

Repairing the Social Contract

*Undertaking the Co-Design of Climate Distress
Services for Young People in British Columbia*

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Executive Summary

This study explored the emotional and psychological reactions of young individuals (ages 16-24) to climate change based on online focus group interviews with 11 participants (two interviews per person). Aiming to comprehend their distress and collaboratively design solutions, the research emphasized community-academic partnerships and youth leadership. The Colaizzi descriptive phenomenological method was employed in analysing the qualitative data themes.

Key Findings

- Our respondents echoed the heightened feelings of anxiety and distress due to climate change of global youth as reported by previous studies
- From the perspectives of young people climate change appears to prescribe an uncertain and undesirable future
- A prevalent sentiment was one of betrayal, with the participants associating their climate distress to the perceived inadequacy of societal leadership in addressing climate change.
- Ideas about what would be helpful centre on enhanced education and community-based events and activities.

Thematic Breakdown

- Feelings towards Climate Change: An overwhelming 82% of the themes recorded in interviews expressed different forms of emotional reactivity about the climate crisis including anxiety and hopelessness about the future (38%), feeling overwhelmed (20%) and feelings of frustration and resentment (15%).
- Perceived Solutions: Participants felt that education, at all tiers, was not adequately addressing climate change and its repercussions, as is reflected in 38% of the themes. A substantial 28% called for more mental health support and 21% advocated for community programs and activities.

In summary, our findings underscore the urgent need for robust community-academic partnerships to address climate-induced distress amongst the youth. The onus lies not only on governmental bodies, but also on educational and community-based organizations to act decisively and provide the necessary support mechanisms for the younger generation grappling with the ramifications of climate change.

Acknowledgements

This project is the result of an ongoing collaboration between MHCCA, GTEC, and the youth participants. It was funded by the Michael Smith Health Research BC.



The Broken Social Contract

Society's response to climate change represents a broken *social contract*. A *social contract*ⁱ is the sometimes explicit and other times implicit agreement between a society and its population in which people surrender limited freedoms in exchange for the orderly governance of the society, typically including the administration of the rule of law. In this study, youth clearly expressed a shattered sense of faith and confidence in the social contract and major institutions of society.

This same sentiment is reflected by the seven young people who brought a landmark lawsuit against the Ontario government that was recently heard in the Ontario Superior Court in Toronto. The lawsuit alleges that the government's climate plan fails to protect them and future generations.ⁱⁱ It was the first occasion in Canada that a climate lawsuit aimed at changing government policy has had a full hearing in court. The seven plaintiffs, with ages ranging from 15 to 27, come from different backgrounds and regions of Ontario. They argued that current government policy violated their rights, under Sections 7 and 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; the rights to life, liberty and security and the right to equality under the law without discrimination. This is one of many such lawsuits brought by young people worldwide.

In the broader context of the social contract young people view society's response to climate change as insufficient and less than commensurate with the urgency of the situation and, as such, a betrayal of their confidence in the society. If left unchecked, society risks alienating this generation and ultimately losing the energy and intelligence that it has to offer in responding to this crisis. Our study is a small step toward repairing the social contract by listening to youth and working with them towards the development of institutional services and programs that are helpful.

Overview of Findings

Our study entailed in-depth focus group interviews with 11 young participants in the 16-24 yr. age group. The majority were engaged in post-secondary studies and were exclusively from urban environments, comprised of mixed ethno-cultural backgrounds. The interviews asked questions about participants' thoughts and feeling about climate change and ideas about what they think would be helpful to them in facing the uncertain future climate change appears to be generating.

The dialogical environment of focus group interviews enabled us to understand more fully how young people's reactions to this crisis are constructed and provide some initial clues about what they think might be helpful. Quotations in italics are taken directly from the transcripts of these interviews.

It is important to note at the outset that these findings are not unilateral across an entire generation. One of our focus group questions asked participants to report how they see their friends' responding. Virtually, all our participants reported that large numbers of their peers are ignoring the climate crisis and instead focusing on the culturally prescribed developmental tasks of their age group such as education, training, and employment.

It's usually either people are kind of paralyzed with anxiety or a kind of just really nihilistic and don't care, or that's just my experience.

-C-

It's a lot easier to just live selfishly, and just move on and just kind of ignore these dangers, and just try to live your best life, than it is to actually confront these dangers.

-L-

The Voices of Young People: Thoughts and Feelings about Climate Change

Emotional Reactions

Our participants reported feelings of anxiety, sadness and hopelessness tied to uncertainty about the future. Participants connected these reactions, in turn, to the overwhelming scale of the problem and their perception that the leaders of society are not responding with commensurate urgency.

I know that government has acknowledged it, but they haven't changed anything. But also big corporations, I think, would be the biggest. And it's not like just, yeah, acknowledging it, but making a change at the same time because they can acknowledge it, but it doesn't mean that anything's going to change.

-K1-

I feel fairly hopeless and confused because it's almost impossible to plan when we don't know if these changes are going to be put in place in a fashion that's going to actually like shape our future.

-K2-

I'd say one of the biggest things that causes my fear is the fact that we're relying on these giant billion dollar corporations to be the change we need to see while we're watching politicians and the leadership that's supposed to be guiding us sort of play in line with what these companies need to keep

their profits up. It really makes me feel like there's a lack of control of the situation and that, once again, money is going to be put over top of the futures of not only us, but our families and the next generations.

-A-

And it makes me very sad that the amount of suffering and the extinction that we're already causing and are continuing to cause.

-C-

A loss of optimism is associated with this uncertainty about the future. The two biggest things I'd say were where I want to live and whether or not I want to have kids. Because if we continue going down this path, I don't feel I want to have kids. If I know it's just going to get worse and worse for them and they're going to bear the weight that has risen over the past decades.

-K2-

One of the interesting findings our participants introduced us to was what they identified as a confusion about personal responsibility. Many had experienced educational initiatives that emphasized taking personal responsibility for things like recycling, travel and even diet as ways to mitigate the climate crisis while, at the same time, finding out later that the scale of the problem is so immense that it is subsequently hard to imagine how these individual changes could make a difference.

One of the first things personally that comes to mind when we talk about the climate crisis is there seems to be like a heavy focus on individual actions right now.

-A-

When I'm shopping or just looking at certain things, I'm always sort of thinking about, like, what impact it has on the environment and the climate.

-L-

Social Media

Additional factors contributing to feelings of anxiety and hopelessness among the study's participants include a sense that the available sources of information are not necessarily reliable and trustworthy. Social media are key sources of information for this age group, though they are very aware of social media's algorithm driven nature. Instagram and Tiktok are the *go-to* media for our participants.

It's definitely scary hearing about climate change and all of that, but like, we don't necessarily have all the facts and like, we don't really know where to start the conversation.

-K2-

Yeah, and I think fear and anxiety kind of get in people's fight or flight response.... And I think that's what those algorithms really feed off of, which is bad for people.

-L-

I think there's maybe some false information that may be going around on Twitter and Instagram and maybe kindling of negative opinions.

-S1-

Given the feelings of uncertainty tied to political inaction we asked participants about what would indicate that this is changing. A change in the prevalent use of fossil fuel burning automobiles along with improvements in public transportation was seen by participants as visible signs of change, as well as hearing about the positive actions of peers.

I'd say one of the biggest things that would make me feel hopeful would be a shift away from cars in our daily lives. I feel like it's an industry that has such control over the way our cities and towns are shaped, and it's such a major pollutant.

-A-

What I found most inspiring is hearing people in particular lives, people my own age or close to me in age, talk about things and what they're doing. It makes it a lot more inspiring, like, hey, oh, I can do that too.

-S2-

Helpful Programs or Services

Education

The consensus among participants is that education has a critical role to play. They visualize climate crisis education as needing to have a more central and integral role in curriculum at all elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels. They think that society-wide response to the truth of the situation, rather than the selective engagement of minority is critical. Though information delivered via social media has a part to play, participants do not experience it as trustworthy.

It's definitely scary hearing about climate change and all of that, but like, we don't necessarily have all the facts and like, we don't really know where to start the conversation.

-K2-

I feel like what might be important is to have not just voluntary after school programming but to have programming be an integral part of school and university curriculum.

-K-

So university courses and electives in their colleges and in universities would be a really good idea to get people more engaged and have something closer to home that can really impact them and give them credit.

-S2-

I find that daily scrolling through social media, one of the biggest things you see is if anyone is complaining about the climate crisis, there's always like a series of comments to follow that saying, well, why don't you do this? Why don't you do this? And I think it's something that kind of fails to address the scale of it. And it seems to be a very commonly shared opinion.

-A-

Canada is so connected and so much of our youth are online, we also have access to a fairly never-ending stream of news about all the bad things that are happening. So, as we're learning about drought and wildfire in California, we're also seeing floods in our own town and we're seeing Australian fires. It just feels like a never-ending compounding crisis, in part because of the scope of information that we have access to compared to other countries. And so that I think needs to be countered with more solutions-focused education.

-G-

Mental Health

Our respondents were very clear that they need various forms of support as they face an uncertain future, a future that is quite likely to be very different from the past. They see a need for a range of community support programs and services, including improved access to mental health services.

I think that it can be really therapeutic to have a group of people who are all suffering from the same struggles, the emotional whatever, and having that area where you can all come and share.

-L-

...one of the things that I had been looking into recently was a UK based project called The Resilience Project. It's a nonprofit based out of the United Kingdom. And again, it is specifically focused on emotional and psychological resilience in the face of crisis. The idea being that we can recognize that there's a whole lot of problems that everyone, particularly young people, are going to have to be facing and that in order to deal with them effectively, there's being resilient and facing anxiety is a skill that can be developed and learned.

-G-

I think that mental health is like, honestly, one of the most important things that our generation needs....

-C-

Community Programs and Events

Some of our participants had already participated in community-based programs and found them of value.

Definitely having one place you can go to as a place, you know, you can find reliable information clearly would be helpful to a lot of people.

-A-

A number of our respondents cited the value of participating in the focus group.

... it is nice to be in the same space with people and thinking about a topic that is really important to a lot of youth and just articulating some of those thoughts because I think, particularly with emotions, for some people it can be hard to really articulate what those feel like and what they mean.

-G-

A number of participants emphasized the importance of hands-on, constructive projects with peers.

For example, I recently did a project with a municipality, where we did a botanical garden in the central location. And during my time there and while

I was working there, we watched a lot of videos of how other people are working in their own communities to combat climate change. So, watching these, watching these videos and being a part of somewhat of a change...and seeing other people participate, whether online or in person, gives me a bit of hope that maybe that there is at least a slight change.

-L-

There was enthusiasm for programs that prepare young people to engage effectively in the political system with a particular emphasis on learning how to get things done. The City Hive program was cited as a positive example. I definitely think that like getting young people educated on how to engage with the political system and how to push for priorities.

-C-

Several respondents also emphasized taking small steps in their everyday lives from both psychological and mitigation points of view.

I know there are personal things that I do in my life too in my daily kind of rituals to make sure that I at least put in a little bit of effort. I play my part or what I think is my part in living a little bit more sustainably. Like, for example, when it comes to water consumption, I try to be as careful and as conscious of that as I can. When it comes to the products I buy and the businesses that I buy from. I like to make sure that I can buy products that in the majority of cases are reusable...

-S3-

Thematic Analysis

The following section summarizes the results of the study's focus groups by tabulating the frequency and percentage frequency of the themes expressed by the participants. The analysis in this respect is more descriptive than statistical. The sample size (n=11) is very limited, and the results are seen as heuristic rather than representative. More detailed information about the intent, objectives and methods of the study are available in Appendix I.

Section A: List of Themes and Representative Comments

Table 1 lists the themes that were identified across all interviews in response to questions about *Thoughts and Feelings towards the Climate Crisis*. The frequency that the theme occurred is noted in brackets. Each identified theme is illustrated by two or more

representative comments from the transcripts. **Figure 1** and **Table 2** represent the distribution of themes related to this table.

Table 1. Thoughts and Feelings

Part 1: “Thoughts and Feelings towards the Climate Crisis?”

1. Frustration & Resentment (42)

- The policy makers aren't making significant changes. They're still going with the status quo and that can be very, very frustrating.
- We don't trust that the governments can really step up in time or a great enough extent to make a huge meaningful difference and so we have to change our future planning and we have to change really a lot of our expectations for our future to align with what the reality is.

2. Feeling Overwhelmed (34)

- I just think it's so easy to fall down like into a rabbit hole, almost like how climate problems are impacting the world and like, how screwed you are quickly. And then, it's really hard not to just be like, oh my God, like, what's even the point?
- I know for me it makes me very sad. Just because the climate crisis kind of goes hand in hand with the mass extinction that's been going on. And it makes me very sad that the amount of suffering and the extinction that we're already causing and are continuing to cause.

3. Sense of Pressure and Personal Responsibility (23)

- When I'm shopping or just looking at certain things, I'm always sort of thinking about, like, what impact it has on the environment and the climate.
- One of the first things personally that comes to mind when we talk about the climate crisis is there seems to be like a heavy focus on individual actions right now.

4. Anxious/ Hopeless about the Future (42)

- Talking about whether it's worth it to have a family in this in this environment right now, not just about climate change, but I would have growing concerns of financial insecurities and economic downfall. And it is climate change. And is it worth bringing children into this suffering?
- It's definitely like it's a struggle to manage the anxiety because it's like it's very, very intense. And what can you do when this is something that just is happening? And I'm one person like I can't if I'm feeling worried about it, it's really not something I can like talk to someone and they'll try to help me work through because they can't change it either, because no one can change it.

5. Desensitized & Avoidant (11)

- Well, it's definitely something I wouldn't want to think about all the time, because it is a bit depressing, and it affects other aspects of my life. So it's, I guess, I guess to answer the question of how I cope with it, it's kind of you just buried in the back of your mind, and every now and then it pops up.
- There's a lot of sort of talking points that are tossed around amongst, like my friends and I and other people around my age. And they have kind of lost their impact on us. Like they even sort of become jokes because it's just this like abstract idea.

6. Don't Know How to Address (10)

- Try to change the topic to talk about climate change, but none of them are really interested in that.
- When I hang out with my friends. There's no room to talk about it.

7. Different Values, Lifestyles & Cultural Backgrounds (11)

- The culture of consumerism is something that I think has been very much problematic or has become problematic.
- Depending on the values, it's difficult to change. If someone is more of a conservative person, they stick to the traditions of their family or their lifestyle.

8. Remaining Optimistic & Contributing in Small Ways (9)

- Doing small things like one person barely can change an entire population's way of doing things or thinking. But you can. You can change, you know. A room full of people. You can talk to a room full of people, and maybe a couple of them will jump on board with you. It's kind of about just. Doing what you can and being happy that you've done more than nothing.
- I feel a sort of apprehension, I would say. But my thoughts are oriented toward resolution. And I think that there is hope for resolution. I don't like to allow myself to fall into the sort of dystopian mindset that people usually fall into. So, I have to admit I'm a little more optimistic than you would think. But at the same time, that optimism is kind of reliant on a determination to find solutions, whether it be through projects or just the will to kind of push things into more sustainability on a structural and, you know, governmental and social level.

Figure 1. Percentage of Themes in Response to Thoughts and Feelings towards the Climate Crisis

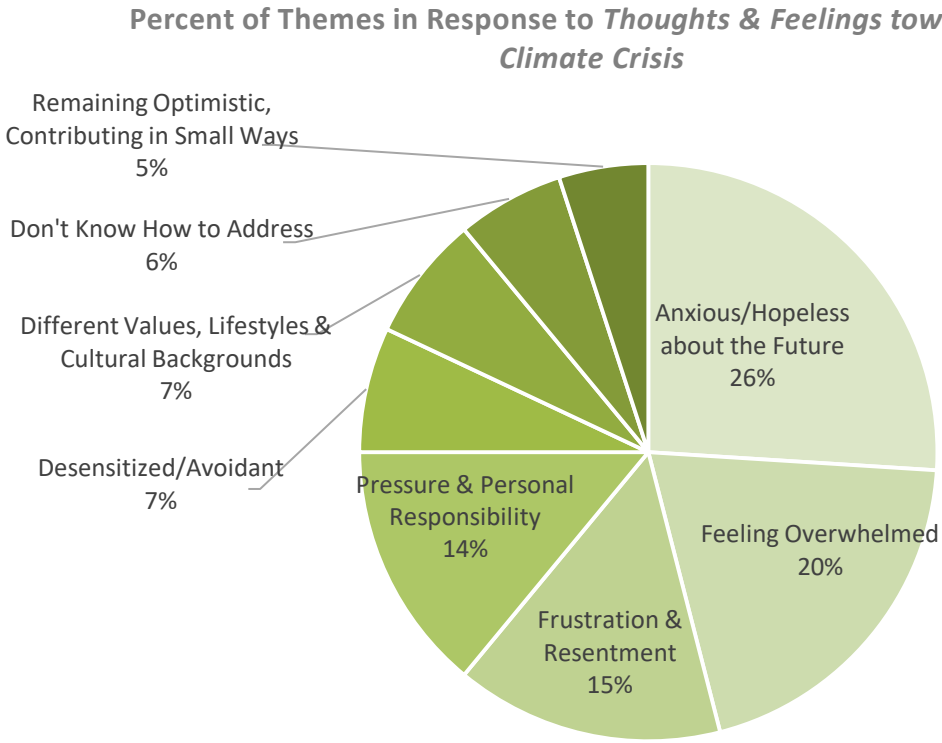


Table 2. Clustering of “Thoughts and Feelings” Themes

Theme Cluster	Theme Constituent	N	%
Emotional Reactivity [82%]	Anxious/Hopeless about the Future	42	26
	Feeling Overwhelmed	34	20
	Frustration & Resentment	25	15
	Pressure & Personal Responsibility	23	14
	Desensitized/Avoidant	11	7
Reflective [18%]	Different Values, Lifestyles & Cultural Backgrounds	11	7
	Don't Know How to Address	10	6
	Remaining Optimistic & Contributing in Small Ways	9	5

Section B: List of Themes and Representative Comments: Helpful Responses to Climate Change

Table 3 lists the themes that were identified across all interviews in response to questions about *What would be helpful in responding to the Climate Crisis*. The frequency that the theme was identified is noted in brackets. Each identified theme is illustrated by two represented comments from the transcripts. **Table 4** and **Figure 2** represent the distribution of themes related to this table.

Table 3. Responses

Part 1: "What would be helpful in responding to the Climate Crisis?"

1. More Education & Programs (23)

- So, I feel like what might be important is to have not just voluntary after school programming but to have programming be an integral part of school curriculum, and university curriculum.
- University courses because what do young people do? You know, in the majority of cases it's they're in university, they're studying. So, university courses and electives in their colleges and in their universities would be a really good idea to get people more engaged and have something closer to home that can really impact them and give them credits.

2. Green Options (11)

- I am 100% sure that if the options were there, my friends would take advantage of it if there was a bus or a shuttle that could take her from her house to her workplace in a reasonable amount of time.
- If we just had less plastic, more locally grown foods, had cheaper produce that more people can access and buy then all of those things will add up to kind of alleviate our own guilt but also kind of rope in people who may not have willingly voluntarily participated but now that they are participating possibly because that's how things are now structured around them (example bulk zero store).

3. Connection with The First Nations (2)

- Forestry management and crop management. I think from what I can see is that our forest fires are getting worse and worse, partially because of course climate change and changing weather patterns but this is just what I hear I don't have any research to back this up because indigenous people used to do controlled burning of forest to prevent large scale forest fires and with the government

stopping that practice as far as I know that is one of the contributors to how come our forest fires are getting their severity.

- The other thing is that I know that there's been a lot of Indigenous lead protests regarding the pipeline and old growth forest logging in, so I think a huge part of reconciliation is recognizing that if the original stewards of this land do not want their trees to be logged and do not want a big oil pipeline going through their territory that's something that needs to be respected. and I think finally it's about traditional management of resources of either for fishing, for waterway management, for crop planting, like all of this stuff, we feel like we know what's going on, we know what's best, but clearly based on the continual depletion of our natural resources that's not necessarily the case.

4. Emphasis on Mental Health Support (27)

- We can recognize that there's a whole lot of problems that everyone, particularly young people, are going to have to be facing and that in order to deal with them effectively, there's being resilient and facing anxiety is a skill that can be developed and learned.
- But it is nice to be in the same space with people and thinking about a topic that is really important to a lot of youth and just articulating some of those thoughts and it because I think particularly with emotions, for some people it can be hard to really articulate what those feel like and what that means.

5. Community Building/Volunteering (12)

- But I feel like my participation and others, seeing other people participate, whether online or in person, gives me a bit of hope that maybe that there is at least a slight change.
- Community volunteering. I think that's also something worthy of promoting on and on and on, just because it's not only good in the context of climate action, but it's good in the sense of allowing young people to remain. Feeling integral and feeling important in their community. And then I think that kind of trains the mind to have some sense of responsibility on a more macroscale.

6. Social Justice (3)

- I just wanted to highlight the importance of intersecting. And being a good environmentalist doesn't automatically mean that you're good at being inclusive or diverse and equitable in your work.
- The importance of just being cognizant of environmental justice or more accurately, injustice that comes up in all sorts of ways in terms of who is more affected by what's happening and climate change locally and at the global

scale. So, I think keeping in mind that everybody is going to be coming to climate anxiety with different levels of experience and I know there's some there can be really tense dynamics around that because of the different experiences we're all having with climate change. It's important to be aware of that.

7. Connecting to the Outdoors (11)

- Social activities, things that include multiple people, outdoor activities, things that actually expose young people to what we're trying to say, which is the environment.
- The facilitator of the club showed us the plants that we were looking at when we were on that hike on that trail, and she would explain what they were. We even gathered some of the leaves and plants and we made tea with it. So, I thought that was really nice. It was very, very fun. It was simple. It wasn't something really complicated. It was really cute. A good way to kind of emerge me in the outdoor setting while at the same time taking something for myself that's not really destructive for the forest

8. Signs of Hope (7)

- For me, seeing more good news on the news about climate change would definitely make me feel a lot more hopeful. I wouldn't say that it's a flip of a switch where it's suddenly, it's good. But I would say, I mean, climate change is slow. It's or at least in my opinion, I think it's slow. And whether it's a lot of good or a lot of bad, it's going to have to be a very slow and long process. So, for me, it wouldn't just be a flip of a switch. It would see, at least for me, it would be seen the gradual, the gradual process towards support of climate change and trying to reverse the images.
- A really interesting perspective that I hadn't thought of, of how ultimately life is going to go on. It's, you know, there's going to be a lot of depressing things in the future, but it's not like it's not like this is a meteor that's going to kill everyone and everything. Its life is going to continue. It's we're going to have you know, biodiversity is going to go downhill. There's going to be, you know, obviously mass extinction already, but. Maybe it's the lesson we need to learn. You know, maybe. Maybe we just have to learn the hard way through climate change that we have to get our shit together.

9. Social Influence (8)

- I found most inspiring is hearing people in particular lives, people my own age or close to me in age, talk about things and what they're doing. It makes it a lot more inspiring, like, hey, Oh, I can do that too.
- Young people are very attached to social media. That's kind of like the ongoing joke. But it's true, and I think it probably will remain that way in the same way that older generations watched a lot of television. It's just kind of a thing that we love screens, and we like to be entertained. And with that being said, there are influential people that are influential influences and people who have a lot of social weight.

10. Share Helpful Knowledge & Action Steps (7)

- Canada is so connected and so much of our youth are online, we also have access to a fairly never-ending stream of news about all the bad things that are happening. So as we're learning about drought and wildfire in California, we're also seeing floods in our own town and we're seeing Australian fires. It just feels like a never-ending compounding crisis, in part because of the scope of information that we have access to compared to other countries. And so that I think needs to be countered with more solutions-focused education.
- For example: the water crisis that indigenous communities are facing in Canada, and then connecting that back to climate change and just showing that a lot of the crises that we're facing are interconnected, which seems like a challenge, but that, that also means any solutions we come up with can also be interconnected and integrated. And that always feels nice because it suggests that, you know, we can have one solution that can address multiple kinds of problems.

11. Accessible & Easy to Understand Information (13)

- If there was a study or an article or a paper, having it paraphrase on, on Instagram because you can do multiple posts and have it really colorful and then in the comment section, have a link to that and to that paper or that study or whatever I think would be really helpful if someone wanted to read more about it. And don't necessarily want to read a whole big thing or go to another website where it's just super accessible if you especially if you're using social media every day.
- Programs that leave people with more knowledge about how to approach this stuff day to day. One thing being maybe media literacy, teaching younger people not only media literacy themselves, but how to communicate that to the older members of their family so they don't end up almost being radicalized

by a very popular Internet theories. Because we all know how targeted your Internet feed can end up to yourself. So having this ability to teach that to someone else would be very helpful.

12 Combine Educational Programs with Action (12)

- I mean, for me, the way that I cope is through action.
- I feel like there's the need to be more pragmatic activities.

13. More Political Influence & A Hands-on Approach (4)

- And I see all these youth and even adults participating and being able to present what changed and I would like to see and they're I've seen some of them at council meetings or people, people with maybe more power, and they're able to present what they want. And I think to see that is very hopeful.
- I definitely think that like getting young people educated on how to engage with the political system and how to push for priorities. And I might have mentioned this in the meeting last week, but there's a really big need for political advisors for the climate community.

14. Arts/Spiritual (5)

- Incorporating music, food, animals, meditation, social interaction & connection with communities, safety, and sense of humor.
- Just the concept of having like a wellbeing lens that's included in there.

“ I mean, for me, the way that I cope is through action. ”

Figure 2. Percentage of Themes in Response to What would be helpful in responding to the Climate Crisis

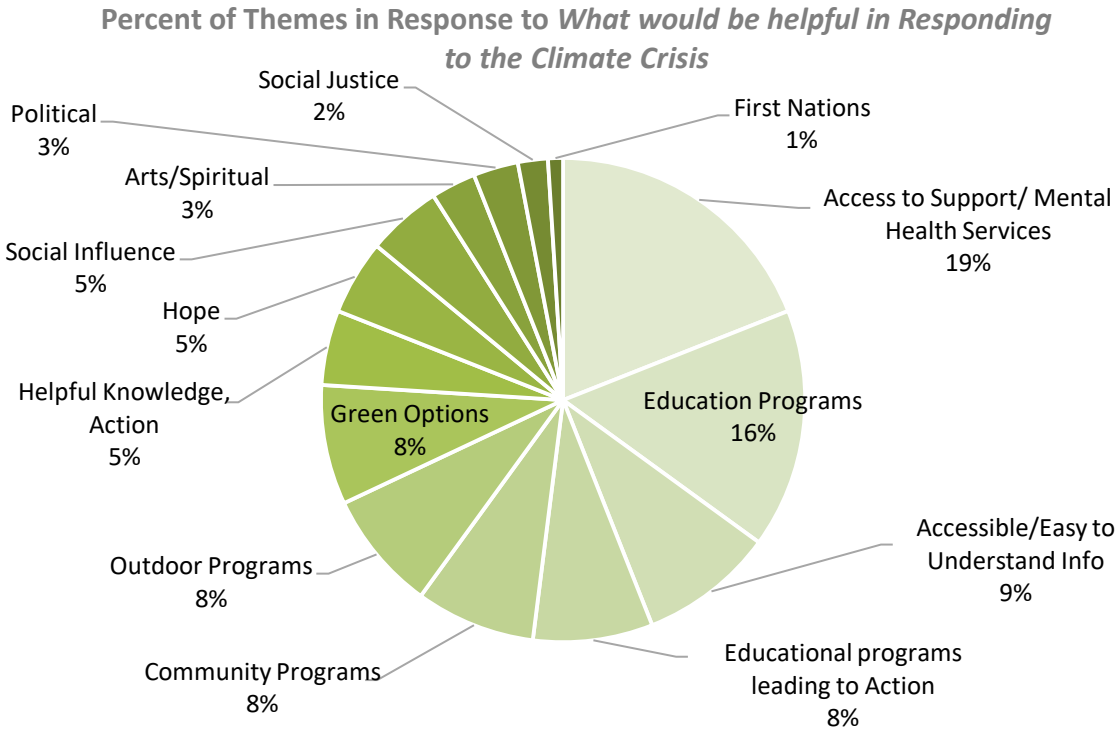


Table 4. Clustering of “Helpful Responses” Themes

Theme Cluster	Theme Constituent	Number of Comments	%
Education [38%]	Education Programs	23	16
	Accessible/Easy to Understand Information	13	9
	Educational programs leading to Action	12	8
	Helpful Knowledge and Action Steps	7	5
Mental Health [24%]	Access to Support/Mental Health Services	27	19
	Hope	7	5
Community [21%]	Community Programs	12	8
	Outdoor Programs	11	8
	Social Justice	3	2
	Arts/Spiritual	5	3
Other [17%]	Green Options	11	8
	Social Influence	8	5
	Political	4	3
	First Nations	2	1



Discussion

Alignment with Previous Research

The findings from our interviews aligned with the results of the now well-known 2021 study of 10,000 young people across 10 countries published in the British medical journal *Lancet*.ⁱⁱⁱ In that study, respondents (16-24 yrs.) reported being worried about climate change (59% very or extremely worried, 84% at least moderately worried). Over 50% felt sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty. Over 45% said their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning, and many reported a high number of negative thoughts about climate change. Respondents rated the governmental response to climate change negatively and reported greater feelings of betrayal than of reassurance. Correlations indicated that climate anxiety and distress were significantly related to perceived inadequate government response and associated feelings of betrayal. Recently published Canadian research^{iv} confirms these findings, including that young people feel betrayed by government inaction and that their inaction contributes to the constellation of emotional reactions that these studies report.

Further Reflections on the Construction of Climate Change Reactions

In-depth focus group interviews can enable or allow further illustration of how thoughts and feelings are constructed through the opportunity for follow-up questions and subsequent reflection. In the following section, we trace the construction of some common responses to the climate crisis among young people as we saw them as interviewees. The section is organized in terms of a summary of how the expressed viewpoint is constructed and brief reflections by the interviewing team.

Difficulty in feeling optimistic about the future

One of our respondents outlined her difficulties in feeling optimistic about the future directly with the perceived inaction of people in the society with more power, principally governments and corporations. She is acutely aware of the need to curtail the use of fossil fuels and the ongoing funding of these industries by major banks. In this, she includes the necessity of a just transition for the many workers involved in the industry. She perceives the changes in policy and regulations that are underway as incremental when wholesale systemic change is required.

An indication that systemic change is in fact afoot in the eyes of this respondent would be fundamental changes to the energy infrastructure in contrast to the current federal government's investment in pipelines and subsidization of the fossil fuel industry. To this she added further recognition of Indigenous land and rights, as well as respect of Indigenous knowledge as the historical stewards of the land. On a more immediate level, she described improvements to public transportation as an important indicator of change.

In further discussion, this respondent highlighted a significant shift in how young people feel over the past 3-5 years. Earlier this generation were taught that they could make a difference by the three R's of reduce, re-use and recycle and set about using less water, turning off lights, biking to school etc. only to find that the scale of the problem appeared to make such efforts inconsequential. The resultant feelings of hopelessness are then tinged with disillusionment. Another related phenomenon, she touched on was an oscillation between anxiety and apathy, with apathy as a defense many of her peers use to protect themselves from the anxiety that is associated with ongoing awareness.

Making trustworthy climate crisis information accessible

Another of our respondents who has taken science courses at university described the gap he experienced between his comprehension of issues such as biodiversity loss compared to peers who do not have interests in science. He emphasized the importance of making scientific information more accessible to the ordinary person. Another peer in the same conversation highlighted how dependent she and her friends are on social media for information, while, at the same time, suspecting that a lot of information on social media is not trustworthy. Related to the issue is the sense that many respondents have that they and many of their peers tune out because the scale of the problem as it is presented is so enormous that there is nothing, they can do about it. We referred to this as the *beyond taking your own cup to Starbucks* problem. Several respondents also emphasized the importance of media literacy.

Coping with feelings about an uncertain future

In many of the interviews, the dialogue very quickly surfaced fears about the future. There are as many ways of coping with these feelings of uncertainty as there are young people, but broadly speaking, our participants spoke of two types of response patterns. The first is getting better informed about the climate crisis, coming to grips with it and taking action. A second is dipping into the feelings of uncertainty and responding and then trying not to think about it in order not to be overwhelmed (or that the future is being taken away). There is also a widely shared sense, as previous research such as the 2021 Lancet study intimates, that the political and corporate leadership of society is not taking the issue seriously enough and therefore, in some way, it is out of control. It is as if society's leadership knows what to do, but they are simply not doing it fast enough.

A number of respondents pointed to the need for community support in addressing the feelings evoked by the climate crisis. Interestingly, the opportunity to share thoughts and feelings in the structured, safe, and inter-generational context of the focus groups was seen as helpful in this respect. They emphasized reducing the cost and convenience barriers to community programming for young people. They felt that such programs need

to reach out to young people through avenues like social media and having young people themselves *pitch* such programs.

Youth-oriented programs would also benefit from including music and food and overall including attention to well-being. In one interview, the issue of community support for young people led to the issue of animals – for some young people, a feeling of connection to a pet is an important aspect of their climate concern. Following this thread also led in the direction of building connection and belonging as a part of the process.

A generational dilemma

The division in responses to the climate change with one extreme represented by high levels of engagement at the risk of synchronous levels of anxiety to nihilism as a preferred to response to facing what can seem to be hopeless situation may mark this generation, the first to enter a world in which the future viability of the planet is at issue. Beyond the vast mental health implications of this ambivalence, lies a vast territory of socio-economic consequences. In a conversation with Canadian political scientist, Thomas Homer-Dixon reported a sense among he and his colleagues that this dilemma and associated loss of faith in society and its institutions could be seen as preconditions for profound political disruption.^v

The emergence of a new culture

Though there is widespread acknowledgement of the overwhelming nature of the climate crisis and associated feelings of anxiety and grief, some participants sense the emergence of a new and regenerative culture in response to the climate crisis. They cited the appearance of vegan restaurants and sustainable products as signs of this new culture.

“ **Seeing other people
participate, gives me a bit of
hope.** ”

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our study confirms the results of a growing body of research showing the socio-emotional and mental health impacts of the climate crisis on young people and their increasing disaffection with the capacity of their society's leaderships to respond with commensurate urgency.

Two of the particular discoveries from this research are:

1. The way in which individualizing responding to the climate crisis translates into perceived emotional pressure on young people.
2. The openness of young people to receiving support and engaging in constructive ways in responding to this crisis.

Our recommendations are to:

1. Advance the connections to young people established in this and similar studies in the form of co-authoring communities of practice and resultant youth-oriented programs.
2. To focus the expertise of the social sciences and the academic community in helping front line community organizations develop evidence-informed and developmental evaluation supported programs and services.
3. To review and evolve the methods by which information about the climate crisis is communicated to young people.

In conclusion, there is a tremendous and immediate urgency to respond to the distress of young people whose future is perceived to be in jeopardy because of the climate crisis.

Epilogue

The experience that evoked my interest (Dr. Arden Henley) in climate distress among young people took place in February 2020, the year when COVID-19 became a pandemic. I was teaching a class on the Psychology of Aging. Early in the class I showed a slide of the SARS virus with which I had some research familiarity by way of giving the young people in my Masters level class in Counselling a feeling for what was surely coming. Like SARS, COVID is a coronavirus.

After referring to the virus, I did an exercise with the class that required them to imagine themselves as 72 and then, in small groups, answer questions *as a 72-year-old*. This question answering took place in the form of simulated counselling interviews with everyone taking turns asking questions and answering as a 72-year-old. I had done this exercise a number of times before and found it surprisingly helpful in guiding younger people under the *ageism barrier*, as well as providing participants with a rich experience of life as a long-term arc of events and experiences.

On this occasion, while de-briefing the exercise in the class, a young woman stood up sobbing to say that in the light of climate change and the uncertain future it was promising, though she was in long term relationship and had always looked forward to being married and having a family, she was now doubtful. What was the point of bringing children into such a world? In fact, she went on to say, what was the point of getting a Master's degree? It was a deeply poignant moment and one that I have never forgotten. Almost, to the woman, the participants in this study said the same.

References

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/ontario-climate-policy-lawsuit-1.6584416> downloaded August 13, 2023

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^{iv} Galway, L. and Field, E. (2023). Climate emotions and anxiety among young people in Canada: A national survey and call to action. *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*. Vol. 9, Jan/Feb.

^v Homer-Dixon, T. (2022) Personal Conversation

Appendix I: About the Research

Intent

The intent of this project was to address the growing distress many young people now experience about climate change with young people, provide an opportunity for young people to give voice to their concerns and invite them to co-design supportive services. The project also tests the capacity of an academic research team to collaborate with a community based environmental organization.

Purpose

The overall purpose of this study was to facilitate the development of strong community-academic partnerships, youth-led leadership, and the development of scientific evidence relating to interventions for climate-related distress among young people.

To accomplish this goal, this project:

1. Explores and documents young people's experience of climate distress.
2. Co-authors with young people a set of ideas about supportive programs or services that institutions may offer.
3. Engages in a dialogue with young people that invites taking an active and constructive role in responding to the climate crisis.
4. Contributes to the emerging body of knowledge about responding to climate crisis induced mental health issues among people.
5. Disseminate what is learned both in lay and academic terms via published reports.
6. Develop further project grants for the development, piloting, and evaluation of GTEC-led intervention for climate-related distress among young people.

Method

Multi-stage Focus Groups

This study employed multi-stage focus groups with two panels of youth and young adults, aged 16-24. Each panel was interviewed twice and consisted of two participants. On three occasions we interviewed a single participant and completed both stages in a single interview. On one occasion a new participant was added for the second interview because of scheduling issues. Eleven young people participated in total. Two additional interviews were disregarded because of participants who either did not participate or were unable to be sufficiently coherent.



Drs. Thyer and Henley facilitated the focus group interviews. Dr. Darko attended the focus groups, managed the online technical issues, and contributed to the administration of the interviews. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes. Focus groups were conducted online to facilitate maximal participation and inclusion. Zoom transcription and recording software was used to collect data from these meetings. Themes were analyzed using a modified Colaizzi descriptive phenomenological method¹. The interview guide is attached as Appendix II.

Please note that this report has been circulated to all the participants in the study.

Research Team

The research team reflects a collaboration between the [Mental Health Climate Change Alliance](#) (MHCCA), [Green Technology Education Centre of Greater Vancouver Society](#) (GTEC) and the youth participants in the project. This research is funded by the [Michael Smith Health Research Foundation](#).

GTEC is a registered non-profit society in BC with CRA charitable tax status. It was established by a group of concerned community leaders with extensive experience in education and community development. GTEC's mission is to provide community-based education about climate change.

MHCCA is a community of interdisciplinary climate researchers, mental and healthcare providers, and other experts committed to addressing the adverse impacts of the climate crisis on mental health.

Research team members

Dr. Kiffer G. Card is the Scientific Director of the Mental Health and Climate Change Alliance, a Michael Smith Health Research BC Scholar, and an Assistant Professor with the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Simon Fraser University with training as a behavioural epidemiologist, social ecologist, and health services researcher. Dr. Card's research is focused on the ecological, political, and social determinants of health — with an emphasis on understanding how emotional distress and coping responses impact health and wellbeing.

Dr. Arden Henley, MA (Psych), Ed.D., is the Executive Director of the Green Technology Education Centre, former Vice President of CityU Canada and a founder of the CityU

¹ Morrow, Rosie, Rodriguez, Alison and King, Nigel (2015) Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. *The psychologist*, 28 (8). pp. 643-644.

graduate counselling programs in Canada. Previously he was the Director of White Rock Family Therapy Institute, the Director of Clinical Services at Peace Arch Community Services, and the Executive Director of the South Okanagan Children's Services Society. He has extensive expertise in green technology, education, and clinical counselling.

Dr. Linda Thyer, MD, is a family and primary care sport medicine physician working primarily with youth over the past 25 years. She currently practices at SFU's Health and Counselling Services where mental health comprises a large part of her work. Linda is a founding member of Doctors for Planetary Health and a board member of Green Technology Education Center.

Dr. Gottfried Darko, is a Research Program Manager with the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Simon Fraser University with training as an epidemiologist and public health researcher. Gottfried's current work borders on mental health and climate change, social connection and loneliness among populations.

Appendix II

Interview Guide

Focus Group 1

Thank you so much for participating in this study. We hope that we can contribute together to the design of services that will help the growing number of young people who are feeling distressed about the present and future impacts of climate change. In your package you will have received a Consent Form and a copy of the Interview Guide.

Before we get started let's take a moment to review the Consent Form. In doing this Linda and I would like to emphasize the confidentiality of these interviews. The Consent Form we have provided outlines the steps we have taken on our side to ensure confidentiality. For your part, we would like to emphasize the *very simple principle that what takes place in this room stays in this room.*

Let's take a moment now to introduce ourselves. In addition to your name, we would love to hear what it was about this study that interested you so that you ended up here today. By the way, when we add a question like *we would love to hear what it was about this study that interested you so that you ended up here today* it is also an option to not respond, to *pass*, as some people say.

Introductions, then, a couple of further notes about the etiquette of focus groups:



1. Linda and I are here to learn so whatever you would like to share is going to be helpful. There are no right and wrong answers.
2. It is important that together we create a *culture of listening*. So, let's be careful not interrupt one another or dominate the talk. That goes for Linda and me, as well.
3. Often, we need a moment to think over what we want to say, so silence is ok.
4. Remember, it's always ok to pass.

Linda and I have 5 questions to guide our conversation. Here is the first one:

If someone said to you: what are your thoughts about climate change? Just off the top of your head what would you say?

[The goal of the question is to prompt dialogue. The further role of the facilitators is to ask further questions that encourage conversation with the goal of exploring ideas and clarifying terms.]

The second question is:

Knowing a bit about climate change from your experience and what you have heard in the news and learned in the classroom, how do you feel about the future climate change predicts?

The third question is:

How have you and the people you know been handling the feelings that come up when you think about the future the impacts of climate change are likely to bring about?

[It is possible that for many young people in the focus group and/or among people they know that feelings about climate change are unexpressed. If that is the case, the facilitators can affirm that turning away, not thinking about it etc. are perfectly understandable ways of responding. This will be important for us to know. A follow-up question in this instance might be: *How do you think not thinking about it will play out in the long term?*]

The fourth question is:

Who and/or what forces have resulted in our being subject to the impacts of climate change?

The fifth question is:

What can be done about climate change, as you see it?

This draws our interview to a close. Thanks so much for being so helpful and so informative. Please let Gottfried know if you would like a copy of the transcript.

Next time, we will have the opportunity to be imaginative. We want to discuss with you what kind of services we can develop and what sorts of opportunities we can provide (as universities, community programs etc.) that would be helpful to you in responding to the uncertain future that you face?

Focus Group 2

Welcome back to our conversation about climate change. Today we want to think through together what kinds of services institutions such as universities and community organizations can provide to help young people respond to the challenges of climate change.

Before we begin, are there any thoughts or feelings from our first meeting that we need to address before moving on?

Let's take moment to recall some of the principles of having a safe and productive conversation today:

1. Linda and I are here to learn so whatever you would like to share is going to be helpful. There are no right and wrong answers.
2. It is important that we create together a *culture of listening*. So, let's be careful not interrupt one another or dominate the talk. That goes for Linda and me, as well.
3. Often, we need a moment to think over what we want to say, so silence is ok.
4. Remember, it's always ok to pass.

Key interview questions:

In looking at climate change so far what ideas, projects or approaches have you heard about that have invited you to feel most curious or optimistic?

What kinds of things could universities, community and business do that would be actually helpful to young people in responding to the impacts of climate change.

Thanks so much for your participation. We will send you a summary report that includes the interventions our research team comes up with guided by what we have learned from you. If you wish, and only if you wish, we would be delighted for you to respond when we send this.

