

Presenter (Verity Sharp)

Hello, and a warm welcome to a brand new podcast series called Climate Crisis Conversations - Catastrophe or Transformation, a podcast hosted by the Climate Psychology Alliance.

And this is the place where, as we live through this momentous age, increasingly defined by the effects of global warming and climate chaos, we're going to be talking about how we're feeling.

My name is Verity Sharp. I'm a radio broadcaster. And I believe this great price being paid on our mental health. As the enormity of this crisis gradually dawns on us, we're having to deal with huge emotions, like guilt, and worry, grief, even panic. And there's something about the very nature of climate change- in that it isn't immediately visible, it's not one thing that we can point to -that is incredibly complicated. And because of this, we have nowhere concrete to put our feelings, no one place for them. So talking about all this, I believe, will not only be healing, it also gives us the strength and the resolve to move on and get involved in potential solutions.

So in this the first of our climate crisis conversations, I'm joined by Caroline Hickman, who's a Climate Psychologist and Teaching Fellow at the University of Bath. And we're going to address the question of why it's so hard for us to engage with the enormity of climate breakdown -I have to say sometimes I feel overwhelmed by it. So what do you think Caroline?

Caroline

Hello, we like the small questions, don't we? (laughs) At some point, it would be really nice to talk about, you know, what type of milk to buy or something like that? Do some easy ones..

But I think you made a couple of really good points there. One is the visibility. Now it is relatively invisible to us living in the West, and in northern industrialised society. But if you're living elsewhere in the world, it can be highly visible. So we've got huge numbers of communities already displaced because of the climate change and rising sea levels, haven't we? So I think there's a struggle there for us to see the impact on others. And to recognise that that, in turn will impact on us in the same way. So there's a kind of political, global sensibility that we desperately need to change in order to start to come to terms with that. So that's one thing that I think is hard.

I think it's very easy for us to turn these people into the Other. So because it's not happening to me, it's happening to Them, I other Them. And that means the I don't have to engage with it emotionally. And if we turn people into the other, and we see that happen with language around asylum seekers and refugees for example, that allows me to treat Them as less human, less to be cared about. Does that make sense? So we distance ourselves from a kind of global concern there. And it allows us to have arguments, for example, about whether we should continue flying or not. As opposed to thinking about ,well, joining up. 'If I keep flying, more children will drown' .. And I know people won't like me join those two things up. But that's the awful reality.....

Verity

Absolutely.

Caroline

...for a lot of children and communities and other species that we share the planet with. So I think that's one reason is just so flippin' difficult. So that stuff is unthinkable. We like to think that we're nice human beings. So to think that we are somehow contributing to the demise and the suffering of others in that way, would be unbearable. So let's not think about it

Verity

But there is that that geographical difference- that the Western world, the developed world ,so called, is causing it but the impacts are being felt so far away that when we see harrowing images, I mean, what was it recently, you know, hurricanes happening in India, and the fires, and floods in Bangladesh, and all of this, it's on a television screen. I suppose, it's like in a physically different medium where we don't engage. I mean, is it the same thing?, we walk past homeless people on the streets. We just seem to have to walk past you know,

Caroline

I think it's hard to relate to . So I think that again, you're pointing to the fact that it's hard for us to engage

with it personally, when it's not actually impacting on us. It's hard to relate to. But there are other things, as you said, originally- it's so big, it's so vast, it's enormous. And there's no blueprint for how to deal with this. So humans, humans collectively, know how to deal with war. We know how to deal with a tsunami, we know how to deal with other disasters and other crises, famine, we know how to react, react and respond. We've never had to deal with this before. So we've got nothing showing us the way to deal with this, nothing to fall back on and think, 'Oh, Okay, that was how our ancestors dealt with this'. So we haven't got that pathway forwards being shown to us by other people.

And to be fair, I think there's been very poor leadership here, politically, about showing us the way forwards and so the public are probably quite right in being very anxious about the lack of leadership about how to deal with this. If our leaders can't deal with Brexit, how are they going to deal with climate change, right? People talk about Brexit anxiety, and I just sort of think that's nothing compared to what you're going to be facing with climate change.

And then when people do speak out, they can be attacked, annihilated. We were talking earlier about the Ed Miliband interview with John Humphrys on the radio this week. And the way John Humphrys attacked Ed Miliband, and just attacked and attacked, over and over again saying things like, 'Oh, so are you saying that we can't fly any more and that we can't eat meat any more?' And, you know, Ed Miliband, couldn't deal with it because he kept trying to answer it as though it were a sensible argument. And it wasn't a sensible argument. What it was for John Humphrys was fear, and anger. And all he was doing was expressing his feelings of anger and fear about this.

Verity

So what could Ed Miliband have come back with?

Caroline

Ideally, he'd have said, 'You are incredibly angry about this. You're really scared about this, aren't you? Yeah, me, too. What are we gonna do about this? You know, we're in this together.'

Verity

Let's get John Humphrys on the podcast.

Caroline

I think that's a really great idea. I really do. I'd like to talk to him about that. Because when I was listening on the radio, and all I could hear was his fear and anger. And I do get that I do. I've been doing a lot of public talks. I was at a talk recently in Lewes. And we were opening up for questions. And somebody at the back stood out and just started yelling at me. And he was very, very angry with me. He was very, very angry about something I said, he was very afraid. And, I'm used to this in a way because actually what I'm hearing from him, I know, he's not - he may be angry with me, I may have said something stupid -but what he's really saying is 'Save us, tell us what to do.' And in fact, he then started saying, 'Tell us what to do.'

And because I don't have the power to change these things -I have the power to take the message out there, but I don't really have the power to tell everybody what to do, although I'll give it a go if someone wants to put me in that position(laughs)

So, he was angry, he was scared. And those feelings are starting to develop in a lot of people as they get more and more exposed to these messages. So leadership is absolutely essential here, and leaders need to show us how to think about these things. And not just good practical solutions, they need to show wisdom. And they need to show thoughtfulness. And they need to show emotional intelligence around this. And they need to hold together these warring opposites of groups like Extinction Rebellion, and people who are fracking. You know, because we may be on opposing sides, but we are all people, and they need to find a way to navigate through the middle of some of these things. I know I'm talking about putting two extremely opposing forces in the same room. But those are the people that really need to start talking to each other. I mean, I know that sounds a bit wacky, but what do *you* think?

Verity

Definitely, definitely. Well, also party politics isn't helping anything, is it really I mean, it's got to be coming together of everybody, hasn't it? A bit like Brexit, you know, it would be much better if we had just dissolved Parliament at the point that that referendum result came out and we got the parties into a coalition and tried to work all this out together. You know, the thing that Extinction Rebellion is saying with the People's Assembly ..

Caroline  
Exactly.

Verity

So, it's coming together in a kind of democratising - a proper democratising of ideas and creativity, you know, creative solutions.

Caroline

Oh God, wouldn't that be amazing? Wouldn't it be fantastic? And yeah, because in that splitting, and those arguments where we fight each other, we all get nowhere.

And there are forces of denial emerging. So you get, you get people kind of producing a political denial. And you know, that they're not actually talking about climate change, or the climate emergency of eco-crisis, you know, that the subtext is I just want to keep my job and stay elected. You know, that's all they're talking about. So they're not even engaging with the reality of the argument. And then you got an economic denial going on, which is you know, people thinking, 'Well, yeah, this may all be terrible, but I just need to keep food on the table and pay my shareholders. Otherwise, I'll lose my job,' you know. So you've got an economic denial,..

Then you have got a small group where there is absolute total denial, but I'm not really sure what to say about them. And be polite. You know, they could be so terrified, that they can't even begin to think about it. That's always a possibility. They could just be people who are kind of perverse, and always will argue with you. So if you say, 'isn't it a nice day?' They'll say, 'No, it's not', so you could get that kind of argumentative character.

I think the majority are people who have that experience of 'It can't be real. It can't be that bad. That can't be real.' So you get that kind of level of denial, where the brain then moves between half your brain going, 'It's real, the house is on fire, panic, wake up, do something.' And the other half going, 'No, because actually, if I look at my window, nothing's changed. Everything's the same. And actually, I'm too busy with the school run. I'm too busy thinking about what to cook for dinner tonight. And I'm feeling less inadequate about the fact that you know, I need to wash my hair, and I need to do X Y Z. So don't give me something as big as climate change to deal with. I can barely think about what to cook for tea tonight.'

Verity

So I had an experience recently where I made a programme for radio 4 about eco-anxiety. And as part of that, I had to read some pretty harrowing documents that I probably wouldn't have chosen to read. One key interview that we did was with Jem Bendall, who has written the Deep Adaptation paper. He's an academic, he's a social scientist. And he wrote a paper and, apparently, academic papers normally get downloaded three times.. his has been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times. But it's the absolute the worst scenario that he believes we are facing in a very short amount of time. He thinks this is all going to happen to us within about 10 years. And I, having read that, having turned that stone over, was finding like you say, 'How on earth now do I restabilize? How do I get myself back to my what I perceive to be my normality?' And I mean, I've been engaging with all these things, and reading lots of things around climate change, but I hadn't read anything that ferocious. Yeah. So what do you what do you think we need to do? (I wouldn't call myself a denialist. But on that level, I don't really actually want to go that far with it. So maybe I am in a way, denying..)

Caroline

Well, maybe some of that denial is actually self protection. Because otherwise you fear going crazy, because it's terrifying, what he's talking about is, it's almost impossible for you to imagine. So maybe a little bit of denial when you first start to engage with those ideas is quite useful. I know when I first read his paper, it took me about two to three weeks to use -I like the word you use to restabilize. It took me two to three weeks to find my feet again, emotionally.

And I remember walking in the woods every morning with the dogs, after I read that paper, crying, just crying every single day. And then having to, sort of, let myself cry on the dog walk, and then pull it together and just go and teach, and go about my day. But I gave myself time every day to grieve. And to let those deeper, more painful feelings breathe, to get in touch with them for a space every day, but not all the time, every day. I was very clear with those feelings. 'Okay, you got this space. You're here. You're welcome. Now, I know you're real but you cannot take over my life, I cannot have you at the front of my life for the whole day,

because I would struggle to function', you know. So I managed to de-stabilise and re-stabilize every day.

And I think that the trick, if you can manage it, is to allow both, because you don't want to fall apart. And then the ideal is- I don't want to be unfair- but you don't want to fall apart, and then take six months to recover. And I think that probably gets in the way of you listening to the lessons of the paper.

You fear too much destabilisation, you fear being taken too far into all of that stuff. Now, for some people, that is what will happen. But I think for the majority, if you can actually learn to fall apart and get together within the same day, then you'll gradually be able to absorb the lessons of that paper. Does that make sense? It's about allowing that movement, that both are true. And this is about allowing the message from the unconscious brain, that we're not completely rational creatures, this is the ego having to learn that it's not completely in control of our world. Yeah, that we are 5%, conscious, rational beings -roughly 5%, I mean that's roughly what Freud would have given us to believe. And so that's the model I'm kind of working with. So we've got 5%, roughly rational, yeah. And then we've got 95% not so rational, doesn't mean it's irrational, but speaks through metaphor, speaks through different ways of engaging with these things, speaks through art, speaks through stories, speaks through relationship, speak through dreams, speak through music. And so we get those messages through the unconscious in completely different ways. So I think it's about having both a conscious and an unconscious.

Verity

That's really interesting, isn't it? Because I mean, this whole question of, why do we find it so hard to get our heads around it? Is because probably, and I'm totally including myself in this, I'm relying on my rational brain most of the time, yeah. But it's not, it's not gonna happen.

Caroline

Oh, my rational brain was sobbing in a corner after it first read that paper. Because it was like, 'Are you kidding me? yet? No, no, no, don't give me this', you know, it would be like giving a five year old, the wheel of an articulated lorry, you know, and saying, 'Have you go, sweetie, try not to do too much damage'. It's just overwhelming and too much.

So I think it's about making it tolerable, but, I want to just reiterate that the falling apart is really important part of that process. And then coming back together again. Because obviously, people think about falling apart as a bad thing. You know, we we have the kind of language of falling apart, going mad losing control..

Verity

..essentially a stiff upper lip , Just Keep Calm and Carry On..

Caroline

Yeah. Well, you know, as opposed to, you know, Fall Apart and Carry On. So we - do you know, the metaphor of the butterfly, do you know how, and this is not a test - as in if you don't know, it's okay, it doesn't make you a terrible human being -do you know how a caterpillar turns into a butterfly?

Verity

well I know obviously about metamorphosis and the stages that it goes through, but what I like, I like to think it's magic.

Caroline

Well it *is*, it is totally magic. So, this is the helpful metaphor. So I used to think that the caterpillar would get into its little cocoon and grow legs and grow wings, and turn into this other creature, but the basic creature remains the same. So it's like a caterpillar with wings. And it blew my mind when I discovered that's not the case. What actually happens is the caterpillar goes into the cocoon, and then it dissolves, into a liquid. So if you break open a cocoon -I'm not encouraging people to do that -but if you break one open, it's full of liquid. So the creature breaks down into nothing, right? But nothing gets lost because you've got all the cells in there. But it's an absolute breakdown of the old insect. I'm writing something at the moment called 'Caterpillar Soup' -it is the way forwards because you let yourself disintegrate. And the caterpillar, you know, disintegrates. Yeah. And then all of those cells reform themselves into a whole new creature. So they fall apart, and then they come back together and create this whole new creature.

Verity

Im loving this metaphor.. It's fantastic.

Caroline

Isn't it, isn't it? I got so overexcited when I first learned this. And it's that's the difference between change and transformation, right? That is transformation. So you become a new creature, but the cells are the same.

And there's another really cute thing about the caterpillar/butterfly, which is you mustn't help it get out of its chrysalis. So once the caterpillar has turned into the butterfly, the butterfly then has to fight to get out of its chrysalis cocoon thing. I'll be getting that completely wrong. Apologies to all the natural scientists out there. It's in a thing anyway. There is this really, really important process, it has to go through -so, it has to fight. And it has to eat its way out because it's a butterfly. And it has to start to chew its way out and then fight, and it has to fight and fight and fight. And it's really tough for it to fight its way out. That process of fighting pushes blood or whatever it has in its wings- I have just proven myself to be the worst naturalist in the world. Sorry.. I know the story, but I don't know what butterflies have gotten their wings, so, apologies- that pumps, whatever it is into their wings and allows them to fly.

If you break it for them, and they crawl out, their wings don't open and they can't fly.

So we need to fight that struggle. We've got to go through the struggle. I mean, it's a life or death struggle? Right? Because if the butterfly doesn't get out, it will die. Yeah. I mean, in order to fly, it's got to be out. Well, I think that's where we go to find the help. What in what way? Does that help you? Why is that helpful?

Verity

Well, I suppose it is the idea of everything melting down being okay. I am still quite sort of raw from this whole experience of reading these sorts of papers, and I haven't gone through the sort of, the three weeks of falling apart. But it is that you don't want to fall apart- that fear of falling apart, especially being a parent and, and all those kinds of things and - actually being a child, too, my parents aren't getting their heads around this at all.

So I don't want to fall apart and have my parents worrying that I'm falling apart. Yeah. But to have something as powerful as that, that

it's only by falling apart, that you really can, re-emerge, is the word isn't it? And, and also that, that it kind of brings an excitement in there, as to what you might reemerge as -somebody better - better is a very subjective word- but I mean, different

Caroline

Well you'll have evolved, right? You know, it's a vessel for soulful, emotional, psychological, intellectual evolution, which maybe, is the next stage for you in this world. So maybe we can take you through this process of disintegration, of making the programme, reading the paper, feeling terrible, struggling with that, but then showing you that there is a way to reshape yourself with these new ideas, and show you that there's a way that these new ideas and these painful feelings can become a new version of you, which gives you more, which gives you depth.

I understand you didn't want to use the word 'better'. I understand that. But maybe we should talk about more depth, more soulfulness, more connection, more empathy, a deeper empathy.

You know, as a psychotherapist, I use my own experience in my life of falling apart repeatedly. Now, I think I'm on about my seventh breakdown at the moment..and I don't say that lightly. But you know, the more you have, the more familiar they become. And they just become part of 'Well this is the old transforming into a new version'. Yeah? I'm not minimising the fear and awfulness of them. But I probably do find them easier now than I did originally. In that I'm more used to making that move through that transformative process and saying, 'Okay, my old stuff is getting ripped up, and I have to trust'. And there's that kind of moment of trust, where the new hasn't quite emerged, but I have to trust and hold that tension, that something new will emerge and that I'm engaged in that process. But this is back to the ego, I'm not controlling that process, the ego has to kind of, trust that it will be carried through. As part of that.

There's a really lovely moment in one of the Indiana Jones films, where he's having to navigate all of these obstacles to get through to find- I think it's the Grail, in order to get back out and save his father. I think it's that anyway, there's this moment. So I'm not always giving you accuracy in my stories, apologies- I can see it, but I can't remember the name of the film. But he's running along, and there's this chasm in front of him. And he has to get across this chasm. But it's too big to jump. And the advice he's been given is to step out and trust, step out into the unknown. And trust that the angel's breath will carry you across- something like that. But there's a crucial thing -that he has to step out into the unknown. And he has to step out into this nothingness without seeing what the solution is to survive.

I don't know if you've seen the film? It's a beautiful moment in this film, have a look at it later, go and have a look. And he realises that all of his heroic kind of solutions of fixing things, and fighting things, is not going to help him in this moment, he has to step out into nothingness and trust. And that's what he does, he steps out. And as he steps out, this bridge emerges underneath his foot, which he couldn't have seen unless he taken that step. It's a gorgeous moment in that film. And that you have to take that leap of faith first. And that's the ultimate leap of faith. And it's not about being naive or ridiculous or over optimistic or heroic. It's about trusting that there are other ways other than the heroic ego, 'I'm going to save everybody, we can save the world', because that is almost another form of denial. It's another way of avoiding the painful feelings.

We need to heal this split between the kind of apocalyptic flight into fantasy of doom and gloom, we're all going to die, you know, it's a bit of a flight, really, 'We're all doomed'? Well, we're probably not all doomed. A lot of us are, but not all, you know. Or the heroic, 'We can save everybody', because it's already too late for a lot of people, and a lot of animals and a lot of other species.

So we have to find a way through the middle of those two ways, but I think, it's a more soulful, trusting, stepping out into the unknown. And that's back to the original question about why is it so hard to think about, because we're facing so many unknowns.. And so we will project our fantasies of doom and gloom and apocalypse into that just to try and control that not knowing, right?

So we'll either project, 'Oh, we can put kind of screens in space that will save us', you know, we can have these ideas, ' Oh, we can invest in nuclear power, we can do this, or we can do that', very rational, that sort of rational, you know, although, one of my particular favourites, and slightly less rational, there is a group that believes that aliens will come and save us will save the planet. No, there is. And you know, there are there are times I have absolute sympathy with that group of people, because I just think they are just on the spectrum with other people who thinks that technology will save us. Its the same belief -that somebody out there will save us, you know, and then you've got the kind of sort of, you know, your other sorts of fantasies that actually we're all gonna die? Well, no, we're not all gonna die.

And we have to kind of navigate those two, and find a way through the middle and hold their tension between this two. I'm rambling, I think I'm just on a roll.

Verity

That's why I wanted you to come on, but - I'd never be so rude as to say, but maybe we have run out of time for this episode. And that's not just because you were rambling because you weren't. Thank you. Thank you for all of that.

Caroline

Does that bring you to a place where you can answer the question you started this with? I know, I just went off on one. But you started with a really, really interesting question, which is ..why is it so hard to think about climate change, so I guess what I'm asking is, has that helped you to find other ways to think about this?

Verity

Yeah, certainly.

Caroline

And I know I haven't given you a practical solution. I'm aware of that.

Verity

Metaphors are a great thing.

Caroline

Well, they are - exactly that. And I'm also saying within that you're not a machine or a robot to be fixed. You're a human being to be understood. And so we have to help you understand this. So I may talk around the subject, use metaphor and stories and art, and poetry and all of these things ,and dreams. But does that work to help you? Has that worked to help you? Do you think?

Verity

I think so. But I'll let you know.

Caroline

Okay.

Verity

Oh, yeah, along the journey.

Caroline

That would be good.

Verity

Yeah, we'll be back.

Caroline

Okay.

Presenter (Verity)

That was Caroline Hickman, Climate Psychologist and Teaching Fellow at the University of Bath. And I'm Verity Sharp. That was the first of our Climate Crisis Conversations, Catastrophe or Transformation, a podcast series hosted by the CPA, the Climate Psychology Alliance, and produced by Parity Audio. There's more information on our show notes and do join us again for our next Climate Crisis Conversation. We're going to be having lots more of them. Until then, take care

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>