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Coping with Eco-Emotions

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Coping with Eco-Emotions

A Capstone Project by: Sylvia Wood, Sylvia Luceno, Kaitlyn Blume, Cassie Berg, Siena Cysewski, Alis Auch, and Jack Person

Abstract

"Coping with Eco-Emotions" was an initiative aimed at tackling the growing challenges of emotional distress brought about by the impacts of climate change, specifically eco-grief and eco-anxiety. Despite the complex and widespread nature of the issue and the limited training of the group in the field of mental health, the goal was to raise awareness about eco-emotions and provide a supportive space for individuals to process their feelings related to the climate crisis. Through hosting a week-long series of events, each tailored to a different strategy for addressing eco-emotions, the project aimed to create a platform for individuals at the University of Montana to explore various coping methods, share experiences, and foster a sense of community amongst participants. These events included an interactive poster walk on UM's oval, a discussion and creative exercise with a climate grief specialist, a meditation session tailored to calm anxiety surrounding the state of the environment, an action project to allow participants to join the solution to climate change, and more. The group's role was to support individuals and communities in their efforts to cope with eco-emotions, serving as a catalyst for larger efforts to address this pressing issue.

Needs Assessment: Understanding Eco-Grief and Eco-Anxiety

The impacts of climate change on the Earth are commonly discussed, but the impact it has on mental health is unfamiliar to most. The news is currently saturated with how our planet is

being destroyed from extreme weather events, from the ice caps melting to increased global temperatures. Just like how climate change is a new field of study, the effects that climate change has on mental health is a new branch of psychology. Effects from climate change on the environment have been correlated with elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). These can be from direct exposure to climate change, such as an extreme weather event, or they can be triggered by long-term exposure to secondary stressors (Comtesse, 2021). Two specific stressors that are being newly researched are eco-grief and eco-anxiety. Ecological grief is defined as “grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (Comtesse, 2021). Ecological anxiety is defined as “extreme worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change” (Oxford Dictionary, 2022).

Addressing how climate change is affecting mental health is critical. Mental health is just as important as physical health, but often those two facets of health are not treated as equals, and mental health is stigmatized. The stigma that hovers around mental health comes from an overall lack of understanding, and while there have been monumental changes in how society fosters conversation around mental health, day-to-day there is still evidence of insufficient education on it. Depression and anxiety are among the most common mental health disorders and the numbers of those affected by these disorders are continuously on the rise. Similarly, antidepressant prescriptions have increased by 34.8% in the last 6 years (Pharmaceutical Journal, 2022). Mental health disorders need a more present discussion in the public sphere because they are extremely common, and affect a majority of the world’s population. More than 50% of people will be diagnosed with a mental health disorder in their lifetime (CDC, 2021).

One of the main factors that determines a person's physical and mental health is their environment. A few components that make up a person's environment are infrastructure, water accessibility, air quality, nutrition, and global climate change issues; and changes to any of those environmental elements have the ability to influence a person's health. Some common examples of climate change effects include the inability to get outside during forest fire season or losing access to certain foods because the change in precipitation levels have prevented ranchers and farmers from producing goods, both examples of acute impacts. Climate change's influence also extends to grief from loss of places one finds personally meaningful, such as returning to a lake house from one's childhood that is now just a house, or venturing out for your favorite hike to see a fire has made it unrecognizable. A third sphere that it affects is a more abstract loss of an intact future that one will never know. These sort of changes that the climate crisis brings continuously affect every person on Earth, whether they realize it or not--many people may experience melancholy stemming from a combination of these factors despite not knowing its root cause. The climate crisis is here and is only getting worse as time goes on, so it is crucial that the society come together to address the effects of climate change on mental health.

Familiarity with Climate Grief

While eco-grief and eco-anxiety are far from universally familiar, studies show that people are experiencing symptoms at alarmingly high rates worldwide, especially young people. A study by Stanford Center for Innovation in Global Health surveyed over 10,000 youths in over 10 countries, including Finland, Portugal, India, Australia, Nigeria, and Brazil. The survey found that the psychological results of climate change are profoundly affecting young people all over the planet (Hickman et. al, 2021). About 60% of survey participants responded that they felt

anxious and helpless in regard to the changing climate, and thirty-nine percent were even hesitant to have children because of the climate crisis. It is also notable that many of the young people surveyed felt that institutions of power they thought they could trust had betrayed them by allowing climate change to continue to go unchecked. They experienced a form of moral injury, or damage done to a person's conscience when they witness "acts that transgress [their] own moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct" (Syracuse, 2022). Sixty-five percent felt that their governments were "failing young people" by not taking sufficient action against the climate crisis (2021). Authors describe all these factors as chronic stressors, meaning they will have considerable detrimental impacts on the mental health of younger generations and will continue to affect them their whole lives.

A meta-study from the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health also indicates that people's mental health is severely impacted by climate change (Comtesse et. al, 2021). Most of the surveys cited do not explicitly ask about eco-grief, instead using words such as "fear," "despair," and "powerlessness" in association with the climate crisis. Still, people are undeniably recognizing that they suffer from the emotional consequences of environmental changes.

However, the public may be somewhat unaware of the concepts of eco-grief and especially eco-anxiety, as indicated in a 2020 study by the American Psychological Association. In the study, 68% of U.S. adults noted that they had at least a little "eco-anxiety," which was defined for them as "any anxiety or worry about climate change and its effects" (APA, 2020). As more people find out what eco-grief and eco-anxiety are, the more they can assign their emotions to a specific concept. Once that grief and anxiety becomes less abstract, people can look into applicable resources related to those key terms.

One primary underlying issue is that due to the infancy of climate change as an area of study, familiarity with eco-grief is lacking in a key demographic: mental health professionals. Despite decades of awareness that humans are altering the climate, it is a constantly evolving issue with consequences that are challenging to predict. Mental health professionals are neither prepared nor educated in dealing with eco-grief and eco-anxiety. With very limited training on the subject, many therapists are ill-equipped to help patients process their eco-anxiety, eco-grief, and solastalgia (the individual distress caused by environmental change directly impacting someone's home environment). In an article by Whitcomb (2021), psychologist Susan Clayton remarks that "hardly anybody has received any training specifically in addressing this." This creates a disconnect between the general public, who are largely aware of and experiencing climate anxiety, and the professionals to whom they turn for help, who are predominantly unacquainted with the condition. As climate change continues to create more stressful environments and impacts people's mental health negatively, professionals and individuals alike need to take steps towards understanding and mitigating the effects. It is also important to recognize health justice as people don't have access to the same resources everywhere. The mental health industry is already overwhelmed and more time, energy, and resources are needed in this area to keep up with the changing times with an emphasis on this new branch around eco-grief and anxiety (Cunsolo, 2020). The most effective method to address this will be a holistic one, including both educating mental health professionals and encouraging individual understanding. That said, prior to the large-scale shift that training professionals will require, it is necessary to encourage individual understanding. This will be done most effectively by encouraging individual understanding, instead of trying to educate mental health professionals.

With inaccessibility to professionals already being one obstacle, implementing a task-shifting technique to teach individuals about eco-grief and anxiety will be more impactful.

Assessment of Existing Eco-Grief Resources

Eco-grief is a relatively new term in the mental health profession, and the concept is still extremely broad. So far studies have suggested that eco-grief is a feeling of mourning the health and security of our planet as it relates to climate change. This “mourning” can look different from person to person. Having so many people experiencing this differently means there should be a wide range of solutions and ways to address eco-grief in each individual. Due to eco-grief’s relative infancy in the mental health sphere and public discussion, existing resources are somewhat limited until further research is conducted. However, strategies and spaces exist in which individuals or groups can seek knowledge as well as build relations with others grappling with the subject. Resources include university-provided informational or institutional options, sharing circles, 10-step programs, self-care regimens, work-shops, tangible actions, and counseling specific and eco-grief.

According to a recent eco-grief study, there are a variety of different ways to reduce eco-grief and anxiety (Lancet 2020). One of those ways is education and training around eco-grief and anxiety for people in the health industry. In order to have adequate education and training methods we will have to increase research and knowledge of climate change and its relationship to mental health. The article mentions that cases of anxiety and grief related to climate disasters are increasing at a rate that requires more resources to be available. The way in which we are currently handling these new developments in the mental health sector is not sustainable.

The necessity for more widespread education on eco-grief is twofold. First, it is essential for health professionals to know how to treat and counsel patients in need of assistance. Second, the public would benefit from improving their literacy in eco-grief through the acquisition of new terms and skills that allow them to make sense of their emotions around environmental degradation. This will require a greater volume of research about eco-grief and anxiety among mental health professionals, educators, and the general public, as well. However, the issue is steadily growing and it may be worth the added effort to do more in-depth research.

That being said, when dealing with feelings of eco-grief and anxiety, it can be helpful to have short-term coping strategies that help people work through their feelings. A document compiled by various organizations, including The Climate Reality Project and Psychology for a Safe Planet, across Australia says that behavioral, relational, cognitive, and emotional coping strategies have been proven to reduce eco grief and anxiety. Behavioral strategies focus on tangible actions that an individual can take to soothe anxiety. Relational strategies involve the help and relationships of other people. These include activities like counseling or sharing your feelings with a friend. Cognitive strategies emphasizes balance between the internal and external. Emotional strategies focus on acknowledging your feelings as a way to help calm the person.

One of the most significant behavioral techniques is taking tangible steps towards improving the environment (Insights, 2022). It has been shown that the act of doing something to help create change can soothe the brain and make an actual ecological difference. Some of these solutions can include planting trees, joining a climate response group, using more sustainable transportation like biking, and reducing air pollution by using clean energy. Additionally, much research shows that the acknowledgment of climate grief, and more specifically the way in

which climate grief represents environmental appreciation, is a powerful mobilizer into climate action (Vince, 2020).

Taking action can be helpful, but it is also necessary to take a break and recharge to avoid burnout. It is important to have fun. “Researchers have found that people who feel good are: more willing to look directly at threats, better at negotiating, and better able to find more efficient, effective, creative, novel solutions to problems” (Harre, 2011). If the only coping method used is tangible action, then it’s easy to become counterproductive in taking care of one’s mental health. Adding cognitive and emotional strategies is just as important as using behavioral ones. Another thing to keep in mind is a balanced routine (House, 2022). This can include eating nourishing food, walking outdoors, moving your body, and meditation. A healthy mind and body are essential to maintain perspective. One person can’t effectively take on all of the climate change themselves, and trying to do so would be futile.

Relational strategies include talking with friends and family (Insights, 2022). There needs to be a focus on family and creating a space that includes “empathetic communication” and “validating feelings of fear” (Cunsolo, 2020). Relational strategies for coping with eco-grief can also look like bringing feelings of eco-grief into therapy. The demand for mental health professionals credentialed in eco-grief and eco-anxiety has grown, enough so that organizations such as Climate Psychology Alliance have established a directory for psychologists equipped with knowledge on the subject. Inherently human as it is, the need to relate, share and process to or with others is central to addressing climate grief. This can take place in many forms; the organization All We Can Save (2022) devised a circle framework in which facilitation guides and written resources are provided. In the Guardian it talked about the need to share; to grow the emotional vocabulary to be able to communicate the feelings evoked by such an ambiguous,

complex issue that can be as isolating or generate as much helplessness as any other kind of grief or more (Vince, 2020). Panel discussions, podcasts, and conversational models are increasingly available to those searching for connection over this mutual experience, but one can also take more personal routes in addressing their climate grief.

Some cognitive strategies include encouraging hope. Fear can be paralyzing, but hope can drive people into action. Without hope, it is easy to slip into a state of depression or grief. It is also important to balance taking action and reflecting. This can help people restore themselves mentally which will allow them to take more action. Reflection can come in the way of journaling or reading and taking the time to reflect on short and long term goals. Taking the time to reflect allows our large goals to be broken down into achievable steps. Having a mantra like “change takes time” is a helpful cognitive strategy. Reflection is also helpful in dropping judgements a person may have on themselves and others. Noticing that judgment and moving on from it can get a person back into action instead of dwelling on past mistakes (Insights, 2022).

Lastly, there are emotional coping skills for dealing with eco-grief. There are differences in the ways we intellectually process climate change and the way it registers with us emotionally (Kishinani, 2022). Therefore, addressing climate grief largely involves simply validating it as one would any other emotional experience. It can be strange to link emotions to the result of our knowledge of environmental degradation, and then to begin to process it as grief as well as complex scientific information. This includes accepting and coming to understand your emotional responses, whether that be through emotional release such as crying, or taking some time to reflect. Letting out all your bottled up emotions instead of denying them allows a person to continue moving forward instead of being stuck by being compassionate towards yourself. Another emotional coping skill is validating your feelings. For example if when taking a break

you feel guilty for not doing more acknowledge that feeling. Say it out loud. The part of the brain that controls regulation of emotions is activated when you do that. Being able to identify this and acknowledge that you are not alone is feeling this is an emotional coping skill. Combining behavioral, relational, cognitive, and emotional coping strategies has been proven to lower feelings of eco-grief and anxiety (Insights, 2022).

Eco-grief and anxiety are complex issues that are only rising in case and severity. The world needs to adapt and change to address this. There are many different sources available to help people with eco-grief, eco-anxiety, and other similar concepts all with varying degrees of effectiveness. There is no one size fits all and there is no definitive cure. Eco-grief is bound to rise in step with our ever-worsening climate situation, thus further resources must be identified and made more widely accessible if we wish to channel such otherwise paralyzing feelings into positive change.

As far as limitations of existing methods of education, much of what is available must be self-initiated. It is not yet common for one to stumble upon mental health resources that provide explanations of the way that they feel as a result of environmental degradation. One must first understand enough the correlation between their feelings and climate change, to then take it upon themselves to seek out information or help. Considering this combined with the steadily rising urgency of climate change, there is reasonable need for the incorporation of eco-grief-informed curriculum and resources in schools, in the workplace, community centers, and certainly within academia.

Education Techniques for Eco-Grief and Anxiety

In order to make the existence and impacts of eco-grief and anxiety common knowledge, professionals in the field must educate the public on what these terms mean and how to best cope. There are a multitude of ways to go about this (books, lectures, websites, etc.), and no singular path to follow. However, there are broad trendlines within the education community that can be applied to this topic, just as they may be applied to teaching any other subject. Patterns in educational techniques can point to means of education that work well for instructing more than one person at a time. These patterns suggest that delivering material to individuals through the use of small group discussions, partner discussions, traditional lectures, and passive resources all play a part in educating the broader population on eco-grief and anxiety.

Educating people after they leave high school or college is a difficult task, because there is little structure for them to follow as they are instructed. In order to display the presence of ecological emotions to the general population, our team will research what the most effective educational methods are based on current scientists' findings. The research done will primarily focus on different educational techniques used to encourage a basic understanding of eco-emotions across a population encompassing many diverse learning styles and levels of prior exposure to the concept.

According to a study conducted on the educational practices and curriculum structure for a diploma program, teaching processes are better facilitated through a wide range of educational practices rather than utilizing just one (Barkley, 2005). That being said, a program with multiple approaches to education will likely provide a more inclusive and welcoming environment to the general public. Another study on collaborative learning concluded that small group learning environments were especially conducive to absorbing a greater amount of information presented

and retaining it for longer afterward (Davis, 1993). Small groups give participants a chance to get to know those within their group, discuss and relate to their peers, and explain areas that any one member struggles with. With these two studies in mind, it is clear to see why professors favored the “Breakout Room” feature on Zoom while many classes were online from 2020-2022. With individuals benefiting more from smaller groups working together to learn, it would be wise to implement an option of group learning to educate on eco-grief and anxiety.

As opposed to learning about eco-grief and anxiety in the confines of a classroom, it would be useful to have opportunities within nature as well. According to Word Forest, an England-based organization, “spending time in green spaces can improve our mental health, reducing feelings of anxiety and depression.” The article also encourages people to plant trees - taking tangible action to benefit the environment, and in turn, their mental health (Baxter, 2021).

Education can be visual and auditory, as well as kinesthetic and participatory. This indicates that if education is on a public scale, it would be beneficial to have different methods of education split up into different activities, lectures, etc. By utilizing a variety of educational tactics for the public, the project will reach more people than if the material was targeted through only one means of communication. Raising awareness of these educational tools is critical for the wellness of those affected.

Project Plan

To begin to address the vast issues of eco-grief and eco-anxiety in University of Montana students and faculty, this capstone team hosted a week of events to facilitate education and discussion on and around campus. Because of the general lack of education surrounding climate grief, we provided a wide variety of resources to help people process these feelings, while

utilizing a range of learning styles to reach as many people as possible. Our event series included a poster display, guest speakers, a nature walk, a meditation session, an action event, and a concert. This series of events took place in the spring semester of 2023, the week of April 10th through 14th.

Before diving into the project, we put together a rough timeline that we tried to follow as closely as possible to stay on track in preparation for the big week. We then divided the work by each picking one or two to focus on to avoid too much overlap. Once we had split up the responsibility, we each began reaching out to the people needed for the events. We put together a list of first, second, and third choices for guest speakers around week three of the semester and then contacted our first choice, Sarah Aronson, a Missoula therapist who had specific experience with climate grief. Thankfully, she responded with interest and attended one of our meetings to help us craft our vision for the talk and creative exercise which we collectively decided to call “Living with Climate Grief.” We found a musician who frequently performs environmentally themed music and asked if they would like to perform, and got another positive response. We looked into payment options, and decided to pay through Switchback Records, UM’s student-run record label who one of our members is in charge of.

We attempted to partner with multiple organizations to help us run the meditation session, but most were volunteer-run and not able to take on extra projects such as ours. Instead, we decided to run the meditation on our own. For the action event, we tried to coordinate a volunteer day with local nonprofit Soil Cycle, but this fell through because they could only host a limited number of people at once. We had more success with 1000 New Gardens, who regularly need extra hands for their garden building projects. We met with them to plan a day and location.

Once the group had solidified plans with most of the people needed, we began the more hands-on work in the second half of the semester. We launched an Instagram page to spread the word about our events and help people understand why they were important. We wrote a script for the meditation session, picked a location for the nature walk, and created a Linktree website with various online resources (articles, forums, and information about our events). We designed posters for the oval walk, ensuring that they were informational, engaging, and consistent with our social media page themes.

One event came together rather spontaneously: about a week before our eco-emotions series, one group member watched a documentary by Molly Kawahata, former advisor to the Obama administration. Finding that Kawahata lived in Bozeman, she messaged her and invited her to lead a discussion as a part of our project. We were thrilled to hear that she was willing to, and quickly arranged for a time and location. Finally, we printed out the posters, double checked with our collaborators, and made sure all the details were in place for the big week.

Project Methods

The eco-emotions week kicked off on Monday with a poster walk around the Oval, showcasing educational posters about the effects of climate change. The posters addressed how climate change is affecting the world, our local area, and people's mental health specifically. Some included information about who eco-grief affects (nearly everyone) and what we can do about it. This drew people in in an engaging way and spread awareness about the issue. The final poster displayed the event schedule for the week to encourage people to attend the following events. This event fell under the relational and resource provision categories of coping skills.

That night, we hosted guest speaker Molly Kawahata, former climate advisor to the Obama administration and founder of Systemic Strategies. Molly provided us with key insights on impactful and positive climate messaging, resources for taking immediate action, emphasizing the importance of convincing environmentalists to vote. She reminded us of the importance of hope in discussions of climate change: guilt tends to paralyze people and cause them to avoid the issue, whereas hope that climate change is solvable motivates people to action. She also highlighted the interlinkages between climate change and public health, as well as the value of systemic change, which happens in these valuable discussions, student led initiatives, and discussing our takeaways with others.

On Tuesday, the group hosted climate grief specialist Sarah Aronson for Living with Climate Grief. She recounted her story and experience with climate grief, including watching glaciers recede in her Alaska hometown. She helped us open up about our own negative emotions in relation to the natural world, and reminded us that they are often in connection with loving the Earth and feeling distressed at watching it be harmed. While one course of action is to numb that pain by disconnecting from nature, she encouraged us to lean into it instead by strengthening our relationship. We did this by writing creative love letters to the Earth (or pieces of it). Some of the subjects included rivers, pinecones, strawberries, grasses, and a “fallen leaf from a fallen tree.” These letters emphasized how important it is to invest in a two-way relationship with the Earth: just like an interpersonal relationship, there must be effort from both sides. This was a beautiful way to listen to and reconcile our emotions surrounding the climate crisis through discussion, vulnerability, and creativity.

Wednesday, we led a nature walk in Greenough Park, allowing people to observe and connect to the natural world and counteract the separation from it that can come from climate

grief. Many studies have proven that being out in nature vastly improves mental health and even physical health: it can lower blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol. The walk was accessible by bus and not too far from campus to make it easily accessible for students, and functioned as a behavioral coping mechanism.

The fifth event, a guided meditation and mindfulness session, was held on Thursday. Two team members led participants through body and mind exercises that promoted relaxation and mental awareness. The session provided participants with practical coping skills for feeling anxious and overwhelmed, allowed them to identify their own emotions, and connected them to others who feel similarly. It utilized emotional and cognitive coping strategies, and was especially applicable for managing climate grief after bringing these heavy feelings to the surface.

On Friday, the final day, we hosted a hands-on climate action event: we partnered with community nonprofit 1000 New Gardens to build three new garden beds for the UM Daycare Center. These beds will allow the children there to get their hands in the dirt and connect to the earth. They will get the chance to grow local vegetables, which combats climate change by reducing emissions from the transportation process. This event helped attendees to be a part of the solution to climate change, a prime example of a behavioral coping skill. They made a tangible difference in the world, which is often cathartic after discussing the negative emotions that environmental degradation brings about. It was mutually beneficial, helping people feel good about themselves and helping the planet.

Friday night, in order to maintain the momentum built up over the week, the team hosted an environmentally-themed concert featuring local musician Stephen Jay Clement. When considering the growing weight of our topic as eco-emotions are fueled by climate change, it

can be easy to feel upset and anxious. The week of events was ultimately intended to bring awareness to the terms of eco-grief and eco-anxiety, and allow people to have a compartment for these feelings. It was also meant to provide means of coping, through meditation, positive action, and experiencing nature. However, the final event we hosted was not necessarily a means of coping. This concert was meant to connect people through music and art, and allow individuals to realize their place in our community and experience something creative that draws influence from the theme of our event series. It encouraged those who attended to connect with with like-minded people and preserve the community formed over the course of the week. Many of the attendees spoke with Stephen and one another after the music wrapped up, and discussed the positive impact that the event had on them. Outreach for the concert was assisted by Switchback Records, and Clement was compensated with a fair wage.

Eco-grief is a relatively new and rising issue with no consensus on how to best address and solve it. Even many health professionals feel that they lack the education and resources to adequately deal with it. This group understands that we do not have all the answers, and we do not expect to even come close to solving this enormous and widespread problem. We are not therapists and do not have formal training in this field. However, this group sought to spread awareness about the issue in order to help people to make sense of their emotions. Our goal was to provide a space for people to learn about and process negative emotions related to the climate crisis, and connect to others who are feeling the same way. Our role was not to solve mental health or climate change, but rather to play a part in the larger effort to address eco-grief and eco-anxiety. Through this project and through our continued online presence, we strive to provide all of the coping resources we can to support people and help them thrive in this constantly changing environment.

Reflection

Overall, our project was successful in providing a platform for individuals to share their experiences with eco-emotions and connect with others who are also dealing with this issue. By promoting different coping mechanisms, we were able to cater to a wide range of people, ensuring that everyone felt seen and heard. Our team is proud of the impact we were able to make and is committed to continuing our efforts to raise awareness about eco-emotions. We found each day to be successful in its own way.

The week-long event series on eco-grief and climate change was successful in achieving its goals of raising awareness, providing coping skills, and fostering a sense of community. Through various activities such as the poster walk, guest speaker sessions, nature walks, creative writing exercises, and the hands-on action event, the series engaged attendees and allowed them to connect with the issue of climate change in a meaningful way.

The guest speaker sessions with Molly Kawahata and Sarah Aronson were particularly effective in providing attendees with useful resources and tools for coping with climate grief and anxiety. Kawahata's emphasis on positive messaging and the importance of hope in discussions of climate change was a valuable takeaway, while Aronson's approach of encouraging attendees to lean into their emotions and strengthen their relationship with the Earth resonated with many.

The nature walk and mindfulness session were also effective in providing attendees with practical coping skills and promoting mental and emotional well-being. These activities allowed attendees to experience the restorative effects of nature, which can be particularly helpful in combating feelings of eco-grief and anxiety.

The hands-on action event with 1000 New Gardens was successful in providing attendees with a tangible way to make a positive impact on the environment, and the

environmentally-themed concert with Stephen Jay Clement provided a creative and uplifting way to end the week and maintain the momentum built up over the course of the series.

Feasibility and implementation challenges were minimal, as the event series was well-planned and executed by the organizing team. However, one challenge that emerged was in promoting the events to a wider audience. While the event series was well-attended by those already engaged with the issue of climate change, reaching a broader audience proved to be more difficult.

It's important to acknowledge that success cannot always be measured in numbers, especially for events that require an intimate setting to have a meaningful impact. For instance, the group session with Sarah Aronson allowed for an intimate setting where attendees could openly discuss their feelings about climate change and how it affects the places they love. The success of this event was measured by the creation of a safe and welcoming space where everyone felt comfortable enough to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Attendees were able to connect with each other through poems and letters, and truly open up about how climate change is affecting their mental health.

After participating in eco-emotion events, several attendees have provided positive feedback to the group members. They expressed that prior to the events, they were unable to describe their emotions about climate change. However, labeling their feelings during the events helped them to accept and acknowledge their concerns. This acceptance has empowered them to take action and begin addressing the issue. The feedback serves as a testament to the value of eco-ecomotion events in creating a safe space for people to confront and work through their emotions about climate change.

Overall, the success of the project can be measured by the number of attendees who felt empowered to take action after participating in the events, as well as the number of attendees who reported feeling more connected to their community and the natural world. We can also measure success by looking at how the project has inspired similar initiatives on campus and in the surrounding community. By using a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures, we can gain a better understanding of the success of the project and use that information to inform future initiatives.

Recommendations for the future include expanding outreach efforts to reach a broader audience, potentially partnering with local organizations or businesses to promote the event series. Additionally, incorporating more interactive and hands-on activities may further engage attendees and provide them with meaningful ways to connect with the issue of climate change. Finally, the event series could benefit from more comprehensive evaluation methods, such as pre- and post-event surveys, to better assess the impact of the series on attendees' attitudes and behaviors towards climate change.

As students in varying fields of study, our group came to the capstone project from seven different perspectives and backgrounds. With some students being involved with climate change studies and environmental science, and others being involved with business or biology, some students learned the concept of eco-emotions for the first time in this capstone while others shared their existing knowledge. A benefit of having all of these different backgrounds was that we could each have specific areas of expertise when it came to our event series project. We tried to emphasize many different styles of coping with eco-emotions through psychology, environmental science, politics, music, art, etc. For each event within our project, one student

typically took the lead, allowing them to be the point of contact for the part of the capstone project that they were most experienced with.

When planning events like the eco-emotions event series, it is important to have many skill sets, from social media marketing to promote each event, to interpersonal skills to engage with people that attend. The varied strengths that each member of our team brought to each event made it easy for each student to focus on their own role, instead of trying to juggle multiple responsibilities for a single event. Additionally, our culmination of different backgrounds expanded our network- we were able to draw upon relationships with people across faculties, community involvements and generations due the varied ways in which we've embarked on our respective educations.

While there were many positive things that came from our team being interdisciplinary, the flipside of the coin is that we had to learn how to function efficiently as a team of people from entirely different backgrounds and interests. This was challenging to begin with, but after some time we found a way to use our differences to our advantage instead of getting in the way. We even became quite close by the end of the year, despite never taking classes with one another outside of the GLI project. By the end of the semester, we understood each other's mindset much more and could adjust our work accordingly to make things run smoothly.

Our project covered the intersection of two very large issues in the world right now: climate change and mental health. These topics are extremely complex on their own, and even more so as they interact. Research shows that there is a definite connection between our current climate issues and mental health, but the subject matter is still new territory for professionals. We had to acknowledge the fact that we aren't mental health professionals and there are limits to what type of help we can offer. This also meant that we had to think outside the box when it

came to tackling this project. Another challenge faced was the amount of available resources for people to use to cope with these feelings. Using this knowledge, we framed our project as a load-sharing technique. Giving people coping skills they can use on their own instead of relying on mental health professionals helps mitigate the influx of new mental health issues we are encountering as climate change progresses.

Another challenge our group experienced was the effect this project has on our own mental health. Talking about this issue for such an extended period of time and working on it each week in class was mentally draining for the group. To address this, we included a statement of empowerment and a wellness statement in our group contract. These stated that the mental health of our group members was of high importance and that we wanted people to prioritize this. We also implement some of our coping skills into meetings including talking and connecting about how we were feeling, meditation, doing a class outside, and taking breaks when needed.

When we began this project, our idea was to do one event that would be a culmination of our research and coping techniques. However, after doing more research, we realized that in order to fully address this problem within our community we needed to provide a variety of resources and styles that many different people could use. This realization led us to the idea of an eco-emotions week of events, allowing us to put each coping mechanism into practice.

If we could do this project again from the start, we would readjust the way we measured our project's success. It would have been great to have an official evaluation after each event that individuals could use to give feedback and express their feelings. We did a survey as part of our research but we were unable to get another one together for after the events. This would have allowed us to have a more exact collection of data to determine whether or not we truly

addressed the climate emotions we discovered in our campus survey. The problem with gathering data on mental health is that is nearly impossible to quantify. Each person's experience is different, and therefore it is hard to quantify. Lastly, if we could have added a small speech to the beginning of each event, that would have been useful. This just got lost in the chaos of doing multiple events, and if we could do it over, this would be a priority.

Due to the fact that both climate change and mental health are massive global issues by their very nature, it was challenging to contextualize these to a local, tangible level and tackle them in manageable pieces. We struggled to craft a project that was both large enough to be impactful in such vast problems and detailed enough to touch people on a personal level. To do this, started with a big picture and then zoomed in. We began our event series with a lecture from global leader Kawahata on how we can take political action that leads to change on a national and international scale. We then shifted toward the community and individual levels, fostering healthy relationships with the earth and taking local action to benefit society (such as building gardens to grow local foods). We finished with a concert to tie music and arts to eco-emotions, remind people to take time to have fun even while considering heavier topics, and reinforce that coping with eco-grief is much easier done as a community than alone.

Through these events, we built dialogue around how worldwide environmental destruction affects the overall condition of mental health. We spread awareness that eco-emotions are valid and can be eased in many ways. We shared techniques for getting in tune with the natural world and with our own thoughts that are used across the world, including meditation and developing healthy relationships with nature. We learned that the current tactics of inflicting guilt and blame around climate change lead only to bitterness and paralysis: in

contrast, we provided hope that the problem is solvable and motivated people to take meaningful action.

If we could repeat this project, we might make some changes. At the start, we would further research how different cultures develop relationships with the earth and cope with distress from its degradation so that we could utilize those that applied. We would follow up with participants after each exercise with a survey or conversation to ask how it had affected them and if they had additional needs they would like to see us address. Despite this, we do have evidence that our project was successful based on the positive reactions and anecdotes after the fact. Success was demonstrated in that we gave people diverse coping mechanisms and they left feeling better equipped to address both eco-grief and climate change.

Appendix A: Social Media Posts

what are
eco-emotions
and why do we need
to talk about them?

eco-emotion
event series

eco-emotion
event series

eco-anxiety
is extreme worry about
current and future harm
to the environment
caused by human activity
and climate change.

Here at UM,

77%
of students felt
they identified
with eco-grief and
eco-anxiety

89%
Worry about how the
next generation will
be affected by
climate change

53%
Did not know the
definitions of
eco-grief or eco-
anxiety

eco-emotion
event series

eco-emotion
event series

eco-grief
refers to the sense of loss
that arises from
experiencing or learning
about environmental
destruction or climate
change.

Thanks to our
partnership with
umem
student group

We are hosting a **FREE CONCERT!**
Stephen Jay Clement
4/14 at 6:00 PM
UM Flat Studio

eco-emotion
event series

eco-emotion event series

- 4/10 @ 11:00 AM on the Oval poster walk
- 4/11 @ 6:30 PM in the DHC Lounge guest speaker and discussion
- 4/12 @ 4:00 PM in Greenough Park guided nature walk
- 4/13 @ 10:00 AM in Schrieber Gym guided meditation
- 4/14 @ 6:00 PM in the UM Flat Studio free concert featuring Stephen Clement



UM Flat Studio
Address: 633 S 5th St E, Missoula, MT 59801
Through the gate to the left of the house



we will meet at the
greenough park
parking lot!

walking
bus
bus stop

more
information
on the
mountain
line app or
at the
link in our
bio!







eco-emotion
event series



eco-emotion
event series



eco-emotion
event series



eco-emotion
event series

Appendix B: Posters

stay up to date with all our events by scanning this QR code!

follow our **instagram** page to know which events are coming up!



eco-emotion event series



eco-emotion event series

4/11 @ 6:30 PM in the DHC Lounge
guest speaker and discussion of eco-emotions

4/12 @ 4:00 PM in Greenough Park
guided nature walk

4/13 @ 10:00 AM in Schrieber Gym
guided meditation

4/14 @ 6:00 PM in the UM Flat Studio
free concert featuring Stephen Jay Clement!

what can we do for ourselves?

- we are allowed to recognize that our minds are not meant to address our own destruction.
- climate change is human-caused, and part of these feelings are the realization we don't know what to do about it.
- we are allowed to grieve the loss of the elements of our world that are not the same anymore.



what can we do for the environment to combat these feelings?

- nature walks
- bike/take the bus instead of driving
- planting
- community clean up efforts
- protesting for large-scale changes



recent evidence of climate change local to missoula



though wildfires are a natural occurring phenomenon and fire at regular intervals is good for a forest's ecosystem, as missoula county's climate warms and as summers become drier, wildfires are likely to increase in size and frequency and the fire season is likely to become longer.

higher temperatures in missoula are starting to affect low-elevation snowpack, snowmelt, and summer precipitation, resulting in the influx of hotter, drier summers.

there is research that shows long-term droughts will be more severe when and where they do occur.



<https://www.missoula-county.us/government/community-development/community-planning-services/climate-ready-missoula-copy>

eco-emotions can manifest through all sorts of circumstances

your friend who loves to ski has their ski season cut short because of melting snow.



your coworker's cabin-on-the-lake is now a cabin-by-a-pond because of hot summers and drought.



your favorite hike becomes unrecognizable after a devastating wildfire sweeps through an unusual area

eco-anxiety

is extreme worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change.

eco-emotion event series

eco-grief

refers to the sense of loss that arises from experiencing or learning about environmental destruction or climate change.

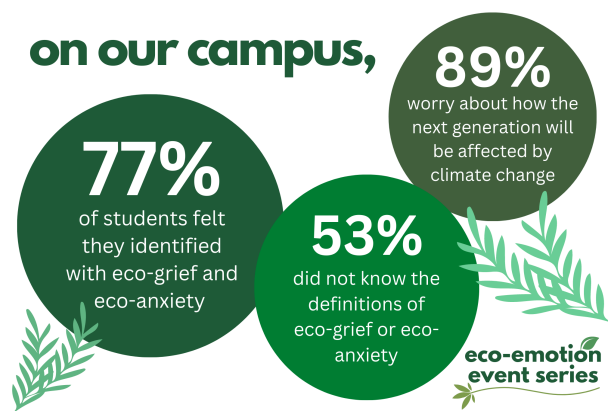
eco-emotion event series

why are we talking about eco-emotions?

- to start the conversation about how a change in the environment can affect us...
- to put a term to the feelings we have about the changing world...
- because we feel this is an under-represented sub-topic of the greater mental health conversation...
- and because our capstone team is passionate about the environment!

eco-emotion event series

on our campus,



who does this affect? → everyone!



WE LOVE
♥ YOU ♥
EARTH

(color me ↓)



[a spontaneous zine by 'living with eco-grief' co-creators]

LOVE

LETTERS

to the

EARTH

⊥
(WHAT EXISTS)

List what exists. Let what you perceive in the immediate
take you to the beyond. . .



Oh Earth,

The first thought, one of a song I've been listening
to, admittedly, in nursing heartbreak. Lauryn Hill "I Gotta
Find Peace of Mind"

"You make my desire pure" but also "Help me
forget about [him]"

I love you so deeply, but the grief is so
cumbersome. My love for you, informed by the ways I've
hurt you, is one that strives for your well-being.

But it comes with acknowledgement of penance
come too late. Sheepishly, I ask what now can I do?
Suspend my family line? Share your story? Decompose?

Thank you for loving me despite myself. And
I'm sorry. Call me anytime.

Sylvia Lucero



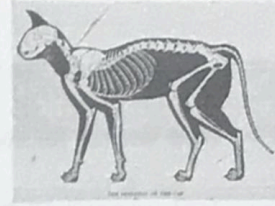


Dear fallen leaf from fallen tree

I once saw you with joy
 I saw you as a maze to run through
 I saw you as a pile to jump in
 I saw you as mulch for my garden

Dear fallen leaf from fallen tree

I once saw you with reservation
 I once saw you as the sun saying good-bye
 I saw you as turning in my shorts for pants
 I saw you as my favorite tree going to sleep



A table exists, couches exist, carpet exists. A deer exists, once thriving and jumping, now skeletized to be observed, its soul and life existing elsewhere. A pinecone exists, holding seeds for another generation. A blue pencil exists, writing these words that now exist on paper as well as my mind. Air exists. Particles exist. Light waves speeding thousands of miles into my eyes exist. Sound waves exist, frequencies tickling the tiny bones in my ears and the pulsing rhythm. The beat of my heart exists, beating alongside 12 other hearts existing in this space and time.

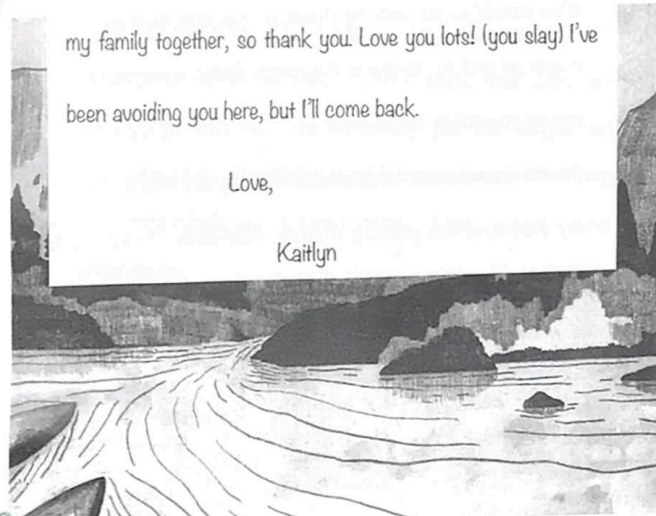
– Alena Flocchini (exists)

Dear Snake River!

We have spent countless hours and days together. You hold so many of my fondest memories. You carved the valley that I called my home. You shared so much with me and with the people I lie the most. I surfed on your waves, kayaked against your current, and swam with you. We hung out every summer afternoon. No matter what the day brought before you brought my family together, so thank you. Love you lots! (you slay) I've been avoiding you here, but I'll come back.

Love,

Kaitlyn



Dear Strawberry,

I didn't read your label – should I question your origins? Your bodacious red color? I feel like I should be wary of you.

You appeared, aloof, non-organic, at this gathering about climate grief, and that seems suspect.

But you remind me of something. Nothing recent, and in no time or place I can pinpoint other than it is warm, humid, and rambunctiously childish.

Forgive me; you're delicious.

- Peter McDonough





(what exists)

carbon pollution, liquid pollution, hazardous pollution, particulates are killing the life in the waters, particulates that live in the eye of the universities and sciences fields and specialists of years and decades of practice have proven the fatal outcome of pestilence and aggregation to be expected to cause decline to expensive and unaffordable disasters too vast and damaging

Jordan Bailey



Dear fallen leaf from fallen tree

I now see you with sorrow

I see you as forests being harvested

I see you as my favorite stream drying up

I see you as the foothills now filled w/houses

Dear fallen leaf from fallen tree

I will see you as hope

I will see you as hope for change

I will see you as one thing falls another will grow

I will see you as a community banding together to create a world we remade with love



Oh wild grasses, how you sway with the wind,
Your beauty is beyond compare my friend.
Dormant under blankets of snow so white,
You wait patiently for the coming of light.

For we yearn for the green you bring,
The first sign of life in early spring.
By the turn of Autumn you may wither and turn brown,
But your worth is priceless, don't let it bring you down.

You are as important as the trees,
The cherished ones that everyone sees.
Trees may provide shelter and shade,
But you keep the soil healthy and wet.

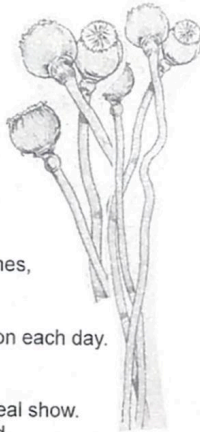
We all need each other,
Together we thrive.
A tree provides shade to keep us cool,
While you retain water like a natural pool.
Together we can survive.

I'm sorry for the way we treat you sometimes,
As we tear you up to plant our vines.
We deroot you and move you away,
To make way for more "valuable" vegetation each day.

But in the end, we all know,
The balanced stability you provide is the real show.
You keep the soil healthy and feed the wild,
Your value cannot be measured by cash, for that's just mild.

Oh wild grasses, you blow in the wind,
A symbol of nature that will never rescind.
Let's cherish you and protect your kind,
For we all need each other to survive and to bind.

-Brandon Quamme



The Sound of Snow
Richard Forbes

When you're in love
You see them everywhere
It's reflexive – it would be far easier not to
But there's something in you
That's almost belling
(and I mean this in the old English sense, the sound
of a hound baying out the joy of the chase)
with the feelings
And you can't help but see and feel what's resonating along
The ringing only amplifying the closer you get.

So when I am out
held in the air by white crystalline structures
suspended however many feet
above the slumbering plants and animals beneath me
I can feel my heart reverberating with the joy of
Being held by a landscape and a substance I
Am letting myself love even as I know
These moments in my life may grow fleeting
Whether through my own ever-growing frailty
Or the vulnerability of this substance
We call snow.

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