



Unfreezing Ourselves: Global Warming, Climate Trauma and EFT

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Abstract

In the fall of 2016 we find ourselves in the midst of an unprecedented planet-wide ecological crisis. Not only are we at war with each other, as we are reminded daily on the news, but humanity is in many respects at war with the earth that sustains life. While this war doesn't make news headlines often, all of us are traumatized by this ecological violence. Some of us, especially children, feel its effects on our psyches and our bodies more acutely.

Along with personal stories from the front lines of climate activism, this article will discuss the still young field of climate psychology as well as new developments and research in climate trauma and pre-traumatic stress syndrome. In particular, the freeze aspect of the fight-flight-freeze response will be examined, along with the healing role that Energy Psychology in general, and EFT in particular, can have.

It is the aim of the author, an ordinary citizen, a mother and educator engaged in working for change, to inform readers but also imbue them with a sense of hope in the face of the current global ecological emergency. There is great potential for personal and planetary healing in the face of this daunting crisis.

Key Words:: Climate change, global warming, sixth mass extinction, climate trauma, pre-traumatic stress syndrome

Introduction

Climate Change/Global Warming

Although the Earth's climate has changed many times throughout the planet's history, the rapid warming seen today cannot be explained by natural processes alone. Based on the evidence, 97 percent of climate scientists are convinced that human activities today are increasing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and causing a major shift in the equilibrium of the global climate. Experts agree that global climate change poses significant risks for a broad range of human and natural systems (NASA, Web ref).

Pre-traumatic Stress Syndrome

Not yet listed in the DSM, pre-traumatic stress syndrome is described by forensic psychiatrist Lise Van Susteren, MD, as a condition in which a person experiences symptoms of trauma as they learn more about the future as it pertains to climate change and watch the world around them not taking

necessary precautions. Pre-traumatic stress syndrome is similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) but it precedes the actual trauma (Esquire, Web ref.).

Climate trauma

Pre-traumatic stress syndrome is brought on by awareness of the future impacts of global warming/climate change and by observing the lack of substantive action on the part of governments and the general population to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Esquire, Web ref.)

Ocean acidification

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the acidity of surface ocean waters has increased by about 30 percent due to the absorption of increased atmospheric carbon dioxide. This increasing acidity is starting to take the shell out of shellfish and, if unchecked, will turn the world's oceans into seas of weeds. (Caldeira & Wickett, 2003)

Sixth mass extinction event

Experts call times when the Earth loses more than 75 percent of its species in a geologically short interval a mass extinction event. Many are saying that, based on the loss of species over the last several centuries and into today, the sixth mass extinction on Earth is currently underway and is tied to human activity. (Ceballos, G, et al, 2015)

Our Earth, Ourselves

If we continue the adolescent-like disregard for the dangers we are being warned of, driving greenhouse gases up with only casual concern, there will be consequences.

- Lise Van Susteren, & Kevin J. Coyle, (2012).

As has been discussed on the pages of IJHC previously, humans are facing an existential crisis of our own making. Climate change is a threat to all life on earth and is one of the principle challenges humanity faces in the 21st Century. Ironically, our youth-obsessed and death-avoiding culture is on the verge of committing collective suicide by poisoning the air, water, and atmosphere that humans require to survive on this planet. However, there has not yet been a general acknowledgement of this threat to our survival. This recognition is necessary before we can act together to avert catastrophe.

Our generation is the first to feel the effects of an over-heated atmosphere and the last one to be able to stop runaway climate change. Yet studies show that the majority of people never talk about this important issue, and most aren't engaged in working for change. (Nogaard, 2009)

The late neuroscientist and pharmacologist, Candace Pert, PhD, famously said, "your body is your subconscious mind." I would expand that and assert that the Earth is our collective subconscious mind. What does it say about the state of that common mind that the earth is beginning to look, as Pope Francis wrote in a recent encyclical, "more and more like an immense pile of filth"?

As Daniel Benor, MD pointed out in an article titled, Good Grief! Why are we not addressing the threats to our planetary survival?, "It is odd to the point of being pathological that humanity is largely inactive in addressing these [ecological] problems." (Benor, 2015)

Forensic psychiatrist, Lise Van Susteren notes in a commentary on the psychological effects of climate change that most people, particularly those who vehemently deny the reality of global warming threat, are too stressed to hear the truth (Van Susteren & Coyle, 2012). "We see this kind of thing in my work all the time, where people who aren't ready to hear the truth about something will simply say it doesn't exist."

It is not difficult to understand what Dr. Van Susteren is referring to. There is enormous psychological stress induced by experts who assert that, due to circumstances largely beyond our individual control, we are making the Earth inhospitable to human and other life within the next generation.

Similarly, professor John Schellhuber (Web reference), of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research observes, *“The difference between two and four degrees [of warming] is human civilization.”*

The Freeze response

“Climate change cannot be identified from individual events but our figures, backed by verifiable changes in meteorological data, indicate a trend towards an increase in extreme weather events that can only be fully explained by climate change.” (Munich Reinsurance, Web ref)

Climate change affects individual and community mental health directly through increased exposure to natural disasters and armed conflicts over resources and indirectly through related disruptions to a community’s social, economic and environmental fabric. Less documented and understood are the ways that climate change as a looming global environmental threat may create emotional distress and anxiety about the future (Fritze, et al. 2008). Having worked in the field of climate action for the last seven years, I maintain that the violence humans are inflicting on our planet radiates out to affect the entire earth community at some level. Many people, especially children who haven’t yet developed psychological coping mechanisms, are particularly vulnerable to this environmental distress. In the short video below, six year old Henry expresses his feelings about what humans are doing to the planet:

<https://youtu.be/lbjabTS5kac>

What we witness in this video is a child experiencing environmental trauma. Unlike many of us, Henry is able to express the deep sadness and anger that witnessing the destruction of our planet can evoke. One can see the possibility that he might discharge some or all of his emotion by moving into action. Henry has not yet gotten stuck in the freeze response that environmental trauma evokes in many of us.

The fight-flight-freeze response to trauma is common in both humans and animals. An opossum freezing in its tracks when faced with a predator is a classic example of this mechanism. It is the ancient, reptilian part of our brains that automatically suppresses heart rate and respiration in response to a real or imagined threat. The interesting thing about wild animals is that, if they survive the threat, they typically go through a “freeze discharge” response allows them to move forward after trauma without stress effects. In humans, the freeze stage can become permanent instead of temporary if an emotion or trauma is buried instead of being released or processed. Unlike most indigenous cultures, modern society offers few ways to release frozen trauma. These buried emotions can result in feelings of powerlessness, despair and desperation. Karl Dawson, EFT Master, contrasts nature’s and our society’s freeze responses in the video clip below.

<https://youtube/8u40WwqkOws>]]

The prevalent lackluster collective responses to the threats of climate change, ocean acidification, and the distinct probability of a sixth global mass extinction suggest to this author that there is a general sense of powerlessness and despair regarding the impending widespread environmental devastation. Daniel Benor, MD (2015) observes, *“Unresolved grief may in great measure also explain humanity’s apathy in addressing the issues contributing to the impending mass extinction.”*

Climate Trauma

There are many among us who have moved beyond inaction and denial of the environmental dangers we are facing. However, paying attention to these threats extracts a psychological price. Dr Van Susteren (2016) acknowledges the toll that being a climate advocate takes on her and others in the field. "Pre-traumatic stress disorder? It's what I see. It's what I live. It's what I see others living....In the worst of cases, it sends [climate scientists and activists] into a feeling of despair."

Climate traumas characterized by disturbance of sleep, constant vivid worry, and dulled responses to others and to the outside, day-to-day world. In contrast, relatively short term responsibilities can fall by the wayside – like paying one's rent on time, attending children's sports games, or retirement planning (Van Susteren, 2016b).

Lawyer and climate activist Gillian Caldwell (Web ref.) talked about her own experience of climate trauma on her blog. She describes symptoms of fear and hopelessness, anxiety and stress, depression, irritability and anger, along with a sense of living in a parallel universe. She asks, "don't people see that we are headed straight off a cliff?"

In an article published in Esquire magazine last year with the telling title of "When the End of Human Civilization is your Day Job", author John H Richardson (Web reference) interviewed climate scientists about how they cope with the grim facts that they face every day. The overwhelming feeling they share is melancholy. Professor Michael Mann from Penn State University told the author of his occasional struggles with emotion when teaching, as well as a poignant exchange with his young daughter. The worst time was when he was reading his daughter Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, the story of a society destroyed by greed. He saw it as an optimistic story because it ends with the challenge of building a new society, but she burst into tears and refused to read the book again.

"It was almost traumatic for her." His voice cracks. "I'm having one of those moments now."

Why?

"I don't want her to have to be sad," he says. "And I almost have to believe we're not yet there, where we are resigned to this future."

My Story

Before becoming a climate-concerned mom and advocate for climate action, I spent years turning off the television or radio if climate change was being discussed. I never found a convenient time to watch *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gore, Web reference). I knew instinctively that the news was bad for the planet and, much closer to home, for my two daughters who were born in the early 1990s.

It was six months after my eldest daughter was born, and two years after Margaret Thatcher was instrumental in the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that the Conservative British Prime Minister (Thatcher, Web ref.) gave a speech to the second World Climate Conference where she said, in part,

"Mr. Chairman, since the last World War, our world has faced many challenges, none more vital than that of defending our liberty and keeping the peace.

...But the threat to our world comes not only from tyrants and their tanks. It can be more insidious though less visible. The danger of global warming is as yet unseen, but real enough for us to make changes and sacrifices, so that we do not live at the expense of future generations."

Despite the global alarm bells, it took almost two decades after Thatcher's dramatic speech for me to allow the severity of the climate crisis to filter into my consciousness. I didn't consciously make the

decision to stay uninformed and uninvolved but at a deep and unacknowledged level I felt powerless to make a difference. It was easier to not engage at all. I found myself unable to respond in the face of climate change's existential threat.

In 2009 I overcame my fear-based paralysis and moved into action on global warming, due to a series of synchronistic events described in my book (Penner Polle, Web reference), which included a work contract that required me to immerse myself in environmental issues and unusual weather that had me paying close attention to forecasts. Like so many others who engage in this issue, climate trauma and pre-traumatic stress syndrome is not just a theoretical construct for me. I have lived it. For the past seven years, I have immersed myself in the science and politics of global warming. For five years I wrote daily posts about this topic on my blog, 350orbust.com. I travelled multiple times to Washington DC and to my nation's capital, Ottawa, to lobby elected officials to put a price on carbon pollution. I signed petitions, organized conferences, wrote letters to the editor and spoke to church and community groups about acting on climate change. I was privileged to be trained in former Vice-President Gore's Climate Reality Project. Like most others who regularly look the climate change monster in the face, for much of the past seven years I paid the price of ever-present grief, sadness, and worry.

It was this grief and trauma that caused me to seek out Energy Psychology practitioners who were exploring the link between personal and planetary healing. This was how I found myself at a weekend workshop with Daniel Benor in March 2012, learning WHEE, the Wholistic Hybrid derived from EMDR and EFT, now rebranded as TWR, Transformative Wholistic Reintegration (Benor, Web reference 1). This weekend marked the beginning of another stage in my life journey, and gave me the tools to cope with the deep emotions climate work evoked in me. I hesitate to say that I've completely healed, as new traumas come up every day, but healing is ongoing. Since that workshop I've become an Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) practitioner and continue to explore the connection between personal and planetary healing.

*Many of us spend our whole lives
Running from feeling
With the mistaken belief
That you cannot bear the pain.
But you have already borne the pain.
What you have not done
Is feel all you are beyond that pain.*
- Kahlil Gibran

Energy Psychology and global warming

Emotional Freedom Techniques, or EFT (often known as Tapping or EFT Tapping), is a universal healing tool that can provide impressive results for physical, emotional, and performance issues. EFT operates on the premise that no matter what part of your life needs improvement, there are unresolved emotional issues in the way.

- Gary Craig

The good news is that my own personal experience, anecdotal reports, and an increasing amount of research (Energy Psychology, Web reference) points to the effectiveness of Energy Psychology (EP) techniques in relieving symptoms of trauma and PTSD. EFT, or Emotional Freedom Techniques, will be the EP technique referenced for this article, as it is the EP modality I most familiar with. This is not meant to discount the effectiveness or importance of other modalities.

A common recommendation of energy healers and therapists is that the best way to heal humanity's collective traumas and psychopathology is for each person to heal her- or himself. EP practitioners may also feel the influence of the modern field of the psychology of happiness, with its focus on the self. This approach can be highly motivating to individuals but has the drawback of possibly being at odds with a focus on the common good, like working to make a better world for future generations (Van Susteren & Coyle, 2012). Another limitation of the one-person-at-a-time approach is that clearing of individuals, while effective at the personal level, is a slow way to brighten a very large, dark field. The question I and others have been exploring is, "Is there a way to leverage the powerful approach of EP to include the collective trauma that's contributing to the violence we see all around us?"

The answer to that question is that yes, it is possible to extend our therapeutic healing interventions to invite a greater healing in the collective consciousness. The focus of every healing session can be broadened to invite healing in all of humanity, while respecting important boundaries. It is imperative that one only ever invites healing at the collective level or for another individual. Daniel Benor (Web reference 2) offers these cautions when offering distance or proxy healing.

"A more respectful way to send healing is to hold an intent that is respectful of the independence of the healed to choose whether to accept the healing or not. One offers healing with the intent that it should be 'for the highest good of the healee and for the highest good of all.'" (Benor, 2015) Benor invites energy practitioners to use the following invocation, spoken out loud or silently, at the end of each healing individual session:

I/We invite anyone and everyone
 Anywhere and everywhere
 Anywhen and everywhere
 Who is ready to [accept this healing/clear their issue(s), etc] with [me/us] to do so.

The EFT Discovery Statement asserts that "the cause of all negative emotions is a disruption in the body's energy system" (Craig, Gold Standard EFT). If EP practitioners keep in mind that the earth is our common body and is reflecting humanity's collective subconscious, it is possible to extend most tapping scripts to invite collective as well as personal healing. For those familiar with tapping, I've included a tapping script below that is focused specifically on environment/climate trauma. Remember to measure your/your client's Subjective Units of Distress (SUDS) before and after each round.

EFT Script for Climate/Environmental Trauma:

Karate Chop Setup Phrase, while tapping with the fingers of one hand on the pinkie side of your opposite hand:

- Even though I feel this deep sense of loss when I think about climate change [or what we are doing to the Earth], I still deeply and completely accept myself.
- Even though it is painful to think about how human actions, including my own, are hurting the Earth that sustains life, I still deeply and completely accept myself and other humans.
- Even though there's this numbness/terror/anxiety inside me when global warming is mentioned, I still totally and completely accept myself.

Then, while tapping 5 - 7 times on the [remaining points NEEDS WEB REFERENCE], incorporate reminder phrases such as "this sense of loss", "this grief", "all this loss", "all this grief", etc. (Tapping Solution, Web Ref.)

Is there hope?

Mythologist Joseph Campbell (Web Ref.) described the hero's journey as the story of a woman or

man who, by persevering through a difficult ordeal, reaches her or his goal. Only then are they able to return to their community with gifts powerful enough to set their society free.

Climate change, with all that it symbolizes about our unsustainable way of life in this industrial age, is the challenge of our time. We are not unique in facing difficult times, though. Other generations had different challenges that only seem less daunting to us in hindsight. Centuries ago, abolitionists challenged an entire economy run on the “dirty energy” of slaves. The “Greatest Generation” fought against overwhelming odds of the Nazi threat in World War II, . Millions paid the ultimate price to make the world safe from Fascism] for future generations. The U.S. civil rights movement waged a long battle for the equality of all people under the law. Persistence and a commitment to a vision of a better world were essential to the success of all of these movements.

Looking back on history, we can see a pattern: again and again, people who weren’t deterred by the impossible overcame seemingly insurmountable challenges. Just because the environmental destruction we are wreaking on the planet seems overwhelming and hopeless doesn’t necessarily mean it is.

The mental health community in general, and the EP community in particular, can have an enormous impact on this global problem. While the magnitude of the task is daunting, the collective influence of members of the mental health community, with their understanding of science and their commitment to helping people break through their resistance and denial, would be significant. Additionally, EP practitioners bring an understanding of collective energetic trauma and thus can apply their healing modalities to address the root causes of so much of the violence in our world. The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, asserts that “only love can save us from climate change.” This is a clarion call to those of us trained to tap into that universal healing energy to respond to the environmental crisis with the urgency and passion that it requires.

There is every reason to believe that if we broaden our focus, we can broaden and deepen the effects of our clearing for PTSDs within the collective consciousness. During therapy sessions, we can ask to clear the same hurts, angers, fears and other residuals of traumas that we are clearing in ourselves and/or in careseekers who have come to us for help ...from any and all beings who are open to releasing these issues of anger, hurt, etc. due to PTSD, anywhere on earth, through all time.

- Daniel Benor (2015)

And here are my recommendations:

UNFREEZE YOURSELF

5 ways to take action on climate change NOW for the sake of your family, your health, & the planet

1. *Break the silence: talk about climate change every day.*
2. *Join other climate-concerned citizens.*
3. *Plan regular time in nature.*
4. *Know the scientific consensus.*
5. *Share the GOOD NEWS: pricing carbon is a big solution to the big problem of global warming.*



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Resources

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- Psychologists for Social Responsibility: Letter to Congress on the Mental Health Impacts of Climate change. (<http://www.psysr.org/about/programs/climate/projects/letter/>)

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