



Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Terms of reference:

An inquiry into what urban, rural and regional communities in Victoria are doing to tackle climate change and how the Victorian Government could support these communities to the Environment and Planning Committee for consideration and report no later than 30 June 2020.

[Psychology for a Safe Climate](#) is a not-for-profit Melbourne based organisation formed 9 years ago with the **purpose of fostering emotional engagement in the community with climate change**. Through workshops, presentations and publications we use our professional knowledge as psychologists and facilitators to increase understanding of the psychological challenges and difficulties of engagement with climate change, we share skills for psychological wellbeing and self-care, and help improve communication about climate change.

Our initial work addressed the difficult emotional process of acceptance of climate change, especially the 'action' gap between the information available on the topic and the ongoing difficulty people had in understanding the science, talking about it in meaningful ways with each other and taking action.

In 2013 we published a booklet [Let's Speak about Climate Change](#) which provided insight on the psychologically complex terrain of the topic, as well as guidance and support for people on talking about climate change with friends, family and those encouraging community engagement. Following the high demand for this booklet, in 2015 we published [Facing the Heat](#) where we shared some of our own stories and learnings from climate change conversations.

Since 2011 we have regularly been invited to **speak on the psychological dimensions of climate change** through media interviews, panel discussions, podcasts, and public talks. We hosted conferences in 2013 and 2015 where experts in the field gathered to present their research, to foster understanding of the psychological issues around climate engagement or disengagement.

We have also regularly written, and published on the topic of mental health and climate change. In July 2019 we made a [submission to the Victorian Royal Commission on Mental Health](#).

In the last few years our core focus has shifted to **offering emotional support to those who are engaged with climate change in their work**: scientists, researchers, policy makers, community activists and community groups (including Australian Youth Climate Coalition, various environmental NGOs and climate activist groups), farmers, bushfire affected community, local councils and university departments.



More and more we find people working on climate change and related issues, are seeing the importance and value of making time to process grief associated with climate change, to address issues of burnout and conflict, and to build emotional resilience and skills around mental health and wellbeing. We have developed a series of different **workshops** that create space for expression of the emotional impact of their climate work as well as sharing skills to manage the ongoing stress of working on this issue.

The workshops have been reported to be most beneficial to participants – giving relief in expression of their deepest feelings, fostering acceptance of their own feelings and connection with others as they realise they are not alone in their often troubled emotional state. **The experience of confronting difficult feelings paradoxically gives strength to people's engagement with climate change in whatever capacity they are contributing.** The workshops always include a segment to foster more capacity to care for themselves and prevent burnout. The workshops are conducted for groups of 20 to 30 people, working in small groups, each led by one of our team of volunteer psychologists, psychiatrists or trained facilitators.

Since the federal election in May 2019, requests for workshops have increased dramatically. The emotional toll of years of work pushing for action by the government is heavy. Offering support at a time of grief and sadness can assist in people staying engaged or re-engaging rather than distancing in despair.

Recently, we have undertaken a new role – **offering psychological support through consultation** with the management team of a well-established climate action advocacy group. We have also offered consultative support and psychological input into the work of [Climate for Change](#) in their development of an engagement and leadership program for the Gippsland communities who face the disruptive impact of the diminishing generation of coal fired electricity.

Next month we are looking forward to a weekend engagement with the recently bushfire affected community in Tathra where we will offer workshops, community discussion and self-care and mental health skills, with the additional goal of **fostering community development in support of climate action.** Our expenses (travel and accommodation and some co-ordination time) will be funded by a grant from the affected community, but our members' time offered will be voluntary.

We field daily requests – through our website and Facebook page – for **assistance with referral to suitable counsellors to deal with climate anxiety and stress**, both from the public and from professionals. We receive requests for **advice for parents in talking to their children.** Requests come from all over Australia- as we seem to be the only such organisation across the country.

Our team of workers are all volunteers and currently number eight: all are either practising psychologists or psychiatrists, one a retired psychologist, plus one anthropologist trained in community facilitation.

From March 2019 we have begun to charge a small fee for workshops as a method of ensuring people attend after booking a place, and to cover venue hire and



costs for the workshops. We also charge institutions for workshops rather than relying on donations. Previously we relied on donations, profit from a conference, and a small grant of \$2000.

We have recently begun to engage a paid casual administrator to assist with our community outreach and organising of events. This helps us keep up with the growing demand for our work so that we can free up time to continue offer high quality psychological support. To date all administrative work has been done by volunteers.

In our many years of experience facilitating workshops with community members we have found that when offered a supportive environment to engage with their thoughts and feelings about climate change, people find motivation to act rather than withdraw in despair. **We believe that the ability of individuals and communities to effectively respond to the challenges posed by a changing climate is established through experiential and imaginative engagement with the issue, and is foundational to any successful community adaptation process.** A successful adaptation to climate change requires that we build a culture of resilience within communities, supporting people to respond to their changing environment in ways that support social connection and mental health.

We want to be able to accept workshop invitations as they are central to our core work of supporting all those advocating for action. We want to encourage continuation of their essential work in a psychologically healthy way. We are interested in continuing to offer the support we already do and making this support more widely available, especially at the local government level as communities begin to grapple with the effects of climate change and the necessary changes involved in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

In summary the work we currently do includes:

- **Fostering emotional engagement in the community with climate change**
- **Speaking publicly and educating the general public on the psychological dimensions of climate change through conferences, publications, media, interviews and articles.**
- **Offering workshops and emotional support to those who are engaged with climate change in their work**
- **Consultation work with climate organisations**
- **Fostering community development in support of climate action**
- **Assistance with referral to suitable counsellors to deal with climate anxiety and stress**

As almost all of our work is offered on a voluntary basis we are unable to respond to all the requests we receive from groups and communities. We are also limited in our ability to actively develop further initiatives that would support communities during this time of transition and adaptation.

We would greatly benefit from Government support for our work to help us transition from a team of volunteers, to gradually finding a way to employ people with relevant skill sets. It's clear we need continue and expand our initiatives, in recognition of the inevitable growth in demand as the climate deteriorates.

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PSC Strategic Vision

Fostering emotional engagement with climate change

1. Care & Compassion

We listen deeply to and respect the feelings and sensitivities of people concerned with the complex issue of climate change. We use our expertise to provide a supportive environment and avenues for relief and nourishment so that people can continue to take action and sustain engagement with the issue.

2. Wellbeing

We acknowledge wellbeing as essential for our sustained, meaningful and rewarding engagement in climate change. We aim to be present and engage with a sense of active hope, connection, and encouragement.

3. Integrity

We acknowledge the climate emergency and strive to stay abreast with climate science, community, reality. We act with professionalism, ethics, transparency, accountability and acknowledge our limitations as a small volunteer group.