

BECOMING A CLIMATE-AWARE COUNSELLOR: SUPPORTING OURSELVES, CLIENTS AND COMMUNITIES



By **Dr Sally Gillespie, Carol Ride and Christie Wilson**

Abstract

Climate and ecological crises are significantly harming global ecosystems, societies, and physical and mental health. Counselling professionals can offer support to individuals and communities by helping to contain, and make sense of, often intense feelings, including overwhelm, fear, grief and anger, that arise in response to worsening climate-driven catastrophes and ecological losses. To engage therapeutically with climate issues and emotions, counsellors need to go on their own journey of climate awareness, as climate issues are currently rarely addressed in counsellor training programs or professional development. This paper outlines the need, and the process, for mental

health practitioners to become climate aware, drawing on the work of Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC). PSC's Climate Aware Professional Development (CAPD) is based on a Support Model developed through their learnings and experiences of delivering workshops, hosting conferences and writing evidence-based publications in the developing field of climate psychology. Through the interactive process of the CAPD, counsellors experience the necessity and richness of collaborative work in developing the appropriate clinical skills to support themselves, their clients and communities to navigate climate-related catastrophes and commit to ecological care and repair.

Introduction

A series of unprecedented climate-related events in Australia, including bushfires, floods and droughts, has placed the global climate crisis firmly into public awareness and life. The *Ipsos climate change report 2022* shows that 83% of Australians are concerned about climate change, while 70% consider that Australia is already being affected by climate change (Ipsos, 2022). Furthermore, most Australians now have a direct experience of a climate change-related event, with 25% of people with direct experience meeting post-traumatic stress disorder screening criteria, leading to the conclusion that:

Australia is facing a potential mental health crisis. Individuals with and without direct experience of climate change are reporting significant mental health impacts, with younger age groups being disproportionately affected. There are key roles for clinicians and other health professionals in responding to and preventing climate-related mental health burden (Patrick et al., 2022).

These research findings are not surprising, given that Australians are increasingly witnessing species extinctions and climate-related catastrophic events including bushfire infernos, superstorms, submerged homes, emergency evacuations and the death of millions of farmed and native animals. The evidence is clear; climate change is not a distant threat, but a present and ongoing lived experience (Guterres, 2022).

Climate change places a huge

burden on emergency services, food security and health systems. The toll on mental health, especially of young people, disadvantaged communities and those on the frontline of climate emergencies, is very high (Patrick et al., 2022). A clear pattern is emerging across the globe that “while no one is safe from these risks, the people whose health is being harmed first and worst by the climate crisis are the people who contribute least to its causes, and who are least able to protect themselves and their families against it – people in low-income and disadvantaged countries and communities” (WHO, 2021).

Young people especially are acutely aware that they are heading into a highly challenging and unrecognisable future and report feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness because they are not in a position to mitigate climate change impacts (Gunasiri et al., 2022). The youth climate movement’s call for urgent political action is a response to the failure of global action relative to the scale of existential threat posed by climate upheaval. A 2021 study in the *Lancet* of 10,000 young people (16 to 25 years) from 10 countries, found that:

- 56% of surveyed young people said “humanity was doomed” due to climate change (including 50% of Australian respondents);
- 75% said the “future is frightening” because of climate change (76% of Australians); and
- 39% said they were “hesitant to have children” (43% of Australians) (Hickman et al., 2021).

This study also reports a correlation between feelings of

climate anxiety and government inaction on climate change, with 58% of those surveyed saying that governments are betraying them. They note that climate distress is often grounded in relational factors, with children often experiencing “an additional layer of confusion, betrayal, and abandonment because of adult inaction towards climate change” (Hickman et al., 2021, p. e864).

As counsellors well know, when adults fail in upholding their duty of care to young people, the psychological consequences can be profound. Counsellors need to be able to acknowledge their adult duty of care in relation to climate issues, professionally and personally, in order to adequately support young people towards healthy engagement with their climate affected future. This means recognising their own and other adults’ responsibilities to collectively engage with and act on climate danger.

When climate issues enter the counselling room

The public need for psychological recognition of, and support for, the mental health impacts of climate change is fast increasing. It is vital that this recognition understands, validates and supports people grappling with climate distress, “without pathologising or labelling the distress as an individual struggle, or a mental illness” (Hickman, 2020). This however is not to deny that in some cases, ongoing climate distress can and does contribute to clinical anxiety or depression, especially if not well-validated or understood. In relation to treatment, Susan Clayton



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(2020) makes the point that it is “important to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive levels of anxiety. A focus on individual mental health should not distract attention from the societal response that is necessary to address climate change”. Both counsellors and clients need support and education to understand that climate distress is a normal, rational and reasonable response to what is happening, and in fact is a sign of connection to, and care for the world (Silva & Coburn, 2022). As Graham Lawton (2019) writes in the New Scientist, “what we are witnessing isn’t a tsunami of mental illness, but a long-overdue outbreak of sanity”.

Climate psychology research shows that conversations with trusted others who are authentic about their own emotional processes of grappling with climate realities and existential threats enable the exploration of psychological defences, conflicts and supports (Gillespie, 2019;

Randall, 2012). When conversations are conducted well, it helps people to consciously integrate the threats of ecological breakdown, easing feelings of isolation, guilt, grief, fears and traumatic reactions, whilst facilitating responsive action (Gillespie, 2019; Randall, 2012). Climate psychologist Sally Weintrobe (2019) observes that when people are able to engage with climate realities, having emerged from a collective psychic retreat, they often feel re-energised and more alive. She cautions however that:

they are also vulnerable. They need the support of a culture of care that values truth and provides a non-persecutory atmosphere. They need the grounding that an understanding of politics can provide. These help to gain a sense of proportion when trying to work through issues of anxiety, shame and guilt. (p. 3)

It is therefore vital that mental health professionals learn

how to provide a politically, psychologically and ecologically informed culture of care as clients and communities seek their support in grappling with the realities of the climate crisis.

It is essential that counsellors explore their own climate understandings, responses and distress in order to be able to provide containment for others (Silva & Coburn, 2022). However, given that most training programs are not offering climate-aware training, many counsellors struggle to recognise and negotiate climate change-related emotions in the counselling room, or indeed in themselves (Silva & Coburn, 2022). They, like their clients, may feel overwhelmed, powerless or isolated in response to the climate crisis, becoming vulnerable to the risk of bypassing their feelings and falling into a collective psychic retreat from climate realities (Aspey, 2021).

Australian research by Silva and Coburn (2022) shows that when climate change issues enter the

counselling room, therapists do indeed feel challenged to support clients or to respond in a way that feels authentic or helpful, because they feel ill-equipped to work with the complexities of climate change and mental health. One of the reasons for this is the therapist's personal experience, which may include "inner conflicts with self-identity around the uncomfortable awareness of complicities with the problem, meaningful resonances with personal and other histories, disconnects with 'truth' and knowledge, and interpersonal reverberations found in conversations with others" (Silva & Coburn, 2022, p. 13). These findings point to the need for training and professional development that supports therapists to explore the complexity of their own psychological responses to the climate crisis while learning how to identify and work with parallel processes within themselves and their clients.

In many ways, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have opened the way for counsellors to work with collective threats, where both the client and the therapist are negotiating similar psychosocial impacts on their lives. In response to both the pandemic and climate crisis, therapists have to learn to navigate their own catastrophic thinking and disruptive emotions (Kassouf, 2022). In relation to climate catastrophes, we are now all affected, to a greater or lesser extent. However, there is a high likelihood that client and therapist may be at different stages of climate awareness, understanding and responsiveness. Facilitators and trainers from PSC, including the authors of this paper, have heard a number of stories of climate

campaigners and researchers seeking therapeutic help for their climate-related distress, only to find that the counsellors they consulted were unable to engage with climate crisis as a valid cause for distress. When this happens, the client's experience can be discounted, dismissed, 'band-aided' or unhelpfully placed into a context of unresolved family dynamics, because of the counsellor's lack of climate awareness training.

Silva and Coburn (2022) call for professional bodies and training institutions to provide "leadership and guidance to therapists that enables them to support clients, and themselves, facing potentially dire climate crisis realities" (p. 1). While ACA is one of a number of professional bodies that already recognises both the significant role that counselling and psychotherapy professionals can play "in supporting and assisting people experiencing mental health issues in relation to climate change and post-disasters", as well as the need to acquire the specialist skills and knowledge, and social justice advocacy perspectives necessary to do this (ACA, 2021), there is little training available in this area. Fortunately, however, climate psychology organisations such as the PSC in Australia and the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) in the United Kingdom and the United States are well-positioned to lead the way in both informing and providing this vital support, research and education for counselling professionals and their professional bodies and training institutions.

Both PSC and the CPA ground their work within a psycho-social approach that examines the interplay between internal, psychological factors and

external, sociocultural factors, such as values, beliefs and norms, that shape people's responses to climate change (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). This ecologically and politically informed systemic approach provides the necessary context for a psychological analysis of people's climate responses. It also sits within critical and reconstructive psychological practices that forgo individualistic perspectives and an 'expert' outsider stance in favour of supporting communities that consciously nurture the wellbeing of all (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Over the last 10 years, these organisations have helped to establish 'climate psychology' as a discipline, while developing talks and workshops for communities, and psychological support for climate activists, researchers and policy makers, both individually and in groups (Inquiry and Dissemination Group, 2021). They also facilitate peer support networks, workshops and conferences for mental health professionals who are, or are becoming, climate aware

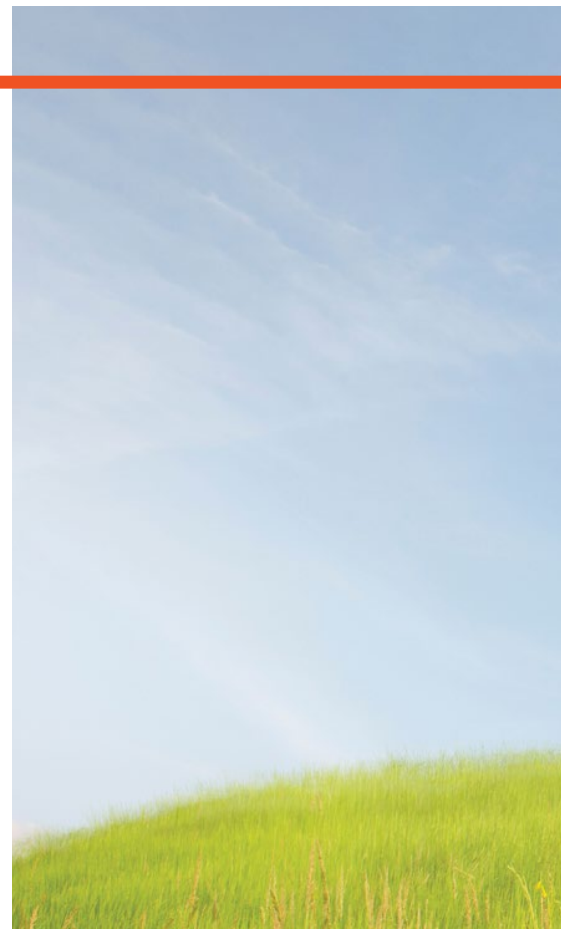




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and informed in their work. In the last two years, PSC has also undertaken to provide Climate Aware Professional Development (CAPD) for counselling professionals in response to the urgent need for such programs.

Psychology for a Safe Climate

Psychology for a Safe Climate is a not-for-profit registered health promotion charity whose work is largely done by volunteers. It was founded in Melbourne in 2010 by a group of concerned psychologists, psychotherapists and counsellors who were alert to the severity of the climate crisis, and the need for psychologically informed and appropriate responses. They began by exploring the psychological factors impeding serious and effective climate engagement by communities and governments to help climate activists begin to understand from a psychological perspective what appeared to be stubborn denial from those they were seeking to influence, and how to counter this through communication (PSC, 2015, 2016).

As PSC developed, the core team

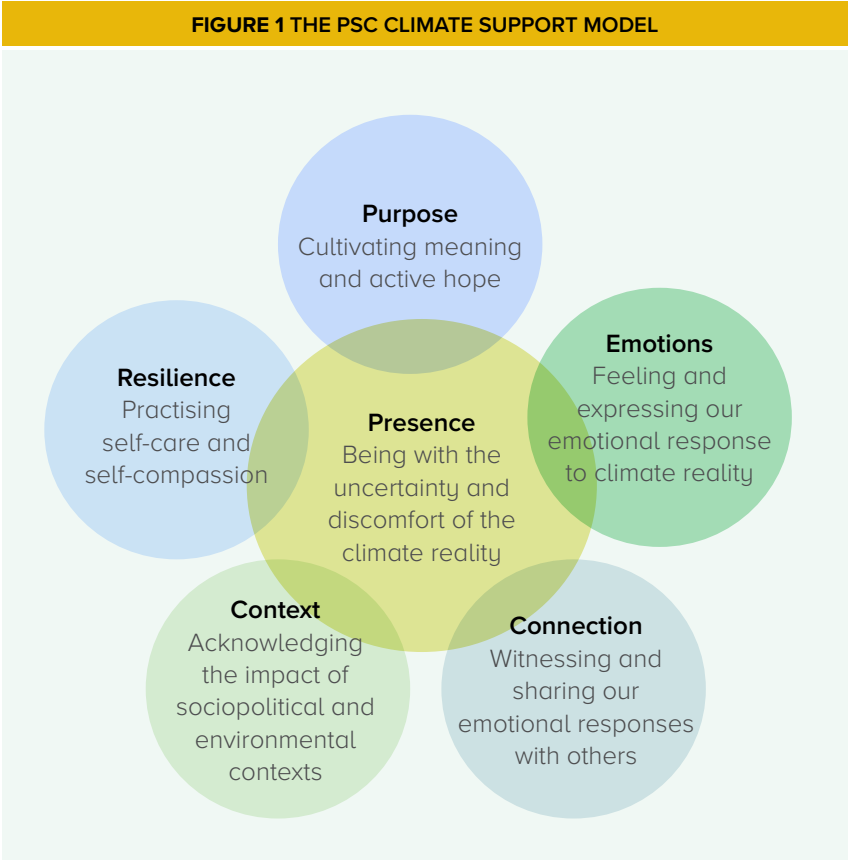
experienced the benefits of peer group conversations and support to explore and process their own climate-related emotions. They also observed in themselves, and those with whom they worked, that climate engagement can be an ongoing developmental journey that calls for support and collaborative actions within a community of care. Their observations were further backed up by research showing that when people are given a safe, facilitated space to identify and share with others their climate-related feelings, thoughts, fears and hopes, it can stimulate collective engagement and sense-making that not only eases distress, but also seeds personal and social transformation and action (Gillespie, 2019; Randall 2012). Acting on this knowledge, PSC has designed and delivered workshops for community members and climate researchers, policy makers, educators and advocacy organisations to explore and support the emotional impacts of their engagement. Through these workshops, PSC provides a space for the expression of a wide range of emotions, including grief, fear, anger,

guilt, exhaustion, inspiration, love and hope in the context of current social, political and cultural climates.

A common response in PSC workshops is that “I’ve been aware and involved in climate change for years, but have never talked about how I feel”. Feedback received in evaluation forms also reveals the need that these workshops meet. For example:

What a session! Our Beating Burnout session facilitated by the PSC facilitator was powerful and emotional. As a small [non-government organisation], finding the time and space to really debrief as a team is essential. None of us realised how badly we needed this session until it happened. The learnings and better understanding of each other that the session gave us are invaluable. (Climate advocacy organisation).

The two-day workshop helped us to open up about our grief after losing so much in the Tathra and District Fire. It was so important to do this as a




group, to see how others were coping, hurting, healing. The facilitators from Psychology for a Safe Climate made a very safe space for us to explore our responses and share the stories of our various experiences. We felt really supported and respected. (Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action)

Through its work with others, PSC has developed a Climate Support Model (Figure 1), as a framework for training PSC facilitators and the CAPD. The model nominates six core avenues of support for people in their engagement with climate change. Each avenue draws on currently available evidence-based research, as described and referenced below, although the model itself has yet to be formally peer-reviewed.

A core understanding of the model is that working with climate emotions is most effective in a group. Individual self-soothing,

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sense-making and indeed action only extend so far when the origins, effects and necessary responses to the threats are collective and socially organised. The complex systemic nature of climate breakdown lies beyond individual consciousness and experience for most people. Coming to terms with this reality, and the enormity of its disruptions, requires the input of multiple perspectives of lived experience. Group work is ideal for identifying the collective systemic nature of the causes and effects of the climate crisis, and to foster a culture of care and collaborative restorative actions for ecosystems, societies and psyches. When group work is well-supported by therapeutic models of counselling, it can provide a healthy way to hold the complexity of emotions and dilemmas related to climate and ecological crises that both normalises a wide range of emotions and builds creativity and resilience for collaborative engagement (Gillespie, 2019; Randall, 2012).

The Climate Aware Professional Development

In 2021, PSC launched their CAPD in the form of three interactive webinars, with the aim of supporting counsellors to develop awareness of the psychosocial contexts of the climate crisis; to recognise climate change impacts on mental health; to identify, express and share their own emotional responses to the climate crisis; and to learn how to work appropriately with climate-related emotions and issues as they present in the clinical space. The content and processes of the CAPD are anchored in PSC's Climate Support Model as the discussion below describes.

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For the practitioner, presence both requires, and supports, an ongoing engagement with climate realities, personally and professionally, while observing fluctuations of feeling, disruptive thought processes and changing worldviews in oneself and others. Being present also means witnessing our own desires and tactics, conscious and unconscious, to avoid facing climate realities, including disavowal, distancing or displacement (Weintrobe, 2013).

Acknowledging and working through personal responses is a critical component in developing the professional capacity to be with those who are struggling with climate distress. Within PSC, this ongoing work is supported by regular check ins, climate café conversations and experiential processes that help PSC members to assimilate and process

the latest climate science, political developments or catastrophic events. Similarly, the CAPD offers participants space for reflection and mindfulness, a sharing of thoughts and feelings, and art-based explorations to cultivate ongoing presence. Once the CAPD is completed, participants are offered ongoing support for cultivating climate-aware presence through regular climate café conversations and InterVision, a peer supervision group.

The outer circles of the Climate Support Model show five crucial avenues of support beginning with feeling and expressing emotions. The emotional terrain of responding to climate change is varied and complex, containing often powerful, painful and unfamiliar feelings. While the terms 'eco-anxiety' and 'climate anxiety' are much used in the media, they fall far short

of honouring the range, depth or nuances of what people commonly feel in relation to ecological and climate destruction. Panu Pihkala's (2020) synthesis of a number of research papers on eco-anxiety reveals a long list of feelings including numbness, melancholia, despair, hope, amazement, disappointment, shock, dread, yearning, regret, shame and inadequacy. Furthermore, these and other related emotions tend to be fluid, easily coinciding with or morphing into one another (Pihkala, 2020).

When people are given the space and support to name and explore their feelings about climate change, it can open a rich landscape of meaning and connection. It also increases capacity for listening to and supporting others (Baker et al., 2021). Throughout the CAPD, participants are given the space to identify their emotions in response to the material and exercises presented within the seminars, as well as to climate-related events in the wider world. Being able to validate the often very mixed and intense feelings about climate crisis we all carry, consciously or

unconsciously, crucially prepares the ground for empathic work with others in this terrain.

Connection happens through sharing emotional responses with others and being a witness for others in their sharing. PSC's work focuses on groups because of the therapeutic value of connecting with others, dismantling walls of isolation and finding mutual recognition and support, often while sitting together with questions and dilemmas about how to be human in these times, such as how to parent, how to work, how to travel or how to relate to friends, colleagues and family who hold different climate views.

When working clinically with climate distress, Elisabeth Allured (2020) advocates the importance of a 'witnessing professional' who has the capacity to deeply be with clients as the trauma of environmental crisis comes to consciousness. This experience of being together lessens feelings of isolation and helps to ease guilt, grief, fears and traumatic reactions (Gillespie, 2019; Randall, 2012). The CAPD models the importance of connection in this work through its many small group exercises and interactive design.

In the Climate Support Model, context identifies the relevance of sociopolitical factors in climate distress and impacts. Entrenched extractivist economies, neoliberal ideologies, consumerist values, political corruption and worsening social inequity are all significant factors driving the collapse of ecosystems and climate systems (Klein, 2014). This combination of factors has contributed to what Weintrobe (2021) has designated as a 'culture of uncare' in which social good is downgraded for free market principles, and where people are treated as isolated individuals and consumers rather than as citizens embedded within communities and ecosystems. This individualistic and dissociative frame weakens the fabric of social connections, breeds loneliness and falsifies ecological realities.

Recognising these sociopolitical contexts stimulates counselling professionals to rethink their own ideas about personal agency, social action and political processes. In the CAPD, participants are given an introductory psychosocial analysis of the climate crisis, informed by climate psychology research, and

The CAPD teaches evidenced-based self-care and self-compassion practices while framing self-care and self-compassion within the systemic context of ongoing community climate engagement and impacts.



are encouraged to develop ways of working that build connections between people and address social justice issues; for example, facilitating community workshops, training and conversations.

The term resilience has had a recent resurgence in response to climate catastrophes and the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting collective concerns about collapse, despair and burnout. People and communities have some understandable scepticism about this term, seeing that it can be deployed to deny the ongoing nature of climate impacts and threats, as well as to encourage 'business as usual' attitudes. For PSC, resilience does not mean 'bouncing back despite it all' but rather something that can be carefully cultivated and shared in the challenging ground of individual and collective vulnerabilities, suffering and ongoing difficulties.

The CAPD teaches evidenced-based self-care and self-compassion practices while framing self-care and self-compassion within the systemic context of ongoing community climate engagement and impacts. Mindful self-compassion supports an acknowledgement and acceptance

of suffering and difficulty while facilitating action from a place of care for oneself and others (Neff, 2011). The CAPD also incorporates nature-based practices that can have many benefits for physical and mental health as well as foster feelings of relatedness to the living world (Coleman, 2006).

In his book *Transformational resilience*, psychologist Bob Doppelt (2016) illustrates how finding new purpose, meaning and insights in life as a result of climate hardships can help people tap into the core values they want to live by in the midst of adversity, and inspire meaningful action that draws on personal skills and gifts. Similarly, in their research with climate activists, Randall and Hoggett (2016) observe the emergence of an emotionally intelligent form of 'sustainable activism' that can hold the tension between optimism and pessimism while committing to the principle that it is never too late for meaningful and helpful action.

Committing to caring and meaningful actions, regardless of possible outcomes, nourishes active hope (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). This form of hope is guided by a compass of care, steering

through the emotional ebb and flow of engaging with climate and ecological issues. The CAPD opens an exploration of how practitioners can support active hope in themselves and their clients by committing to purposeful action, nurturing inspiration and joy, connecting to the natural world, practicing gratitude and rest, and tending to emotions.

Each one of the circles in the Climate Support Model are taught and practiced in the CAPD including in the final seminar, when therapist facilitators share case studies of working with climate distress, and invite participants to respond to hypothetical scenarios as well as their own experiences. Through this process, practitioners experience the necessity and richness of collaborative work in developing the individual and community resilience necessary for engaging with immense social and ecological upheaval. Knowing that everyone present is grappling with unprecedented events, dilemmas, griefs and change generates a shared vulnerability, generosity and openness to experimentation that is as inspiring as it is challenging.

Reflecting back on the CAPD process, one participant offered this feedback:

These workshops offered me the deep understanding and support I needed at a critical time in my work. I felt the humanity, humour, kindness and deep vulnerability of both facilitators and participants. The conversations explored our shared grief, uncertainty, dismay and understanding, as well as offering valuable insights and genuine learning. This experience has strengthened my work practice and I do not feel as alone. We do not know exactly what the future holds but I, for one, need ways to help maintain both individual and collective wellness. Disasters happen to individuals and communities. So many of us have not had spaces to hold these dynamic conversations about climate grief, as we have been too busy listening to others. Psychology for a Safe Climate offers those conversations into the unknown. I am so grateful.

InterVision

As well as building a network of CAP practitioners, PSC has created an InterVision (supervision) Professional Development program to continue the ongoing development of clinical skills and the practitioner's personal climate journey. These clinical skills include assessment, problem identification, diagnosis, rapport building, treatment strategies and nature-based practices. As the therapist's climate journey is an integral part of developing CAP clinical skills, the InterVision groups continue

the CAPD practices of giving participants the space and support to explore their personal climate emotions, thoughts, actions and relationships. InterVision also helps practitioners to explore issues of self, values, identity, meaning and spiritual concerns in depth, with the recognition that climate emotions require an eco-psychosocial response and a systemic approach. As well as providing peer support, this supervision group focuses on refining what is needed in the emergent field of climate psychology, adapting counselling skills in a rapidly changing therapeutic field within a climate-disrupted world.

Conclusion

PSC's CAPD and InterVision groups meet a previously unmet need to rework mental health practice understandings and practice in this era of mounting existential threats due to climate and ecological losses. Through this process, participants, including trainers, can experience the necessity and richness of collaborative work in developing the individual and community resilience necessary for engaging with immense social and ecological upheaval. Along the way, many assumptions influenced by an individualistic and eco-systemic denying worldview can be proven false.

As is so often observed, crisis creates opportunity. The opportunity that the climate crisis offers counsellors is to work with others – peers, clients and communities – to develop mental health understandings and practices anchored in a systemic worldview. It will take many villages to endure climate crisis. The village

of mental health practitioners can make a vital contribution through shared experiences and learnings based in an acknowledgement of common vulnerabilities, connections and care. PSC looks forward to seeing a thriving and widespread network of practitioners committed to supporting individuals, communities and organisations develop emotional resilience, connection and capacity for sustained efforts to respond wisely to the climate crisis. ■

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