



Editorial

Thinking Bigger for Wellbeing: Look to Climate Action.

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I write this editorial on the eve of the United Nation's 28th Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP28) hosted in Dubai (UAE) this year. Tomorrow, the world will learn of the final agreed upon text of the negotiated commitments between global heads of state. The decision is vital for the state of the planet nearing critical tipping points from which it will be difficult to return, but also because any worsening of the effects of climate change has a heavy and negative impact on the wellbeing of people (De Neve & Sachs, 2020). Positive psychologists will play an important role in tackling not only the effects of the climate on individual and community welfare, but also in harnessing the goodness in individuals towards taking positive action towards preserving as well as promoting nature. As wellbeing is threatened by the climate itself, it is time to broaden its definition to include nature and our role in it (Mead et al., 2021).

Climate and Wellbeing

Since the introduction of positive psychology (PP), “wellbeing” has become a popular and meaningful topic. Moving away from traditional perspectives of merely reducing human misery to building positive emotional experiences that make life enjoyable and worthwhile, the field has gone through several iterations. Its beginnings focused on the development of theories, constructs and measures as well as the accumulation of evidence in the areas of health, academic outcomes, work performance, etc. (De Neve et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2023). The second wave focused on the development and empirical validation of positive psychology interventions (PPIs) designed to generate positive emotional experiences, meaning and the use of good character (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Lomas et al., 2021; Wong, 2011). The third, PP 3.0, focuses on broader sociocultural and political issues affecting individuals like climate change and consumer consumption, as well as the contexts in which these occur and where individuals are likely to have an impact like civil society, schools, and workplaces (Kern et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2021). Meeting the United Nation's sustainable development goals in wellbeing (SDG3), sustainable consumption (SDG12) and climate action (SDG13) (De Neve & Sachs, 2020) is a significant portion of this wellbeing labour.

Exploring ways to develop and maintain wellbeing not only for individuals but societies necessarily demand a more sustainable and systemic form of happiness that does not prioritize individual's views on their life alone, but equally that of other individuals, including the planet.



Sustainable wellbeing (O'Brien, 2012; O'Mahony, 2022; Ronen & Kerret, 2020) promotes the skills to make lifestyle choices that support short and long-term happiness while respecting climate concerns. The daily choices individuals make are particularly salient as the links between materialistic values, overconsumption, environmental harm and wellbeing are well documented and not new (Brown et al., 2016; Brown & Vergragt, 2016; Isham et al., 2022; Kasser, 2018). Thus, sustainable wellbeing invokes eudaimonic strivings, goals and pursuits (i.e., making meaningful contributions, investing in relationships, learning) over hedonic choices (i.e., instant gratifications, an exclusive focus on positive emotional experiences). It also rests on developing new terminology around concepts such as cradle to cradle, carbon sinks, tipping points, fossil fuels, and the circular economy, as much as eudaimonia, solastalgia, and relational wellbeing as examples. It further includes the development of skills to redesign lifestyles with respect to housing, food, leisure and transportation as well as transform attitudes, values, actions and social connections to suit new realities. Such decision-making frameworks become important as most individuals are unsure of which actions to take for the greatest impact. The figure below (www.drawdown.org) can help those interested in climate and wellbeing coaching or in considering their own habits.

TOP 20 HIGH-IMPACT CLIMATE ACTIONS FOR HOUSEHOLDS AND INDIVIDUALS

The data presented here represents cumulative Gt CO₂-eq over 30 year period





Sustainability and wellbeing knowledge is critical as most adults would not have received it in their own early years of education and because theoretical models may change over time, i.e., the well-known “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” mantra now includes “Refuse” as its starting point. Household waste is overlooked in comparison to industry waste or government policy (in)action, but emissions from food consumed to household energy use and waste are expected to rise by 70% in 2050 if our habits are not tempered, with high-income countries including those in the Gulf region, generating more than one-third of global emissions alone (Kaza et al., 2018). Individual action is not trivial, adopting minimalism and voluntary simplicity for instance, is associated with more sustainable consumption, policy support for, and engaging with positive climate action and greater life satisfaction (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2019; Hook et al., 2023; Lima & Mariano, 2022; Rich et al., 2017; Thomas & Sharpe, 2013). Promoting more eudaimonic forms of wellbeing across the work of positive psychologists and the public will be key. Yet, positive psychologists will need to ensure their education is up to date as curricula integrating sustainability, climate action and wellbeing, while growing, remain scarce (Ronen & Kerret, 2020).

Often reported in the popular media and with good reason are mounting rates of climate anxiety and climate-related mental health issues (Hickman et al., 2021; Hrabok et al., 2020) rising in youth certainly, but also in adults as awareness of the climate crisis and its urgency grow. Climate anxiety is not a disorder (Clayton, 2020; Hickman et al., 2021) as it is experienced in response to actual threat, but nonetheless causes distress and impairs functioning. Disavowing such emotions will not help; in fact, the more concerned the individual, the more action they tend to take (Leiserowitz et al., 2023); rather, positive psychologists will be tasked in other ways. Individuals will increasingly deal with climate disasters and extreme weather events, including in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, where the effects of climate change will be worse due to its arid climate, weak governance systems and existing economic and political instabilities (Alaaldin, 2022; Wehrey & Fawal, 2022; United Nations, 2021). Such factors will be compounded by desertification, water shortages, food insecurity, conflict and resulting mental health problems, key issues for policy makers and practitioners alike.

The skills for climate resilience will need to feature not only in civil society, but in schools and organizations as well. With the growing mental health and wellbeing needs of young people in the Gulf region (e.g., Campbell et al., 2021; Marquez & Long, 2020), as well as that of employees and adults generally (Hammami et al., 2023; PWC Middle East, 2022; Tuhoon, 2022), attending to climate emotions is paramount. Professionals in positive psychology would be negligent not to broach the topic; speaking of the very things which concern people dispels their weight; yet learning how to have climate conversations is for many, a new and tricky skill (Fine, 2022), especially in regions of the world and in organizations where economic livelihoods depend on the continued burning of fossil fuels and where energy transitions have not even begun¹.

The taboo around climate change generates communal awkwardness where individuals underestimate how much others care about climate change and as a result, avoid it altogether. Yet,

¹ If you are in the United Arab Emirates (or GCC region) and want support in having organizational and/or personal climate conversations, see <https://climatefresk.org/> for local facilitators. The author has no affiliation with them but attended one of their sessions during COP28 in Dubai, UAE.



this only reinforces the belief that no one cares because no one is talking about it (Kjeldahl & Hendricks, 2018). Changing social norms around climate change functions much like it does when trying to motivate others to be more active (i.e., I'm running a 10K race next month, check out my training plan, want to join? I've switched to oat milk and cut meat consumption to once a week, what are you doing?). Announcing one's intentions suggests not only that action is possible and happening, but that it also matters. Challenging the perception of few people caring or acting sets a new standard for what is normal to say and do, such as the fact that the majority of individuals know about climate change and care deeply about it (Leiserowitz et al., 2022). Step two will be persuading those people that they can also do something concrete about it; the solutions for which are not mysteries, however the prevailing inertia and apparent lack of urgency to do so appears to be the larger hurdle.

Climate resilience must also include radical self-care (Powers & Engstrom, 2019), i.e., not exfoliating masks, but sitting with, and respecting one's climate emotions, engaging in physical activity, spending time with and in nature, taking a media time-out to not be overwhelmed. Acting in the service of the planet is demanding work: ecological grief, activism burnout, continued self-justification, tiresome workplace advocacy and climate anxiety are commonplace, while striving to meet life goals (i.e., relationships, education, employment, health, etc.). Engaging with climate action is also to acknowledge its gravity and struggle with bureaucratic forms of civil, public and commercial society unaccustomed to responding quickly, or transformatively. It is also to experience frustration where commercial activity and interests, a lack of effective policies, and the difficulty of mobilizing social action towards an unfolding crisis reaches its apex. Distracting climate change denial where researchers are denigrated, threatened and ridiculed does not help (Duggan et al., 2021). The mental health of climate scientists and activists, as well as mental health professionals and coaches called to the climate arena (American Psychological Association, 2022; Li et al., 2022), is also a burden (Clayton, 2018; Duggan et al., 2021). To reduce burnout, climate activists, professionals in the field and researchers need to be afforded greater respect to continue their work.

A final overlooked tool against insecurity is (re)building community. Climate change is caused by collective human activity and will equally be solved by it. Joining others who identify with the same concerns, such as advocacy or climate action groups, buffers against the effects of climate anxiety and prevents its escalation to clinical levels (Schwartz et al., 2023). Taking part in collective action increases one's sense of personal agency, empowerment, belonging and further normalizes eco-emotions. There are many climate action groups in the Middle East/North Africa region and positive psychologists should advocate for, and refer clients towards their membership as much as they would to other groups, such as post-partum groups for new mothers, etc.

This area of scientific inquiry is vital for the development of our respective professions, whether in psychology, positive psychology, mental health, coaching, social work, etc., and also because it is the most serious existential threat facing us. An admittedly daunting task, this time can also be a meaningful one through which we find new ways of being, relating and working. However, the window of opportunity is small and the time for action is now if we are to have a chance. With the same maturity, optimism and hope, persistence, kindness, humour, and perspective we advocate within boardrooms, classrooms and research labs, we must, can, and will make an impact. The question is: will 2024 be the year **you** do so and more importantly, how and with who?



What can you, as a professional, do? A cheat sheet to getting climate serious.

1. Get informed. Climate change is complex, but not impossible to understand. Still, there is science around it and it's not because you have a degree in one thing that you necessarily know about another thing. Understand climate science to help yourself be able to explain how things work, what things are called, and when they are likely to occur. The more you know, the less you are vulnerable to junk science. The less you know, the more likely you are to spread misinformation which we don't have time to waste battling on your behalf.
2. Reflect on what you have learned and don't allow yourself moral laziness. I thought I knew about climate change until I took a course and saw that I didn't! It brought perspective and reflection on my footprint, impact, livelihood, and legacy. "Business as usual" no longer works. You can't know better and let yourself get away with doing the same.
3. Understand how climate change affects your profession. It may be that the literature is only starting to accumulate in your field; make sure to read it and consider how it affects other fields too, like social work, marketing, health, human rights, etc. There is work happening in all fields and many are well ahead. We must decide how to incorporate the effects of climate change into our work, broader profession, and larger society. These are big ideas, take your time, but not too much time please.
4. Recognize your voice. Every time you share what you have learned, how it makes you feel, or ask what your industry, workplace, grocery store, school, gym, or friend is doing for climate action, you send a message: "This Matters." And at the present time, it's exactly what needs to be heard. It's not true that we do not know how to solve climate change, it's that there are too few people taking action and more critically, fewer people expecting it. Raise the standard for everyone, ask and talk about it. And yes, those are climate actions.
5. Be critical and smart. Just like there are "practitioners" trying to fool you into thinking they are schooled in the science of positive psychology by using happy faces and random words designed to confuse and sound scientific, so too are practitioners "greenwashing" by putting green stickers on everything and calling it "sustainable." Call this out when you see it; it adds to the list of time-consuming distraction and makes climate change worse. Your knowledge from steps 1 and 2 will serve you well. Speak up, it's why you have a voice.
6. Congratulate yourself for taking the harder, noble road. Climate action is tough and will keep you up at night. But you'll feel better for doing it. And the more you do it, you'll be exercising your courage, grit, love for humanity, kindness, and optimism for all living things. And for that, we thank you. Annoying smiley face here: 😬

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