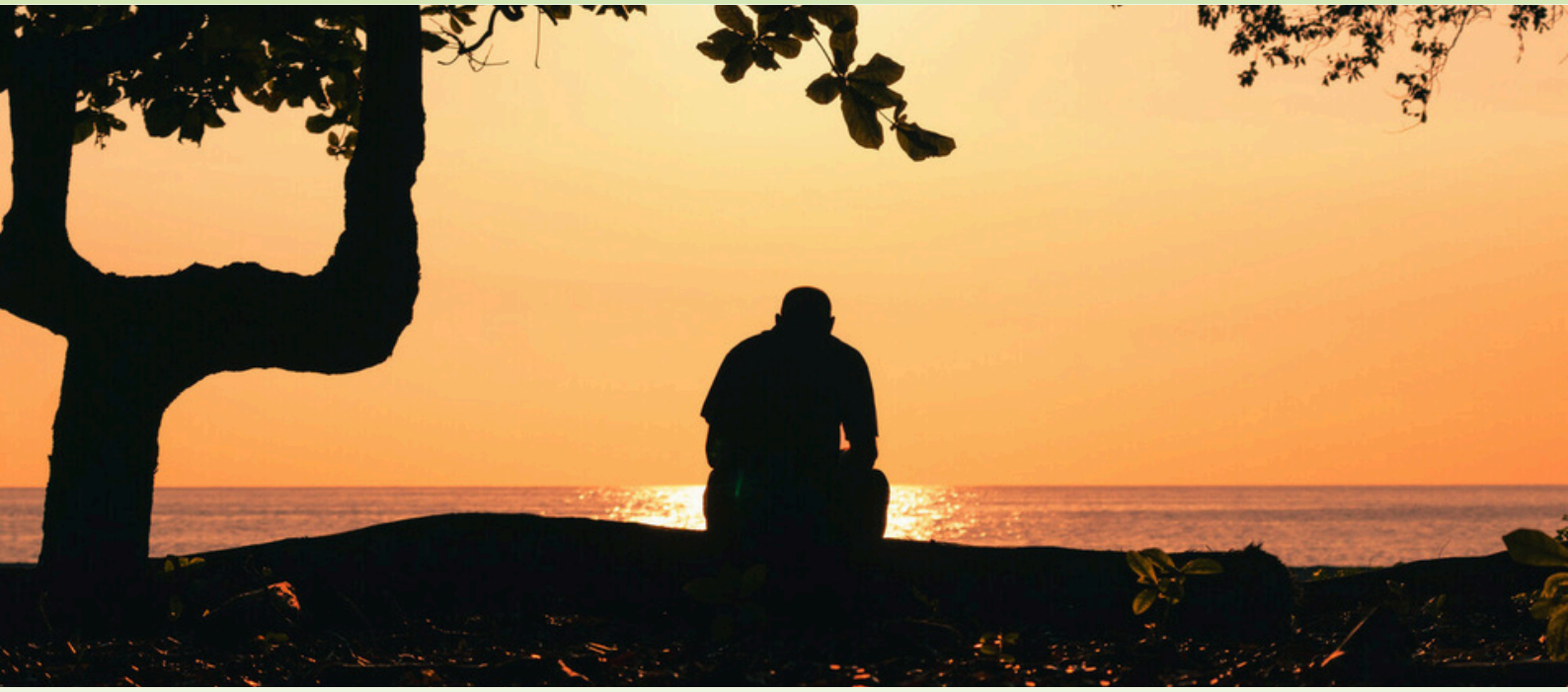
Notes for Teachers on Climate Anxiety

THE CLIMATE COALITION



Sunset in Vanuatu.
Photo: Ivan Utahenua/Oxfam. Oxfam acknowledges the support of the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP).

Climate anxiety is recognised by psychologists as a legitimate mental health issue.

'The tolls (of climate change) on our mental health are far reaching. They induce stress, depression, and anxiety; strain social and community relationships; and have been linked to increases in aggression, violence, and crime. Children and communities with few resources to deal with the impacts of climate change are those most impacted.'

American Psychological Association (2017, pg4) - 'Mental Health and Our Changing Climate'

Get Creative for Climate Justice can play an important role in promoting wellbeing among young people. However, achieving this depends on how the project and other climate topics are presented. These notes contain some brief advice about how to promote greater climate wellbeing and avoid climate anxiety, and have links to more detailed resources.

Research by the University of Bath revealed that 82% of children in the UK worry about the impact of climate change. 48% of those who said that they spoke about climate change with others said that their concerns were ignored or dismissed, and 26% said that climate distress and anxiety were affecting their everyday lives.

At a time when children face multiple anxieties and pressures both outside and inside school, promoting good climate mental health is more important now than ever before.

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Psychologists agree that our responses to the climate emergency are shaped by our emotional selves rather than our rational selves. The climate emergency generates similar 'flight, fight or freeze' responses as any other external threats we face. These threats are usually societal and not directly caused by school, although they may be amplified by school.

In this context, where children are facing the 'metacrisis' of climate change

They need

- seeing older people care and take action
- social justice for all
- normalising talking about it
- being seen, heard and accepted
- being with and collaborating with like-minded others
- taking collective action

They don't need

- being made to feel like it's their responsibility
- dismissal and advice
- fear based education
- focus on individual action
- false positivity - 'toxic hope'
- individual pathologizing - 'you are the problem'
- not mentioning it, avoidance

School does not set out to create climate anxiety. However phrases and framing used in school may inadvertently have the opposite effects to those intended. For example; '*We're reducing our emissions at school to save the planet. I'm giving YOU the important job of switching off all the computer terminals. You should feel very proud to have this responsibility Don't forget to do it and don't let the school down*.' This well meaning instruction could have the opposite effect to the one intended and trigger climate anxiety.

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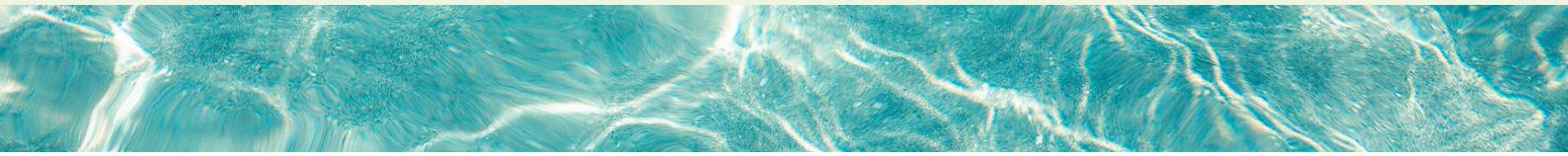
Messages to avoid during Get Creative for Climate Justice		Messages to include during Get Creative for Climate Justice
'You are doomed'	→	You are not alone
Lists of individual actions	→	Examples of collective action
'The future is in your hands'	→	'Your future matters to all of us'
It's your job to save the world'	→	'Many adults everywhere are working to protect the world'
'It's all going to be fine'	→	'It's going to be hard, and we will face it together'
'You are amazing, you have got this'	→	'We trust you, we support you'

Building resilience in young people

There are wider implications in this project for how schools best prepare children for a fast changing and potentially traumatic world, particularly where children's behaviour may reflect their involuntary responses to 'flight, fight or freeze.' We hope the Get Creative for Climate Justice project plays an important part in your journey towards a more resilience focused approach to teaching and learning about the climate.

This resource is based on a workshop delivered by climate psychologist Jo McAndrews

See www.jomcandrews.com
https://padlet.com/jomcandrews/climateradicalcare



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