

A New Path

THE ROLE OF SYSTEMIC THERAPISTS IN AN ERA OF **ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

While global warming is often explained through references to carbon emissions reports and warnings of rising seas, we're overlooking the primary cause of this traumatic reality and the domain where the solutions will ultimately be found: the human psyche. Though climate change is now widely acknowledged to be the result of human behavior, our pro-environmental efforts don't skillfully attend to the deep-seated psychological factors that drive our unsustainable lifestyles and cultural norms. MFTs have a powerful role to play in providing psychological insights and interdisciplinary conversations focused on sustainability solutions and treatments for climate-induced emotional distress.

Leslie Davenport, MS

As we know from our MFT training and experience, facts aren't enough to motivate change: It's our feelings and beliefs that color our perceptions, shape our relationships, and drive our behaviors. **Many of our most influential beliefs are unexamined, as they dwell below the level of conscious awareness. We're at a critical crossroads, and it's imperative that systemic psychological thinkers contribute their expertise to dealing with the harsh realities of our changing world.**

Our field must also develop professional competencies to treat climate-induced anxiety, depression, and trauma. Emotional distress triggered by climate change is already showing up in our practices and will only increase in the coming years.

Climate change research

A 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was compiled by over 600 scientists worldwide to advise world leaders. It outlines a disturbing picture of severe ecological degradation occurring much earlier than anticipated. Without immediate and significant changes to our lifestyles and public policies, by 2040—a date that falls within the lifetime of much of the world's population—we'll face worsening food and water shortages, an increase in disease, faltering infrastructures, intensifying and more frequent extreme weather events, and a dramatic reduction of the biodiversity on our planet, including the extinction of many organisms and even species (IPCC, 2018).

Climate change is happening now, and it's personal. Consider how California previously had two defined fire seasons, but now devastating fires occur year-round. Many who fled the 2018 California Paradise Camp Fire describe how their shoes melted onto the asphalt as they ran for their lives (Hughes 2018). One of the 30,000 individuals impacted by Hurricane Harvey in Texas may tell you how civilians joined first responders to form

human chains in deep floodwater to rescue those stranded in their homes and cars (Mezzofiore, 2017). But despite the growing personal impacts, we continue to burn fossil fuels at an alarming rate, build on floodplains, and discard single-use plastics that end up polluting the oceans, unable to recognize that we're using natural resources at a rate that far exceeds nature's ability to renew itself.

Mental health impacts of global warming

Climate events devastate more than just property. The Executive Summary of the *Psychological Effects of Global Warming on the United States* warns that, "Global warming...in the coming years...will foster public trauma, depression, violence, alienation, substance abuse, suicide, psychotic episodes, post-traumatic stress disorders and many other mental health-related conditions" (National Wildlife Federation, 2012, p. i).

Many Americans are pervaded by an ambient anxiety, including those who haven't experienced a climate disaster. The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication has tracked American's concerns about the impacts of climate change, finding last year that 69% of Americans worry about global warming, and 49% believe it will harm them personally (Gustafson, Bergquist, Leiserowitz & Maibach, 2019). This marks a sharp increase in concern from just five years ago, a rapid and large-scale emotional shift. A new clinical vocabulary is emerging to capture the lived experience of

climate-related distress:

- Solastalgia: The feeling of longing or being "homesick" as your familiar environment changes around you.
- Pre-traumatic stress disorder: Anticipatory anxiety about climate disasters that are projected to occur in the future.
- Ecological grief: Intense feelings of grief as people suffer climate-related losses of ecosystems, landscapes, and human and animal life.
- Eco-anxiety: An experience of dread, helplessness, and/or existential anxiety triggered by the seemingly irrevocable impacts of climate change.

While these terms aren't yet widely incorporated in our professional vernacular, the emotional states they describe are pervasive.

Emerging roles for MFTs

Is treating climate-related emotional distress within our scope of practice? Our field has evolved tremendously, and our professional commitment includes periodically re-evaluating how and what we treat in order to keep pace with new clinical approaches and emergent issues. Psychiatrist Lise Van Susteren makes a powerful case that the time has come to include the climate-change theme in our work when she states: *Mental health professionals vigorously endorse requirements to report cases of child abuse. It is a legal obligation, but it is also a moral one. Is it any less compelling a moral obligation, in the name of all children now and in the future, to report that we are on track to hand over a planet that may be destroyed for generations to come? I respectfully request that we, as mental health professionals, make a unified stand in support of actions to reduce the threat of catastrophic climate change* (2011, p. 1).

It's time to add a climate psychology lens to our assessment and treatment

of clients of all ages. Intake forms could add a question like, "When you hear about what's happening in the world, including climate change, how does it affect you?" When clients come into our practices with a constellation of symptoms like insomnia, depression or anxiety, we look for a history of abuse, factor in family-of-origin patterns, and examine current stressors at work and at home—but clients may also be having a visceral response to the unsettling changes in their environment. It's part of the task of assessment to discern their sources of distress in order to help clients "connect the dots," process their emotions, and develop healthy patterns and relationships.

Core competencies and training

The incorporation of climate-related issues isn't intended to dominate the therapeutic focus, but rather to be appropriately integrated into our theories and interventions. Much of our existing training is already applicable to these concerns.

We can allow space for clients to bring their fear and disenfranchised grief out into the open with compassionate validation. As the exploration deepens, tremendous ambivalence often surfaces. We witness our clients begin to express a universal desire for a secure and healthy world for themselves and their families. But cognitive dissonance arises with a growing recognition of how our lifestyles impact the environment, bringing this wish into direct conflict with our daily choices. We want a wholesome diet of fresh fruit and vegetables year-round, but they're flown in out-of-season at heavy environmental costs; we love keeping our home at a comfortable temperature, but we're increasing our carbon footprint when the heat or air-conditioning is turned up; we value special time with our family, but reunions may require flying back and forth across the country, adding to pollution.



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More common than denial is disavowal, when we acknowledge that climate change is real but turn away out of sheer frustration or overwhelm. When confronted with challenging new information, we're psychologically programmed to implement a range of defense mechanisms: rationalizing our choices, projecting the blame, compartmentalization. Remaining trapped in ambivalence can lead to shame and even despair.

We can decrease our clients' experiences of isolation by being present with their expressions of fear and helplessness. We can support them in exploring their beliefs, which may include the conviction that they're too small to make a difference. We can offer evidence-based approaches to shift ingrained habits. We can encourage their efforts to cultivate community connections and build social capital. Assisting clients in navigating the emotional grip of climate distress makes space for heightened curiosity and reimagining

a new relationship with the world. When clients make the shift to actively participating in a constructive response, they experience an increase in resiliency and empowerment.

MFT leadership opportunities

Understanding and changing the drives and behaviors that contribute to global warming is a complex and nuanced undertaking, and it requires a systemic approach that includes a comprehensive understanding of the human mind. Our training has applications outside the therapy room, and we can bring our expertise to interdisciplinary strategies. In collaborative dialogs, we can provide our insights on the emotional underpinnings of climate disavowal and ambivalence, share the many evidence-based studies of our motivations for change, facilitate non-polarizing communication strategies, and teach tools for building emotional resiliency.

Many environmental strategists hope to spur others into action, but they often don't recognize that their tactics run counter to what we know about human behavior. For example, when people are given a great deal of information about the dangers of climate chaos without having had a direct experience of the personal difficulties stemming from it, they'll tune out and develop a kind of "apocalypse fatigue" (Stoknes, 2014). One hundred twenty-nine different behavior change studies confirmed that the *least effective* strategies for encouraging change are those that arouse shame or fear (Curfman, 2009). These results are a clear indication of how well-intentioned but ill-informed efforts can produce the opposite of the desired effects. Bringing these kinds of psychological insights into our pro-environment efforts is one of many ways that MFTs can contribute to a more effective approach to change.

Adding a global warming lens to our work is imperative. The systemic roots of the MFT theoretic orientation—which tell us that changing one part of the system influences the entire congruent living system—could not be better suited to addressing the interconnected nature of climate issues. We can be valued partners in the collective effort necessary to drive the personal and social evolution that our planet's condition so urgently requires.



Leslie Davenport, MS, LMFT, is an integrative psychotherapist and climate psychology consultant with offices in Tacoma, WA, and the San Francisco Bay Area.

She is an AAMFT Clinical Fellow and has been practicing for more than 25 years. Davenport is the author of *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change: A Clinician's Guide* (2017).

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April Lancit & Associates PLLC
Couple, Family, & Individual Therapy
225 North Presidential Blvd
Suite 103
Bala Cynwyd, PA 19004