Learning to Engage with Climate Change without Sacrificing Mental Health

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Abstract

Climate change poses a great challenge that must be addressed, but in order to make substantive progress in mitigating and reversing climate change, we must first examine the root causes of our inaction. This includes our desire to not think or talk about climate change due to the anxiety and distress it can incur. While many have examined the psychology of why climate change is difficult for us, fewer have considered ways in which we can better foster emotional resilience, an understanding of which is imperative. To build upon previous work and further our understanding in this area, I hope to test three different climate change education courses that will reveal whether group-based and solution-focused communication can allow for maintenance of both mental health and climate advocacy. The results of this study would allow me to discern how support from others and sense of agency with knowledge of environmental actions can aid our approach to tackling climate change. With our time to stop climate change running short, this is an urgent question which I hope to give insight to.

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Introduction

It is no surprise that climate change poses a pressing and monumental challenge—the UN warned in 2018 that we had 12 years left to limit climate change before the Earth warmed 1.5℃, a temperature above which would have catastrophic effects (IPCC 2018), while many newer reports say we have even less time. Our response, or rather lack of response, however, does not reflect the severity of this challenge. In the face of an existential threat, our failure to take serious, large-scale action has frequently frustrated and confused me. But while I have always cared deeply about the environment, I have often supposed that the difficulty of facing the truth of climate change was a large contributor to our inaction. I have experienced the anxiety and hopelessness that can accompany learning about the devastating effects of climate change, the overwhelming feeling that the problem is too great to know where to begin. And it turns out, my conjecture is not entirely inaccurate.

These negative feelings are not only widespread but also an explanation for our poor response. There is a website dedicated to the verbalization of the emotions that climate change can onset, with further advice for not letting said emotions immobilize you (Duggan 2014). An environmental campaigner and communications specialist wrote an entire book explaining why climate change poses such a difficult challenge for us psychologically (Marshall 2015). There is even an emergent jargon, including terms such as eco-anxiety, to discuss the emotional side effects of climate change. This knowledge underscores the importance of learning how we can talk about and take action against climate change without letting our emotions paralyze us. But while a substantial amount of research has been done on our psychology and why we have difficulty with climate change, fewer studies have tested what changes or tools could be

implemented to increase emotional resilience. Consequently, I want to explore this area of research to test how we can proceed in an action-oriented, yet composed, manner.

Background and Prior Work

Many prior works offer insight into what is and is not helpful in regards to climate change communication. One such work compares the climate change movement to a religious movement, as they share four central features—supernatural concepts, a focus on existential ruin, offerings and sacrifices, and institutionalized rituals. The authors urge that the spread of the climate change movement, accordingly similar to the spread of a religious movement, bodes well for greater grassroots activism than political action (Bhagwat, et. al., 2016). I noticed in this comparison that, unlike many belief systems, the climate change movement does not have widespread, regular meeting spaces where people can come together to learn. This sense of community is vital, however, to keep hope and prevent the isolating feeling that the burden is on your shoulders, alone. A study analyzing how climate scientists and climate activists cope with constantly facing the disturbing truths of climate change found that the activists displayed much greater emotional resilience because they built a community of support with each other (Hoggett & Randall, 2018). This finding validates the importance of facing climate change together, but climate communities are not widespread enough to provide this space for everyone, requiring a more broad implementation of climate change-focused groups.

In addition to a community of support, our framing of the discussion of climate change can have a significant impact on our response. One study presented the findings of personal stories in shifting the views of politically moderate to conservative listeners. The positive increase in participants' beliefs and risk perceptions of climate change led the researchers to

propose that personal and more emotionally evocative stories could be a persuasive tool when discussing the effects of climate change (Gustafson, et. al., 2020). This should not validate too great a focus on the negative consequences, however. In the book explaining our psychological response to climate change (mentioned previously in the introduction), the climate campaigner suggests that we abandon the doomsday narrative, as this does little to activate a response from listeners (Marshall, 2015). I, too, have experienced the unmotivating effect of focusing on our imminent downfall, which is why I believe we would be better served to examine possible solutions and courses of action. A study conducted in Taiwan of university students who took a course on climate change and recycling found that greater knowledge of recycling was correlated with a greater emotional connection to nature, increasing their environmental advocacy, activism, and recycling intention (Yu, et. al., 2019). This finding seems to support a greater focus on concrete solutions when discussing climate change. With this in mind, I want to test whether group-based and solution-focused climate change education can increase our activism while fostering emotional resilience against the distressing nature of climate change.

Methods

I plan to test three different climate change education courses, each with eight participants. The courses will span three weeks, meeting once a week for two hours. The three different courses will test elements of climate change education that seem influential to outcomes of both environmental activism and emotional wellbeing. The first element, seemingly crucial in the study of climate researchers and activists, will be whether the education occurs individually or with a group. One course will be individual, used as a control to observe the benefit of group-based action in the other two courses. The second element will be whether the education is

accompanied by personal stories of climate change impacts, to determine whether heightened emotion is persuasive or mentally taxing, both responses of which have been previously cited. All scenarios will be solution-focused, as the education at test is aimed to provide participants with the knowledge of how they can affect greater change in fighting climate change.

In order to gauge the impacts of the different elements, participants will fill out a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the course. The statements on the questionnaire will be as follows, with participants ranking their agreement with each statement from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree):

- ❏ I believe climate change to be a serious problem.
- ❏ I believe climate change to be an urgent problem.
- ❏ Thinking or talking about climate change makes me feel anxious.
- ❏ Thinking or talking about climate change makes me feel hopeless.
- ❏ I feel alone in undertaking climate change.
- ❏ I feel that climate change is too great a problem for me to tackle.
- ❏ I feel that I have the means to actively fight climate change.
- ❏ I plan to be active in fighting climate change.
- ❏ I feel emotionally resilient against any negative emotions that climate change incurs.
- ❏ I feel that I can fight for climate change without it severely affecting my mental wellbeing.

Expected Results

Using the results of the questionnaire, I plan to observe any trends to gain insight into the helpfulness, or lack thereof, of engaging with climate change from a group-based and

solution-focused approach, which will then be reported in a paper. The different course setups will allow me to survey how a sense of community impacts the participants, both from the start to the end of the course as well as in comparison to the individual course participants, and to see whether there is any indication that personal stories are more persuasive or distressing. Lastly, the comparison of questionnaire results from before and after the course will reveal whether there is a correlation between greater knowledge of solutions and sense of agency and commitment to climate advocacy.

Conclusion

Our time to band together and heal the Earth is closing in on us, and while there are a multitude of actions we can take, we cannot make substantive progress if we continue to ignore climate change in the name of sparing ourselves the negative emotions it invokes. Every insight into how we can proceed more effectively and healthily in the fight against climate change is valuable, and from my background research, this seems an area in which we could stand to expand our understanding. Whether my study produces clear trends or only reveals further complexity to answering this question, it will point towards what to test next and take us a step closer to becoming meaningfully engaged with climate change.

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Timeline

August-October 2021 | Plan the climate change education courses:

　　-Research and determine which topics / actions will be taught for fighting climate change

　　-Construct materials (presentations, videos, discussion questions, etc.) for each course

November 2021 | Conduct the study:

　　-Individual course will be done without a facilitator, following provided instructions

　　-Group-based courses will be guided by myself

December 2021 | Analysis of data and interpretation of results, begin writing paper:

　　-Compile questionnaires and observe differences between variable components

　　-Look for trends from start to end of course, between group-based versus individual

　　 courses, between groups with and without emotional stories, and so forth

January-February 2022 | Finish paper and submit for review

Budget

Project Item	Cost	Quantity	Subtotal
Participant compensation	$30.00/participant	24 participants	$720.00
Venue (classroom) for courses	$30.00/hr	18 hrs	$540.00
Total	------------------------	--------------------	**$1,260.00**