

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

What happens in Climate Cafés? Exploring responses to the psychological burdens of climate change in seven UK women

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Abstract

As humanity faces a future of rising global temperatures, and associated extreme weather events, distressing emotional responses are understandable, but often silenced. Climate Cafés are unique, dedicated spaces where such responses can be shared and validated with others. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with attendees of Climate Cafés facilitated by the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA). An initial interview of 45 minutes was followed by a shorter follow-up interview 3 months later. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was used with seven female participants. Four superordinate themes were identified: (1) Having a keen awareness of threats to planetary health, (2) Action taken in the face of climate change, (3) Journeying from isolation to connection, and (4) Legacy of Climate Cafés. Participants described positive experiences both during and after the Climate Cafés, particularly having their concerns heard and validated, being with others who share their worldview, and feeling more connected. Attending Climate Cafés appears to offer important support to people experiencing distress related to the climate and ecological emergencies. Findings are discussed in light of the compassion-focused therapy (CFT) ‘Three Systems’ model, which offers a unifying theoretical conceptualisation that could support future development and research in this area.

Key learning aims

- (1) To understand the idiosyncratic experiences of seven UK women at Climate Cafés.
- (2) To begin to conceptualise and apply psychological models to current Climate Café practices, especially compassion-focused modalities.
- (3) To use the experiences reported here to add to the growing understanding of eco-emotions.

Keywords: Compassion; Eco-distress; Eco-anxiety

Introduction

Climate change is the biggest health threat facing humanity (World Health Organisation, 2021: para. 1). This includes mental health impacts, where climate change is a source of distress and anxiety (Clayton, 2020). The existential threats of climate change are already here and involve wider aspects of environmental destruction. This includes signs of the collapse of the Gulf Stream (Boers, 2021), the Amazon Rainforest becoming a source of carbon emissions (Gatti *et al.*, 2021), the release of methane from the Siberian permafrost (Froitzheim *et al.*, 2021), and heatwaves, fires and floods across many parts of the world in 2022 and 2023. Future changes and impacts remain

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uncertain but further disruption will occur, and climate change is linked to broader ecological degradation. Responding to this reality with distressing emotions such as fear, anxiety, grief and anger is rational, and even constructive (Verplanken *et al.*, 2020).

Eco-distress

Eco-distress refers to the broad range of psychological burdens that arise in response to the climate and ecological emergencies. By steering away from pathologising terms akin to diagnostic labels, eco-distress describes ‘*the generalised sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse*’ (Albrecht, 2012: p. 205). Concern about climate change and associated ecological degradation is an increasing source of worry for people aware of such threats, without direct personal exposure. Fear and anxiety about a threatening and uncertain future (Pihkala, 2020) are common, but so too are other emotions (Pihkala, 2022a) including grief (about actual and anticipated losses) (Gibson *et al.*, 2020), anger, and a sense of injustice at the failings of powerful people and older generations to act on climate change (Hickman, 2019; Hickman *et al.*, 2021). Repeated studies show that concerns about climate change are high: 83% of 10,000 children and young people globally report concerns (Hickman *et al.*, 2021), as do 86% of Australians (Reser *et al.*, 2012a) and up to 40% of Europeans (Steentjes *et al.*, 2017). In places where climate change impacts are already obvious (i.e. sea rise and coastal erosion) rates are higher; for example, in Tuvalu, 95% of people reported eco-distress (Gibson *et al.*, 2020).

Stanley *et al.* (2021) sought to understand the mental health impacts of different emotional responses to climate change. They found that eco-anger, eco-anxiety and eco-depression predicted elevated scores on ‘anxiety’ and ‘stress’ sub-scales of the DASS-21. Furthermore, an analysis of behavioural outcomes found that depression, anxiety and anger all predicted collective action. Greater eco-anxiety predicted greater anxiety and stress in their daily lives, and eco-depression predicted greater depression, anxiety and stress symptoms. Unpicking the details of these predictions is limited by the lack of validated measures of eco-distress, although recent developments here (Clayton and Karazsia, 2020) are improving our understanding of associations between eco-emotions and mental health.

The findings of Stanley *et al.* (2021) align with the theory that worry can be constructive as well as unconstructive (Watkins, 2008), particularly in the context of understandable, rational concerns about a real existential threat (Clayton, 2020). Such constructive worry is likely to correlate with positive engagement with the climate crisis (e.g. Verplanken *et al.*, 2020), which is what the world urgently needs (Lee *et al.*, 2023).

Hope and values

Although some models of anxiety (Hebert and Dugas, 2019) emphasise the role of uncertainty in threat perception, another viewpoint is that hope also requires ‘*an uncertainty-entailing belief*’ (Milona, 2020: p. 109). For outcomes as uncertain as those relating to climate change, this may indicate why the anxiety within eco-distress can arise alongside feelings of empowerment and hope (Marks *et al.*, 2023) which may be significant drivers of positive engagement with the climate crisis. Hope arises when there is a desire for a particular outcome, even when the balance of probability may seem counter to this outcome (Lazarus, 1991). As Ojala notes, ‘*without difficulties there is no need for hope*’ (Ojala, 2017: p. 78). Thus engagement with the climate crisis requires people to connect with hope and agency alongside distress and ambivalence (Ojala, 2017).

Individuals’ personal values may interact with the constructive nature of eco-distress. This is seen in an increase in positive self-identity being reported when individuals act in line with eco-conscious values (Venhoeven *et al.*, 2016), and a correlation between ‘green self-identity’ and eco-distress (Verplanken *et al.*, 2020). The power of one’s values in living a meaningful life is increasingly recognised as a significant element of mental health and well-being, and for example,

third wave cognitive therapies (e.g. acceptance and commitment therapy) place values-based living as a central component of this (Hayes, 2016).

The climate and ecological crises have the potential to elicit existential anxiety. Work by Tillich (1952) can offer a framework here; when structures in our lives falter, anxieties about death, meaninglessness, guilt and condemnation are elicited. As we now face grim reports of extreme weather speaking to growing threats upon national infrastructure, political and societal global systems, such anxieties are likely to be evoked. Pihkala (2022b) applies Tillich's work to eco-distress, noting the challenge of finding meaning through distress, and the intersection of death and eco-distress, and offering insight into particular drivers of distress.

Implications for therapists

The broad range of eco-emotions (from hope to despair, empowerment to hopelessness, and love to grief) involve complex cognitive-behavioural and functional changes in individuals aware of the climate crises. This multifaceted psychological burden of living alongside an unfolding planetary catastrophe (as predicted by the scientific consensus) may have distinct differences from the distress described in traditional models of psychopathology (e.g. clinical anxiety or mood disorders) (Marks and Hickman, 2023). It also has the potential to affect people across the globe, as climate change will impact all of our lives. In this sense, eco-distress presents a unique form of distress to therapists.

This has significant clinical implications. Therapists increasingly encounter eco-emotions in therapy, with 37.6% of therapists reporting this increase and 41% feeling that climate change was relevant to their clinical work. Anxiety/fear were most commonly reported (Seaman, 2016). A more recent survey of 517 mental health professionals in Minnesota found that 76% saw their discipline as well positioned to help individuals cope with mental health difficulties associated with climate change, and 60% felt well positioned to help communities (Hoppe *et al.*, 2023). While 40% of respondents had discussed the mental health impacts of climate change in therapy, only 15% were aware of specific tools, resources or skills to use: *'It feels overwhelming and scary to me, too. I'm unaware of specific interventions other than general grief and trauma-related interventions'* (Hoppe *et al.*, 2023: p. 20).

Most research into psychological support for eco-distress involves 'WEIRD' (Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic) countries, with a relatively privileged position of being somewhat protected from the immediate impacts of climate change. This is despite the fact that eco-distress is more common in people who have already experienced direct impacts (Clayton, 2020). In modelling potential consequences of climate change on the Global South, King and Harrington (2018) showed that climate change will (and is already) affecting poorest communities most in terms of greatest changes in local climate. The alarm is sounding loudly in the Global South, but there is a risk that such concerns are unheard or even silenced by researchers in the Global North. The scientific community must be mindful of this potential bias.

With eco-distress arising more in therapeutic settings, psychological practitioners and therapists must be trained to respond appropriately. In the UK there are various professional reactions. For example, clinical psychologists have taken stances endorsing the consideration of eco-emotions in therapy (British Psychological Society Division of Clinical Psychology, 2022; Association of Clinical Psychology, 2020). The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2020) advise on how to best support young people with eco-distress, and the UK Council for Psychotherapy revised their Standards of Education and Training to include specific advice on sustainability and environmental awareness, including *'understanding of the implications and likely impacts this will have on the lives and wellbeing of us and future generations'* (UK Council for Psychotherapy, 2023: p. 9).

Many people reporting eco-distress have also reported feeling silenced or ignored when they attempt to talk about climate change and their emotional responses (Hickman *et al.*, 2021; Karol, 2018). Cunsolo and Ellis note that eco-distress *'isn't publicly or openly acknowledged'* (Cunsolo

and Ellis, 2018: p. 275) and as such it exists within a ‘socially constructed silence’. This takes power from the voices of those who would otherwise express their experiences (Fivush, 2010). Furthermore, if unable to speak of an internal experience, it is difficult to become fully aware about the extent to which one’s worldview is shared with others, creating feelings of alienation, isolation and disconnection, further compounding distress. This has been noted in other areas of socially constructed silence, such as survivors of rape (Ahrens, 2006).

Greenberg and Arndt (2012) suggest that a solid worldview buffers individuals against anxiety, by providing social identities, and values (Wolfe and Tubi, 2018). However, when certain world views are silenced (such as an environmentally aware and concerned view) they can feel unvalidated, which in turn creates a greater vulnerability to anxiety and distress. In contrast, we can create social spaces where groups and communities can come together and create a shared narrative of their world view. Sharing thoughts and emotions without being ignored or dismissed is an opportunity to break the social silence. This will allow people to feel validated, connected and valued, and can even lead to new ways of talking about, and living with their distress. A well-known example is the #MeToo movement where an online forum (Twitter) disrupted a global, socially constructed silence, and forged new connections and communities between individuals with shared painful experiences (Bogen *et al.*, 2021)

Death Cafés and Climate Cafés

Death is a topic about which few cultures speak freely, where socially constructed silence is common, offering a useful comparison to climate change (which involves death and even extinction; Thomas *et al.*, 2004). Miles and Corr (2017) explain how not speaking about death increases fear and threat about death, further limiting our ability to speak about it in a healthy and helpful way, and creating worries about how people will react to such conversations (Caughlin *et al.*, 2011). Death is the only existential certainty (Brashers, 2001) but humans are skilled at avoiding relevant information, protecting the self from such reality to stay optimistic and avoid suffering. Individuals thus endorse and conform to this socially constructed silence.

The Death Café movement challenges the social silence around death and dying, offering informal, single-session events where people meet in a semi-facilitated space and talk about death (Miles and Corr, 2017). Baldwin (2017) interviewed facilitators about their hopes and goals for their Death Cafés and found that ‘Advocacy’, ‘Validation’ and ‘Personal Identity’ were key, indicating that facilitators aim to help attendees have their feelings heard within a supportive community. This is seen to change unhelpful narratives about death, and enable attendees to assimilate new information and perspectives about death into their worldview (Greenberg and Arndt, 2012). This study was limited somewhat by the homogeneity of the sample (93% female, 67% aged 55–64 years, all facilitators were white and had received some form of college education), and more research is required.

‘Climate Cafés’ are based on the model of Death Cafés, as a way of exploring ‘*psychology and the climate and ecological crisis, and our own emotional responses*’ (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2020). Climate Cafés have been available for several years, offered by facilitators from a wide variety of backgrounds. They are, however, somewhat atheoretical, and largely based on the ideas discussed above about the importance of breaking socially constructed silences and offering people a place to express and hear valid responses to climate change. However, developing approaches to eco-distress demands researchers to investigate processes of change more closely and to consider how and why an approach such as a Climate Café may be an appropriate forum for those with eco-distress.

Theoretical considerations from third wave cognitive therapies offer some insight here. These approaches focus on supporting individuals to accept and live well in difficult contexts. Compassion-focused therapy (CFT) or acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), for example, focus on relationships to emotions, a person’s values, and acceptance of reality as it is (Hayes and

Hofmann, 2017). Although not used in the development of Climate Cafés, such theoretical frameworks could have explanatory power around the processes occurring within Climate Cafés.

The climate and ecological crises involve loss – past, present and future – on a global scale. People must find ways to process this loss, and assimilate a new understanding into their sense of self and place in the world (Atkinson, 2020). Climate Cafés were designed to offer a place for this, and empirical research is urgently required to assess whether this does in fact occur. This could deepen our understanding of appropriate therapeutic and community approaches to eco-distress. It is imperative that psychological professionals, and our communities, feel equipped to respond to the growing health threats of climate change.

Aims and research question

This study aimed to investigate what brings people to attend Climate Cafés, and how attendees experience them, including their experiences of emotions and distress related to climate change over time. The research questions were:

- (1) How do attendees experience being part of Climate Cafés?
 - (a) Why do people seek out and decide to attend Climate Cafés?
- (2) How were attendees' psychological burdens of climate change and ecological degradation impacted by attending a Climate Café?
- (3) Were there any longer-term impacts of having attended a Climate Café?

Method

Design

Each participant took part in two semi-structured interviews between November 2021 and May 2022. The initial interview lasted around 45 minutes, with a shorter follow-up interview arranged 3 months later. The purpose of the follow-up was to explore any changes in behaviour, thoughts or emotions in the period since attending the café. This allowed for an exploration of temporality in participants' telling of their experience. The interview schedule was developed in collaboration with a member of the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) with lived experience of attending and then organising Climate Cafés.

Participants

Ethical approval was given by the University of Bath Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited from people who had attended a CPA facilitated Climate Café. A typical CPA Climate Café is facilitated by two facilitators. An initial round of sharing is often scaffolded by images or natural objects that participants are invited to interact with. After an initial round of reflections from each participant, the conversation is opened up and participants are invited to respond to, and reflect on, the contributions of others. Throughout the Café, the focus of discussion is on participants' thoughts and feelings about the climate and ecological crises (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2020). At the time of recruiting, most cafés were facilitated virtually due to restrictions on socialising during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two later participants had experienced face-to-face Climate Cafés. Seven participants were recruited from seven different cafés.

An information flyer was sent to CPA Climate Café facilitators who shared these with all attendees. Attendees could then decide whether or not they wished to participate. Purposive sampling was used to allow for as diverse a sample of participants as possible. The intention was to use heterogenous purposive sampling in order to capture the widest possible breadth of

Table 1. Demographic summary of the participants

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest level of education	Profession	Level of eco-distress	Diagnosed mental health condition
Patricia	45–49	Female	White Irish	Further education	Administrator	Somewhat distressed	No
Maggie	60–64	Female	White British	Further education	Mental health professional student	Extremely distressed	Yes
Teresa	40–44	Female	White British	Further education	Pastoral support	Somewhat distressed	No
Edith	45–49	Female	White British	Further education	Student	Somewhat distressed	No
Judith	55–59	Female	White and Asian	Further education	Artist	Extremely distressed	Yes
Ethel	50–54	Female	Other white background	Further education	Mental health professional	Somewhat distressed	No
Mary	35–39	Female	White British	Further education	Additional needs tutor	Somewhat distressed	No

experiences of attending a Climate Café, an under-studied phenomenon. This sampling method is at risk of researcher bias as the heterogeneity is dependent on the subjectivity of the researcher. In this study, the only potential participants that were not included were living outside of the UK. The ethical approval for this research only allowed recruiting from within the UK.

The project aimed to be as inclusive as possible, and so the inclusion criteria were broad: being over 18 years old; living in the UK; and having attended at least one CPA Climate Café. Seven females were recruited to take part in the study (Turpin *et al.*, 1997). All participants' gender identity aligned with their assigned gender at birth. Demographic information is detailed in Table 1.

Data collection

Those expressing interest in participating were emailed a link to a questionnaire hosted on Qualtrics, where they provided demographic information, accessed the participant information sheet, and consent form. Once consent was given, participants were invited to interview using the Microsoft Teams platform. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and the recordings were then deleted.

Analysis

Data were analysed in accordance with an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology (Smith *et al.*, 2009). IPA researchers seek to immerse themselves in the world and experience of the participants. Rather than bracketing their existing knowledge in an attempt to capture an unbiased version of participants' experience, IPA researchers are reflexive in the interpretation of the data, in relation to their own experience and knowledge (Tuffour, 2017). Data were coded line by line by the lead author alone, with initial noting reviewed in research supervision sessions between the first and second author. The research group met on seven occasions between September 2022 and May 2023 to discuss coding and evolving models. Data were then developed into emergent themes, connection across these themes explored (Smith *et al.*, 2009), and finally superordinate themes were developed.

IPA methodology involves a critical realist ontological stance, where reality and truth are seen to exist in the minds of individuals who experience different versions of that reality (Cuthbertson *et al.*, 2020). Critical realism allows for reality to be subjective and multiple, and it assumes that the development of models is integral in understanding the structures, mechanisms and processes associated with the phenomena being studied (Cuthbertson *et al.*, 2020).

Each participant transcript included both the initial and follow-up interview, allowing for exploration of temporal changes in each participant. Each transcript was read and coded by hand for greater immersion in the data. Data were explored in the context of linguistic and semantic features. Connections across themes were identified in one transcript before analysing the next. Regular research supervision explored the codes and narrative of the data. Discussions about the development and/or application of appropriate models to explain the phenomena of Climate Cafés were continuous throughout the analysis phase. A reflexive log and reflexive supervision brought biases into dialogue. Biases were named and noticed, but not bracketed. This is in line with reflexive data interpretation in IPA methodology (Tuffour, 2017). Once all transcripts were coded and analysed, thematic patterns across interviews were developed into superordinate themes that captured shared experiences of the journey through Climate Cafés. Themes were repeatedly discussed with the research team in an iterative and reflexive process, in the context of what were felt to be appropriate models of understanding.

Self-reflexivity

The corresponding author is a clinical and research psychologist who has conducted research into eco-distress over the last five years. She has significant personal concern about the climate crisis. Her work emphasises the realistic, painful nature of eco-distress as a response to the current climate and ecological emergencies, and the growing need to develop and apply existing psychological theories and approaches to such experiences. Her awareness of the growing Climate Café movement drew her interest to this topic of research, recognising it as an opportunity to explore how psychological theory and practice could be applied to this under-studied area from a critical realist stance.

The first author conducted research during a turbulent socio-political era. The United Kingdom experienced three changes in Prime Minister, where climate policies were rarely identified as a high priority. Witnessing Rishi Sunak initially refuse to attend COP27, and his administration limiting the ability of King Charles III to attend, demonstrated how low on their agenda the government situated the climate emergency. Bearing witness to powerful political forces acting in this way meant that their relationship to this research has oscillated between determination and steadfastness, to apathy and dejection. This oscillation was further compounded by consistent exposure to coverage of natural disasters, and extreme weather events, demonstrating the increasing impact of climate change. They found themselves determined and emboldened by the notion that all scientists should, in whatever way is available to them, work to address the consequences of the climate emergency. They have also connected with a sense of hopelessness and futility, and felt the allure of turning away from this existential crisis.

They noted feelings of hypocrisy in the research journey, having coded some of the data on a transatlantic flight, and the weight of responsibility of becoming a father. Seeking sense-making, they tried to live in line with core values of actively turning towards suffering with compassion. This aligns with clinical interest and experience in CFT, and awareness of the modes of threat, drive, soothing and care fitted well with the data.

Discussions with the research team, and reference to existing research on eco-distress, supported the idea that compassion can help us understand eco-distress. In particular, our awareness of the interdependence of climate, ecology and humanity, and how this underpins the suffering people report, made models of compassion particularly appropriate, being based upon a

recognition of our interdependence. Furthermore, the data showed that as people's awareness of the climate and ecological crises deepened, so too did their care and compassion.

Results

While the main research questions focus on people's experience during and after Climate Cafés, it was clear that this experience was inseparable from the participants' context of awareness of planetary health and eco-distress. Taken together, superordinate themes thus describe a clear sense of *journey* for participants, from the distress that led them to the café, to how they felt during and after attendance. Table 2 summarises the four superordinate themes, and subordinate themes. We note that despite using purposive sampling, all participants were female.

Superordinate Theme 1: Having a keen awareness of threats to planetary health

All attendees of Climate Cafés were well aware of the climate and ecological crises, leading to emotional, behavioural and cognitive responses, based on different personal experiences, and which all affected how they experienced their café. Awareness included a sense of both certainty (e.g. in scientific prediction) and uncertainty (e.g. our ability to mitigate and adapt). The degree to which participants were consciously aware of their responses varied, and was affected by attending the Climate Café.

Living with an existential and ubiquitous threat

Participants saw the climate and ecological emergencies as a pervasive and all-encompassing threat, affecting personal life decisions including whether it is '*worth having children*', and bringing up painful thoughts about whether they were '*going to be able to see their grandchildren*' (**Maggie**). The everyday presence of such threat was clear, such as experiencing an '*existential crisis when you go shopping*' (**Maggie**). Sometimes they would try to '*push it away . . . and forget about it*', a strategy that only worked sometimes (**Maggie**). Such threats were not abstract to them, but were '*a real thing in the real world*' (**Judith**), and the scale of threat was linked to a sense of futility of individual action effecting meaningful change.

The emotional toll of climate change is both above and below the surface

Attendees reported an emotional toll of climate change that was both conscious and not, with concomitant psychosocial and physical impacts. Prior to attending (or even seeking out) Climate Cafés, attendees had felt '*helpless at times . . . depressed . . . angry*' (**Maggie**). Regarding this type of distress as unique to the climate crisis, it was regarded as impervious to existing therapies: '*CBT won't fix my climate anxiety*' (**Judith**).

These participants (in the UK) noted how in their society '*we're not allowed to be angry*' (**Teresa**), suggesting that such painful emotions would be regarded as inappropriate, or culturally unacceptable. Denial was an important coping strategy, but one that could not be used in a Climate Café because such a space: '*[it] ingrains in that it's [climate change] really happening*' (**Teresa**). When the option to turn away from eco-distress felt unavailable, participants were left feeling different, lonely and isolated, as others in society failed to perceive the situation similarly:

' . . . I kind of think of it almost like I put on another set of glasses, and I can't . . . take them off anymore, like, they're on now' (**Ethel**)

Yet participants still had to continue '*trying to live our lives*' (**Maggie**), which felt like a double bind, or cognitive dissonance. Daily life would involve having intense emotional reactions to an existential threat, alongside engaging in behaviours and thoughts associated with a 'normal' life.

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate theme	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2	Subtheme 3	Subtheme 4
Having a keen awareness of threats to planetary health	Living with an existential and ubiquitous threat	The emotional toll of climate change is both above and below the surface		
Action taken in the face of climate change	Personal and societal responsibility	Activism can help	There is no 'one reason' for attending a Climate Café	
Journeying from isolation to connection	Feeling alone, ashamed, and silenced	Barriers to connection, intimacy, and compassion	Facilitating connection, intimacy, and compassion	Interpersonal relating – from contempt to compassion
The legacy of Climate Cafés				

As is common when attempting to reduce the discomfort of such dissonance, people talked about coping by trying to suppress or forget the pain of eco-distress:

'denial and ... needing to kind of forget about it for a bit' (Ethel)

This strategy became harder to do, and less effective as the realities of climate change increased in salience, with more frequent and intense weather events around the world, and proximal to the UK such as the *'heat waves here in London'* (Edith).

Reflecting upon their Climate Café experience, participants noted how they had not been fully conscious of the depth and breadth of their emotional responses to the climate crisis prior to attendance. They spoke about how this opportunity to express emotions deepened their understanding of themselves and their pain, e.g. *'oh gosh, perhaps I really needed this'* (Teresa). Recognising distress is central to CFT (Gilbert, 2009), as is the benefits of expressing such emotion as self-soothing mechanism: *'[it] kind of calmed me down a bit'* (Maggie), even if the participant had not been aware of needing to be calmed down beforehand. Eco-distress varies in terms of how conscious people may be of it, and it may also be held in the body outside of awareness, only coming to the fore when an appropriate space is available:

'I was surprised by, as soon as I kind of got into the space, I really felt like so much stuff in my body. I had such a visceral response' (Ethel)

Superordinate Theme 2: Action taken in the face of climate change

Participants were drawn to Climate Cafés for a multitude of reasons, and most had already taken steps in response to their concern, particularly *'spearhead[ing]'* (i.e. leading on) (Ethel) action and conversations.

Personal and societal responsibility

Climate Café attendees took individual responsibility for reducing the environmental impact of their own actions, and by extension, they tended to feel guilty when they did not manage this. Often, this sense of responsibility was tied to the sense of self as a consumer (or eco-consumer):

'I feel guilty that I ... buy a bar of chocolate that has a plastic wrapper' (Patricia)

Unfortunately, the individual living in a Western society with neoliberal cultural norms (Maxton-Lee, 2020), is limited in the personal changes they can make, which felt futile and limiting:

'Everything came from Morocco or Chile or somewhere else, so she ended up coming home with just a bag of potatoes, 'cause they were locally grown' (Maggie)

In contrast to a largely transactional, consumer-driven society, the Climate Cafés had been freely offered to all attendees, involving no payment or transaction. This 'gift economy' context was seen to offer a new way of valuing peoples' voices and experiencing by demonstrating how these are, indeed, priceless. Attendees appreciated this alternative means of relating to each other:

'I think I'm also really appreciative that someone is doing them like 'cause . . . they're not really paid much money and that makes me quite feel quite nice' (Teresa)

It also grew a sense of finding power as a citizen, living in line with ethical values, and '*living your best life*' (Maggie) rather than just being a consumer

Beyond their sense of personal responsibility, participants were clear that individual lifestyle change was far less important than the choices enacted by '*global leaders and industry leaders and corporate people*' (Maggie). Some of the participants interviewed after the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021 highlighted COP26 as a '*missed opportunity*' (Mary), and described additional painful experiences, including disappointment towards institutions and government.

Activism can help

Recognising the need for political and business leadership on climate change had led many participants to engage in activism, e.g. 'Extinction Rebellion' (Maggie), protests (Mary, Patricia), and 'art and activism' (Judith). Successful outcomes from activism were energising (and sometimes surprising): '*wow, it actually works*' (Mary). Activism's benefits included improved mental wellbeing, by supporting people to carry the emotional burdens of climate change:

'My upset and grief . . . is kind of mitigated by knowing that I am in a good place to do something about it' (Edith)

Activism, however, also had limits, with some saying they '*don't feel filled by it*' (Maggie), particularly after a lack of success or clear outcomes. Sometimes this could in fact make things worse, causing apathy or dejection. This is important, as although climate action can be a skillful response to eco-distress, it may not be enough alone if people do not also have space or skill to work with the painful eco-emotions that are likely to arise alongside this sort of engagement with the crises.

There is no 'one reason' for attending a Climate Café

Climate Cafés were actively sought out by individuals for different reasons such as '*looking for local social events*' (Mary). Many joined up without knowing what it involved or even if it would '*help*' (Teresa). Some were more motivated by professional curiosity than personal support, e.g. to help '*the piece of art that I'm making*' (Judith), for '*research for my [degree]*' (Edith), or to find out more about doing '*Climate Cafés ourselves at [work]*' (Teresa). Edith, who was completing

research into eco-distress, found that the Climate Cafés bolstered her belief in the worthiness of her research:

'It was kind of like, gosh, there is . . . going to be so much need for research and support in this area' (Edith)

Linked to this was the finding that Climate Cafés helped participants feel more confident about bringing professional skills and knowledge to personal concerns:

'For ages that was separate to my profession . . . but somewhere I just was like, oh, that's ridiculous. I'm a [specialist] therapist . . . I know a lot of stuff' (Edith)

This initial 'professional interest' aspect of participation was superseded by a new awareness that their own 'anxiety was there as well' (Teresa). Even people working professionally in psychology, or activism, appeared to be carrying an unrecognised, and even non-conscious psychological burden of climate change, and Climate Cafés allowed them to feel and express this, sometimes in an unexpectedly emotional way. Other participants had already been more aware of their eco-distress, and were drawn to the cafés hoping for guidance and advice from 'the experts' (Teresa).

Regardless of the initial reasons for attending, all participants viewed Climate Cafés as a valued space meeting a need that has been neglected by other parts of society, including climate movement itself:

'There's a real need for the for this kind of place because I think a lot of people are feeling completely helpless and don't know what to do with those feelings and so just having that opportunity to talk that through . . . was helpful' (Maggie)

Superordinate Theme 3: Journeying from isolation to connection

In line with existing literature, participants described feeling silenced about climate change in their personal and professional lives. This included feeling shame around being complicit in a silence, because it violated core moral codes. From this point of isolation, participants described how attending Climate Cafés felt like a journey towards greater connection with others, and the importance of how people related to one another in the groups. These relationships were grounded in connection, emotional intimacy, and compassion: experiences that were facilitated or limited by various factors. The Climate Cafés were felt to leave participants with a positive legacy around healthy ways of relating to the self and others, moving from silence and contempt, to empowerment and understanding. An important shift was learning to have compassion for other people, even if they were perceived to have violated moral codes.

Feeling alone, ashamed, and silenced

Despite the pain of eco-distress, participants felt unable to speak of it: 'I wasn't really speaking to anyone about it [climate change]' (Teresa), even in close social circles: '70% no 80/90% of people . . . are not aware or don't care' (Teresa). The resulting difficult interactions with intimates could be 'devastating' (Ethel), when they 'don't seem to be taking this as seriously as we are' (Maggie):

'I was floored because I thought, right? OK, here's an intelligent person who travels around and you know reads newspapers and . . . there's an inability to actually connect with these things [ecological degradation]' (Ethel)

Another painful aspect of this was how it could lead attendees to feel anger, contempt and dislike for other people, to the degree that they might even wish that such people ‘*shouldn’t be happy*’ (Teresa). This led to negative self judgements: ‘[I] *hate myself for saying I don’t want them to be happy*’ (Teresa), further compounding distress as it was so obviously counter to participants’ core values around care and compassion for others.

Participants also judged themselves if they were ever drawn into behaviours that in some way fed this silence. This included having thoughts about things other than climate change and engaging in normal daily activities. Perceived as a failure to prioritise climate change in their inner world, this could even be felt as a personal violation of their own moral codes:

‘I feel bad to say that because I know it hasn’t . . . but yeah, life intervenes’ (Maggie)

The thoughts and feelings were dissonant, with a felt sense of hypocrisy when not fully engaged all the time, and a recognition that to do this would be ultimately paralysing ‘*because . . . then it’s difficult to . . . function*’ (Mary). Some could recognise the pragmatism inherent in protecting the self to staying well, but even with this recognition, feelings of shame and judgements of hypocrisy remained.

Barriers to connection, intimacy and compassion

People generally preferred in-person meetings to online, and the physical layout of the online platform was seen to inhibit deeper connection, with one participant noting that the screen ‘boxes’ of each participant mirrored the isolation felt in ‘*our separate worlds*’ (Judith). The communication structure of online groups also presented a barrier to easy interaction:

‘[in person] you go “Oh I’d like to ask a direct question of that person. Is that OK?” And then the person says yes, you can ask a question of me or no, they don’t want to’ (Judith)

More generally, people had concerns about being in a shared space for people and even though people had similar concerns, it was possible to feel like the ‘*odd one out*’ (Mary), particularly if participants thought that they had not joined ‘*for the reasons that some of the other members . . . had joined*’ (Maggie). This made some participants more cautious in sharing.

The importance of how the space was held was demonstrated by one attendee who reported an occasion where the facilitators did not end the cafés well, and how this made them feel uncontained with a ‘*loss of connection*’ (Edith). Furthermore, some attendees reported that, rather than just sharing feelings, there was a contagious component where emotions could be ‘*passed on*’ (Maggie).

One participant expressed relief at ‘*finally*’ (Edith) being with people talking about feelings that are not discussed widely in society, only to find that ‘*they’re in much greater distress than you are*’ (Edith). This comparison with others’ distress could risk being invalidating or minimised, for example participants judged themselves for ‘*not [being] in the front of the queue for feeling like crap*’ (Edith). This indicates how a hierarchy of distress needs to be managed, that a shared experience alone is not sufficient to build connection, and barriers were arising, for example, in relation to individual differences need to be thought about so they can be acknowledged and mitigated where possible.

Visible difference was also significant, and one participant with mixed white and Asian heritage noted how all other participants were white, and how this affected their experience:

‘I don’t feel like I was as honest as I could and maybe it would be different if there were more black and brown people there’ (Teresa)

Facilitating connection, intimacy, and compassion

Participants spoke eloquently about how connection, intimacy and compassion were cultivated. The facilitators created a ‘nurturing’ (**Maggie**) environment, ensuring ‘space for all’ (**Maggie**) that felt ‘safe’ (**Edith**) and containing. This milieu was seen to support connection between participants and guide an attitude of compassion to each other, and to the self. This aligns with models such as CFT which emphasise the need for safeness in developing compassion. Social connectedness meant people realised ‘that I’m not alone’ (**Maggie**), and the online groups with a broad catchment area in particular could facilitate this on a global level:

‘I just had this . . . visualised this sense of just all of us across the globe . . . in the Northern hemisphere, admittedly, but reaching out, you know, and that there’s something really comforting about that’ (**Maggie**)

There was a sense of surprise at how quickly and strongly a connection developed in a new group even though ‘I’ve never seen these people before in my life’ (**Maggie**). Such bonding with strangers in this way was contrasted with the challenges of connecting with family and friends over the same topic:

‘Hearing people speak in a way that . . . cause even say your relatives or your friends might not go that deep to really sort of say “ohh I really feel like this”’ (**Judith**)

Attendees felt a reprieve from their usual fear of being viewed as different or strange (a ‘nutter’: (**Teresa**)). Thus attendees could ‘express yourself more authentically’ (**Mary**), drop the mask of a ‘brave face’ (**Mary**), and share the ‘real stuff’ (**Patricia**). As Judith described, the café offered a unique ‘space for people to be as honest as they want to be’ (**Judith**). The validation of an authentic expression of distress and concern offered powerful relief, despite it being in a single two-hour group of strangers, perhaps suggests just how pressing this need was for them:

‘meeting someone who is seeing the same thing that I’m seeing and then saying, oh, that’s really hard, isn’t it . . . like “oh thank God”’ (**Teresa**)

The sense of safety and relief was compounded by attendees knowing that they were unlikely to have to contend with denial or ‘arguing about’ (**Ethel**) the reality of climate change. These data paint the picture of a connected and intimate experience within Climate Cafés in contrast to the isolation and loneliness many felt elsewhere in their lives. The group process was reciprocal, with participants giving and receiving support and wisdom to each other, and with the facilitators holding the space in which this could occur. This continued with them after the café.

Climate Cafés were seen to offer a stark contrast to the other climate-related groups participants had attended, mostly with a tone of ‘we need action . . . and there’s this line of anger to it’ (**Teresa**). Climate Cafés had a ‘very different impact’ (**Maggie**), because ‘there’s no action . . . there’s no “you’ve got to do this”’ (**Teresa**), thus liberating people for this time from the focused drive mode of activism to one of reflection and care:

‘They’re [other groups] usually about action and what I quite liked about the café was that it was an opportunity just to kind of talk about feelings’ (**Mary**)

Participants had taken this learning with them into their lives post-café, reporting finding new ways to bring compassion into climate action, making it more sustainable for them, such as making ‘meditation part of a protest’ (**Mary**).

This shows how even a single group experience of connection, intimacy and compassion within a café was powerful enough to have a lasting impact, including a sense of hope. Interestingly, the

ability to feel hopeful grew out of the ashes of being in café where one was first ‘*allowed to be hopeless*’ (**Patricia**). This highlights the transformative power of allowing and honouring painful emotions in oneself to then be able to ‘*come away with*’ (**Patricia**) hope.

Interpersonal relating – from contempt to compassion

Participants experienced including receiving compassion from others, which in turn (and in line with models of compassion) made them better at being more self-compassionate; for example, trying harder to ‘*do more self-care*’ (**Judith**) and feeling less guilt and shame around perceived imperfection:

‘It doesn’t have to sort of overpower everything that you do, and I think it almost kind of gave permission for that to allow yourself to be happy, despite the fact that this horrible’ (**Maggie**)

Again, in line with models of compassion, participants talked this growing over time, enabling them to extend compassion to others, including people who previously would have been viewed as contemptible for their non-ecological stance:

‘And I guess that’s that sort of shift towards self compassion . . . sometimes denial is the easy choice . . . Understand[ing] where they’re coming from is maybe a healthier way of looking at things. You know that . . . denial is actually a survival mechanism, right?’ (**Mary**)

Fascinatingly, such compassion could even be extended to the most villainous actors in the climate crisis, such as those working in oil companies. This benefited the participant too, as it reduced the pain of feeling rage towards others:

‘There . . . must be people in Shell, who kind of feel trapped in their job because they’ve got a mortgage or whatever, and they want to leave’ (**Mary**)

Compassion did not stop active engagement with the climate movement or create a feeling of weakness; it had quite the opposite effect. Attendees felt better able to re-connect with active and driven forms of engagement after attending a Climate Café:

‘I’ve got some ideas that I want to do from September ’cause . . . I can do some stuff at [work]’ (**Teresa**)

After taking part in the cafés, participants reported being more attuned to the positive behaviours of others in their life, and could perceive this as hopeful, perhaps because of the cultivation of compassion:

‘my sister said . . . I’m not gonna just like fly to Barcelona for the weekend like I used to because of climate change’ (**Judith**)

The awareness grew in the group that ‘*we’re all living with it* [climate change]’ (**Maggie**) as part of feeling interconnected to a movement ‘*across the globe*’ (**Maggie**) where individuals are ‘*part of*’ something far bigger (**Maggie**).

Prior to attending a Climate Café, participants felt envious of people who were not worried about climate change, and their ‘*anxious free life*’, which meant they wanted to ‘*bring someone with you*’ into a state of ‘*misery*’ (**Teresa**). The tone of this shifted with attendance, and participants described how their communication style had moved away from ‘*hammer[ing] it home*’ (**Maggie**), towards more skilled conversations where one can ‘*listen out for those little moments where I can*

perhaps just acknowledge their anxiety and say, you know, yeah, we're all feeling like that, so it's really validating people's feelings' (**Maggie**). Participants did not describe noticing large, overt behavioural changes in themselves, but these data suggest that Climate Cafés created a new model that facilitated their ability to notice the emotional state and needs of self and others, which did shift communication styles, a potentially important change in an arena where conversation is usually shut down.

Superordinate Theme 4: The legacy of Climate Cafés

Climate Cafés offered more than a single, static point in participants' journey in eco-emotions. Although most participants had attended only once, they described a lasting impact which speaks to their potential transformative power:

'it just feels like an ongoing journey and it's nice to know that the ... Climate Cafés ... [are] a continued resource for myself' (**Edith**)

This impact appeared more cognitive and emotional than behavioural, which aligns with the intentions of this approach:

'I think all of those things ... I'm still pondering all of them' (**Judith**)

This wasn't a 'solution' to fluctuating eco-emotions which would still go 'up and down on a weekly basis'. Rather participants developed greater ability to 'step away ... some days more than others' (**Teresa**). With this they recognised the importance of acknowledging eco-emotions:

'if we're not conscious of ... it's there and ... impacting our mental health I suppose' (**Maggie**)

Prior to attendance, the importance of taking care of one's emotional wellbeing would 'often go to the bottom of the priority list' (**Mary**), but Climate Cafés shifted this perspective:

'I can see there's a space ... that I know ... that's really helping me' (**Teresa**)

In terms of specific behavioural change, participants could not 'pinpoint' this (**Teresa**), or found it 'hard to know if it was to do with a Climate Café' (**Judith**). However, Climate Cafés 'resourced' (**Judith**) people so they felt 'topped up' (**Edith**), 'galvanised' and 'fortified' (**Ethel**). They thus made people more able to continue with pro-environmental actions. This indicates how Climate Cafés may offer a vital resource for communities at risk of burn-out from eco-distress (Hoggett and Randall, 2018), perhaps particularly those people who are already behaviourally engaged with the climate and ecological emergencies:

'I felt fortified and therefore how much of my energy has actually, without me really knowing, come from that Climate Café ... and how long does that take to burn itself out and need topping up?' (**Edith**)

Discussion

In just one, two-hour Climate Café, participants felt heard, validated, and invited into an affiliative relationship with others. Participants described developing more compassion towards themselves, including their own perceived shortcomings as an individual living at this time of climate crisis.

They also cultivated compassion towards other people, including people not yet engaged with the issues and people demonstrating more harmful behaviours.

The seven women attending a Climate Café were already concerned about the climate crisis, and experiencing many eco-emotions (Gibson *et al.*, 2020; Pihkala, 2020). Most were already engaged in pro-environmental actions, supporting other research into the constructive and activating elements of eco-distress (Verplanken and Roy, 2013).

Climate Cafés, based on the Death Café movement, offer a space to talk of things culturally regarded as taboo. Participants confirmed this assumption, as they talked about their lived experience of socially constructed silence around climate change and eco-distress. This created a sense of threat around approaching these topics (Miles and Corr, 2017), which in turn stopped people with shared social identities and similar values from talking together (Wolfe and Tubi, 2018). This then limited people's opportunities to tell new stories about alternative lifestyles, societal transformation and more hopeful futures. Climate Cafés could disrupt this silence, connecting individuals through shared beliefs and a sense of care, and supporting each other to turn towards and understand the suffering we all experience when we allow ourselves to feel the reality of the climate and ecological crises.

One potential negative effect of Climate Cafés could be a further stifling of these conversations, for example if attendees are 'othered' in some way, or if Climate Cafés are seen as 'the' place to share eco-emotions, so the rest of society does not have to. The data do not appear to support this outcome, as most attendees reported an improved ability to talk about climate change and eco-emotions after the Café, and with more compassion. So although Climate Cafés could become a marginalised space, they have the potential to cultivate strength and compassion in attendees, allowing the breaking of silence to spread through their networks, and society.

CFT models offer theoretical insights into processes of change within the groups. Participants saw climate and ecological threats as existential, ubiquitous, and increasingly proximate, thus activating their 'threat' system. Activated 'threat' systems will sensitise individuals and their attention to threat-related stimuli and safety-seeking responses through fight, flight, freeze, or appease (Gilbert, 2009). The active 'threat' system of participants was seen in their reports of painful emotions (anger, anxiety, etc.), although prior to the café, many of these feelings were not in conscious awareness, suggesting that the scale and ubiquity of climate change is so great, no individual can possibly turn towards all aspects of the threat all of the time.

Responses to an active 'threat' system tend to engage the 'drive' system, which involves feeling energised and pursuing desirable outcomes (Gilbert, 2009). Here this would include protecting the self, planet, and valued ways of living (e.g. increasing pro-environmental behaviour or activism, to gain a sense of agency). Although individual action (e.g. ethical consumption) alone will not solve the climate crisis, it did offer participants a way of showing others in society *'through their personal actions what is possible ... and thereby inviting curiosity from others who might well make the same changes'* (North, 2011; p. 1592). On a large scale, this could even lead to positive social tipping points (Lenton *et al.*, 2022).

Such actions, based on the 'drive' system were difficult to maintain, particularly as participants had not previously prioritised self-care or allowed themselves to feel and tend to the more difficult eco-emotions. This neglect of the 'soothe' system and reliance on 'threat' and/or 'drive' systems is likely to cause burn-out, exhaustion, hopelessness, and ultimately the loss of drive (Gilbert, 2014). This may be exacerbated by the wider context of slow social change, and increasing feelings of isolation in one's eco-distress. This aligns with the evidence that sometimes eco-distress can become so severe it is 'paralysing' (Hoggett and Randall, 2018; Pihkala, 2022b).

The 'soothe' system is affiliative, involving connection with self and others. Data could indicate how a Climate Café activates participants' 'soothe' systems, by creating a unique space to have their eco-emotions and needs held, cared for, and attended to by themselves and by other people. Activation of the 'soothe' system can re-balance 'drive' and 'threat' systems, and create a new resource for responding to challenging times. A more balanced set of systems enables people to

turn towards pain and suffering caused by climate change, which in turn can support a commitment to reducing the impact of this suffering, through emotional care as well as action. This process can be initially painful, but it also deepens the understanding one has about one's responses to difficulty (here the climate crisis), which in turn clarifies the need for wise responses, including the need for care and time out. In the longer-term this balanced approach reduces the risk of becoming drained, burnt out or overwhelmed by challenges (Gilbert, 2014). Remarkably, even a single, two-hour Climate Café supported this shift. It could be seen in the move from feeling contempt towards others (and the self), to a far more compassionate stance. Individuals were soothed by the affiliative nature of the café, which cultivated compassion flowing towards the self, towards others (in and out of the group) and from others (Brienes and Chen, 2012). Clearly this counteracted the isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness common in attendees.

Future research should explore these processes in more detail, for example by looking at potential changes in eco-distress (e.g. Clayton and Karazsia, 2020) or compassion (e.g. Gilbert *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, future research could consider potential benefits of Climate Cafés for particular at-risk groups (i.e. climate scientists, young people), where compassionate attention to their suffering of others may create a societal approach to eco-emotions which reduces distress (Calabria *et al.*, 2023).

Clinical implications

With mental health practitioners reporting an increase in eco-distress (Seaman, 2016), this research has important implications. There is clearly therapeutic value in having one's eco-distress heard and validated. When clinicians encounter eco-distress in their patients, they could remember the potential power of simply holding space for these feelings, rather than seeking to 'fix' them in some way: 'don't just do something . . . stand there'. This is one more forum in which the existing socially constructed silence could be disrupted. Therapists could also signpost to local Climate Cafés or discuss other ways of helping a patient to engage their affiliative 'soothe' system, and related sense of social connectedness. Indeed, consideration of CFT principles might lead to helpful formulations of a person's eco-distress, particularly when framed around core values, to support the turning toward suffering, recognising our shared humanity, and finding meaning in the face of distress.

Limitations

IPA methodology offers rich data, but is limited in its ability to offer a generalised conceptualisation of phenomena applicable to wider, or different populations. With the role of language integral in the presentation of one's experience in IPA research, there exists an elitist critique of IPA as a methodology. If an individual struggles to convey their experience linguistically, their experience may not be adequately captured, and thus under-represented or over-shadowed (Willig, 2013).

IPA methodology involves a tension between idiographic commitment and the search for connection between experiences (Wagstaff *et al.*, 2014). In the pursuit of capturing a common experience in the data, valuable stories and information can be 'left behind'. Wagstaff *et al.* (2014) noted the accordion-like process of themes being developed and then subsumed by other themes. The epistemological stances of the research team in this study (i.e. critical realism), mean that the pursuit of the development of models of knowledge about Climate Cafés was important, even if this risks losing some idiographic data. Reflexive thematic analysis was considered as an alternative analytic method, but was felt to risk inhibiting the depth of exploration of each individual's experience, which was seen to be essential considering the novelty of Climate Café research.

Despite attempts to engage a diverse sample through purposive sampling, the result was a relatively homogenous sample of UK females aged between 35 and 64, and thus the findings offer insight into this demographic. Finally, the results here are the result of attending a single two-hour Climate Café. Climate Cafés themselves, and by extension understanding of them, remains in their infancy. Future research could explore the impact of attending multiple Cafés compared with attending a one-off Café.

Recruiting through the CPA meant that many participants were from a similar professional background, being involved in mental health in some capacity. The Climate Psychology Alliance who were contacted about this in March 2023, indicated that their last 10 Climate Cafés had 88 attendees with 65 (74%) female. Women tend to have greater perception of climate change-related risk (Reser *et al.*, 2012b) and greater vulnerability to eco-anxiety (Coffey *et al.*, 2021), which may account for this proportion attending Climate Cafés. Additionally, the participants in this group have a high level of education. There is evidence that higher levels of education are associated with pro-environmental behaviours (Meyer, 2015), further decreasing the diversity of the sample.

Future research should investigate the experiences of attendees of different genders, backgrounds and nations. For example, there may be quite different experiences for people coming from places where talking about emotions, or engaging in climate activism is more taboo, or where media coverage of the climate and ecological crises is less comprehensive (Ogunbode *et al.*, 2022). Sex and age differences would also be interesting to explore (Clayton and Karazsia, 2020), particularly as young people may have more pronounced eco-anxiety. Future research would benefit from a seeking to understand a wider breadth of experience from sociodemographic backgrounds. One solution could have been to recruit to saturation, but the nature of saturation is complex and definitions inconsistent (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). This study adopted an *a priori* approach to saturation where a sample size of between 6 and 8 is recommended for IPA methodology (Turpin *et al.*, 1997).

Conclusion

This novel study describes the lived experience of seven UK women attending a Climate Café. It also describes a journey of living with eco-emotions – a journey where Climate Cafés are an essential resource, helping people to access the vital support of compassion. Attendees were seeking a place where they could begin to make sense of their painful eco-emotions. They had felt alone and uncertain about how to respond to their distress. Most were engaged in significant pro-environmental actions, but this felt insufficient or unsustainable. The unique space of the Climate Cafés allowed them to share, hear and be heard in their distress. Models of compassion suggest this enabled individuals to re-balance their threat and motivation systems through affiliation, soothing and self-care. Benefits were long-lasting, not by encouraging ‘more action’ but because people felt resourced, and able to remain engaged with their pursuit of a better future for all of us, without becoming so overwhelmed.

Key practice points

- (1) Consider and be attentive to eco-emotion presentations in therapy settings.
- (2) Be mindful of the power of sitting with, validating, and bearing witness to these experiences.
- (3) Consider compassion-based conceptualisations of eco-distress, and how to help people engage their ‘soothe’ system.
- (4) Be aware of the utility and availability of community interventions, like Climate Cafés, to signpost service users, friends, family, and colleagues.

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Data availability statement. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, E.M. The data are not publicly available due to their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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Luis Calabria: Conceptualization (equal), Data curation (lead), Formal analysis (lead), Methodology (equal), Writing – original draft (lead), Writing – review & editing (equal); **Elizabeth Marks:** Conceptualization (equal), Supervision (lead), Writing – original draft (supporting), Writing – review & editing (supporting).

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