

FOUNDATIONAL MODULE

The Emotions of Climate Justice



What's in this module?

Description

This module demonstrates the many emotional responses elicited by climate change and climate justice, and asks students to reflect on their experiences.

Contents

- 4 parts
- 2 videos
- 3 readings
- 3 activities
- 4 project options

Key Resources

- [Feeling climate \(in\)justice](#)
- [Finding Joy in Climate Action](#)
- [Climate Change Isn't the First Existential Threat](#)
- [The Climate Anxiety Discussion Has a Whiteness Problem](#)



Public domain image courtesy of [Insure Our Future](#) on Flickr.

Learning Objectives

01

Identify the causes of climate change emotions

02

Recognize different responses to climate change

03

Understand the unequal psychological impacts of climate change

04

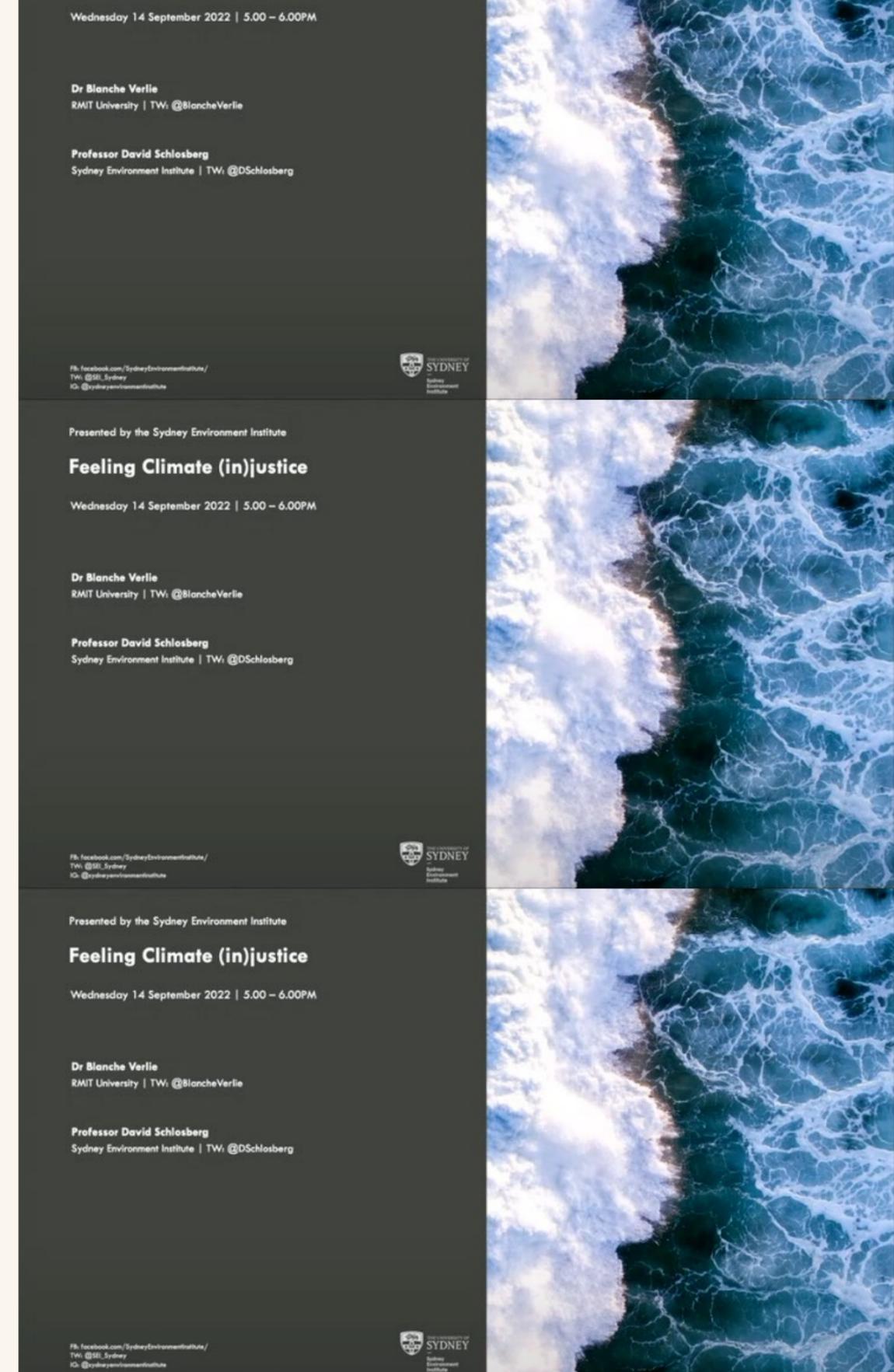
Discuss strategies of systematically addressing climate anxiety

Warm up

Discuss the content of the video assigned before class “Feeling climate (in)justice.”

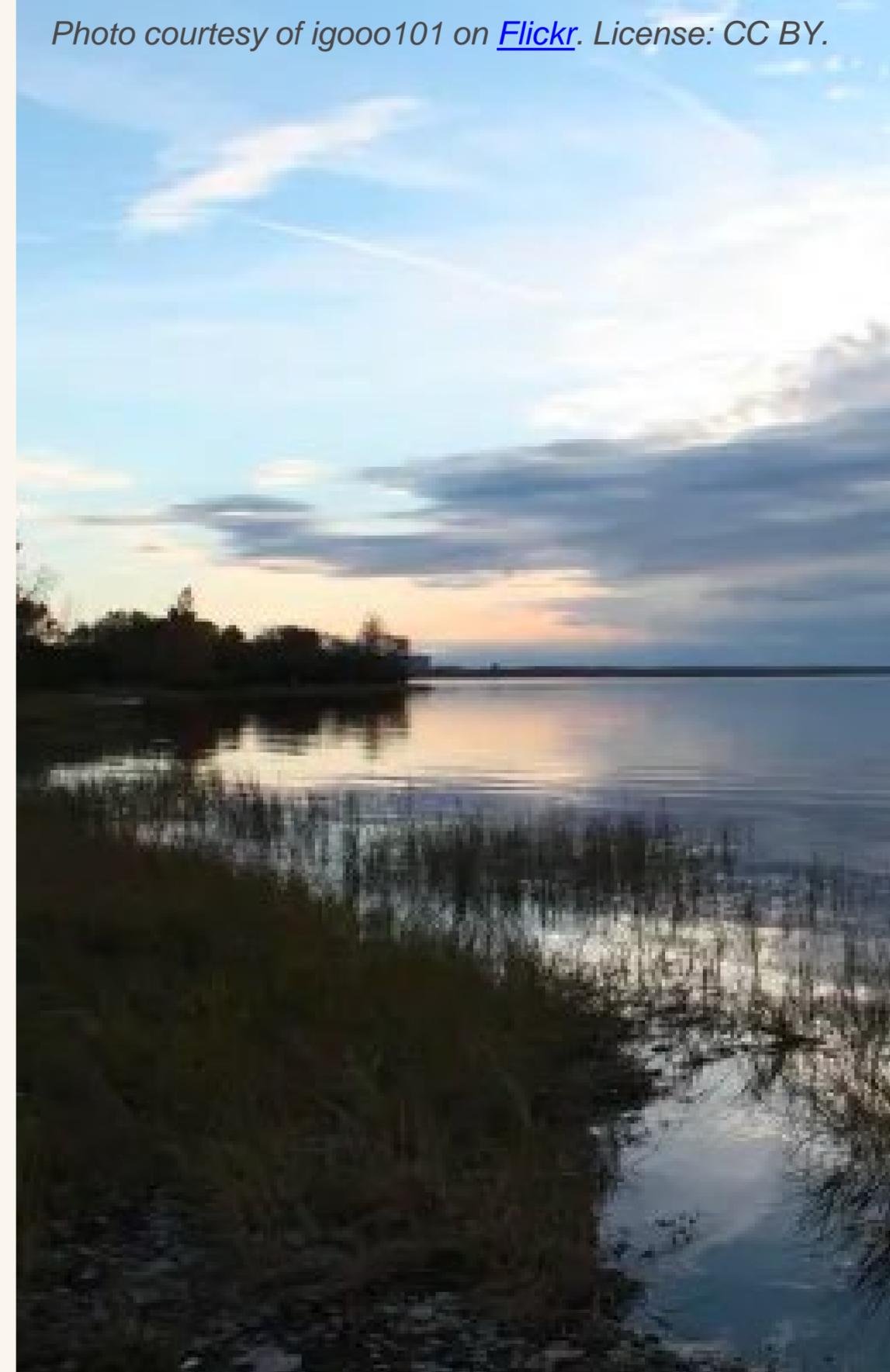
Turn to a partner or small group and discuss using these guiding questions:

- In what ways can the discussion of climate change and climate feelings be changed to help individuals feel more supported?
- Do you agree or disagree with her argument about climate anxiety blaming individuals? What about greenhouse gaslighting?



Introduction

PART 1



Thoughts and Feelings about the Environment

The way we perceive the environment affects the emotional responses we have to topics like climate change, climate justice, and environmental degradation.



The emotions of climate change and justice

Climate Change Cognition

01

Psychological distance

How psychologically near or far an object, event, or idea is perceived as being. Something that is psychologically near is perceived as being more concrete.

02

Past experiences

People's experiences with nature, positive, neutral, or negative, act as a lens through which they take in information and think about the environment.

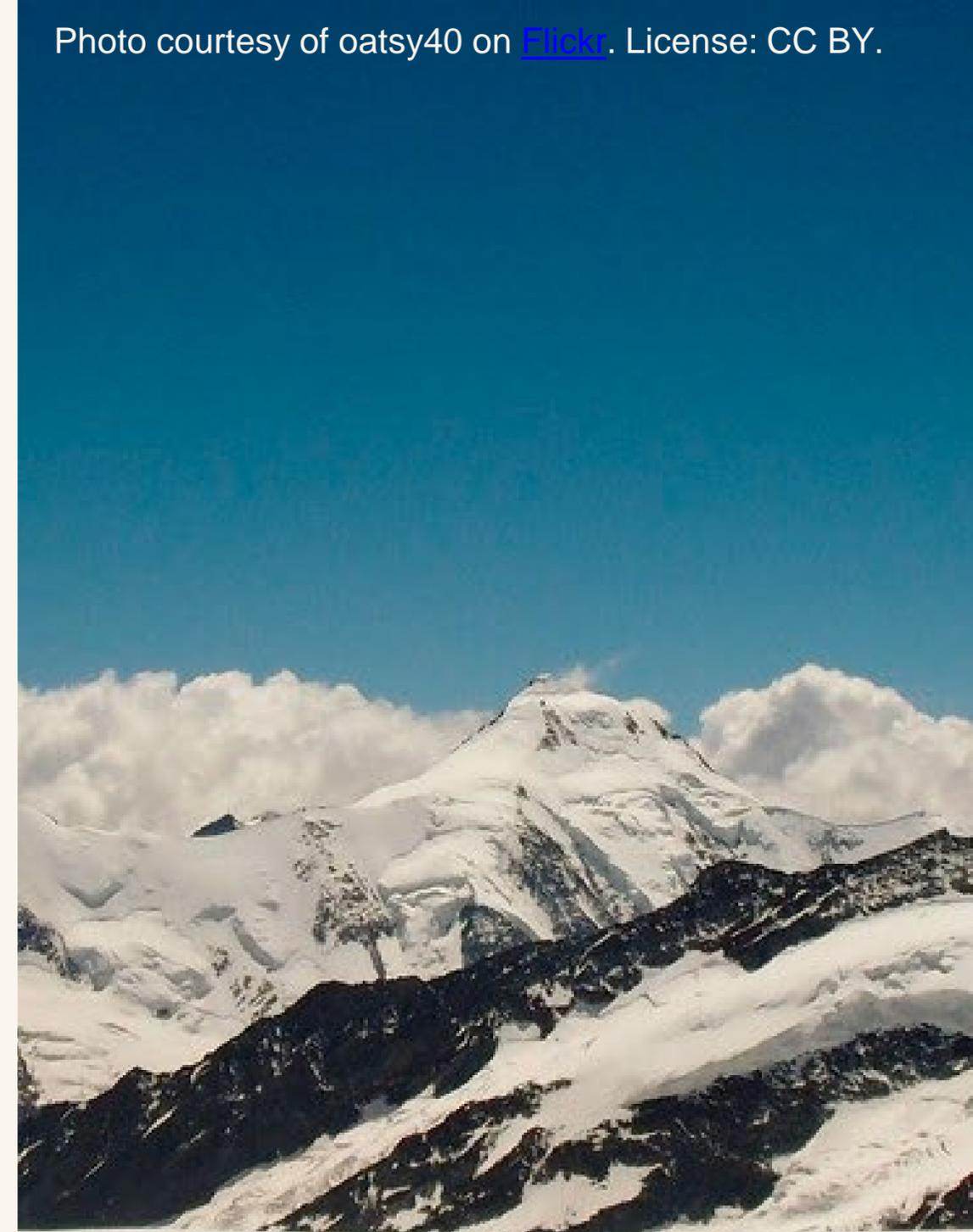
03

Prior knowledge & education

The teaching a person receives about the environment forms the basis of their understanding of the environment.

Feeling Climate Distress

PART 2



Climate Anxiety

Definition

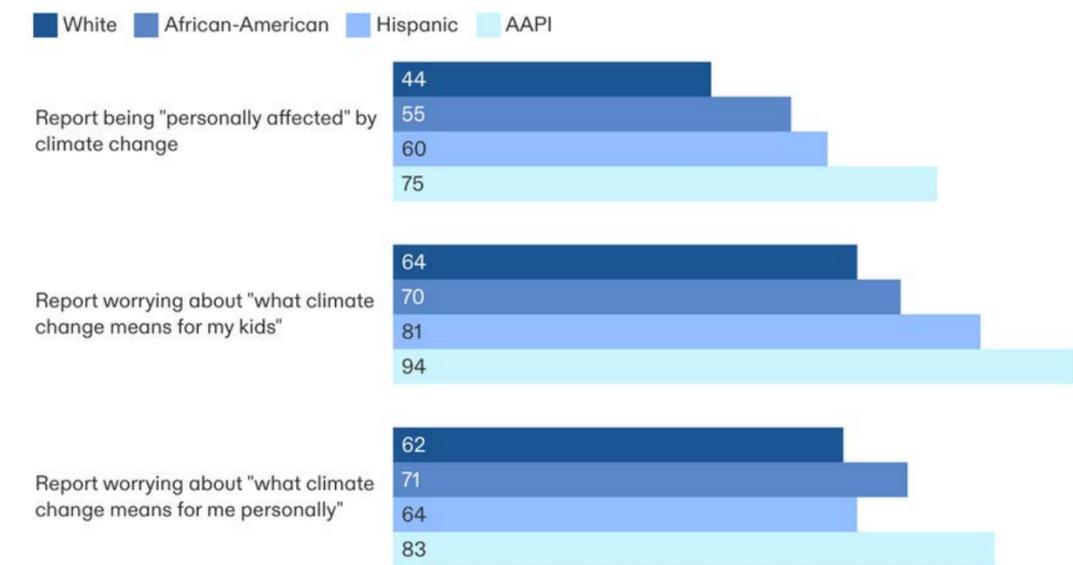
The feeling of dread or helplessness relating to the effects climate change will have on one's self, family, future generations, animals, and plants.

Climate change does not impact all people equally and neither does climate anxiety.

Whiteness often dominates the conversation of climate distress. According to the [Heatmap survey](#), people of color actually experience more climate anxiety than white respondents.

How can the discussion change to include more voices?

Concern about climate change: Breakdown by race



Source: Heatmap Climate Poll



Unequal Effects of Climate Change

Disproportionate impact

The most vulnerable populations who experience the most drastic effects of climate change often had the least hand in causing the problem.

Effects of climate change

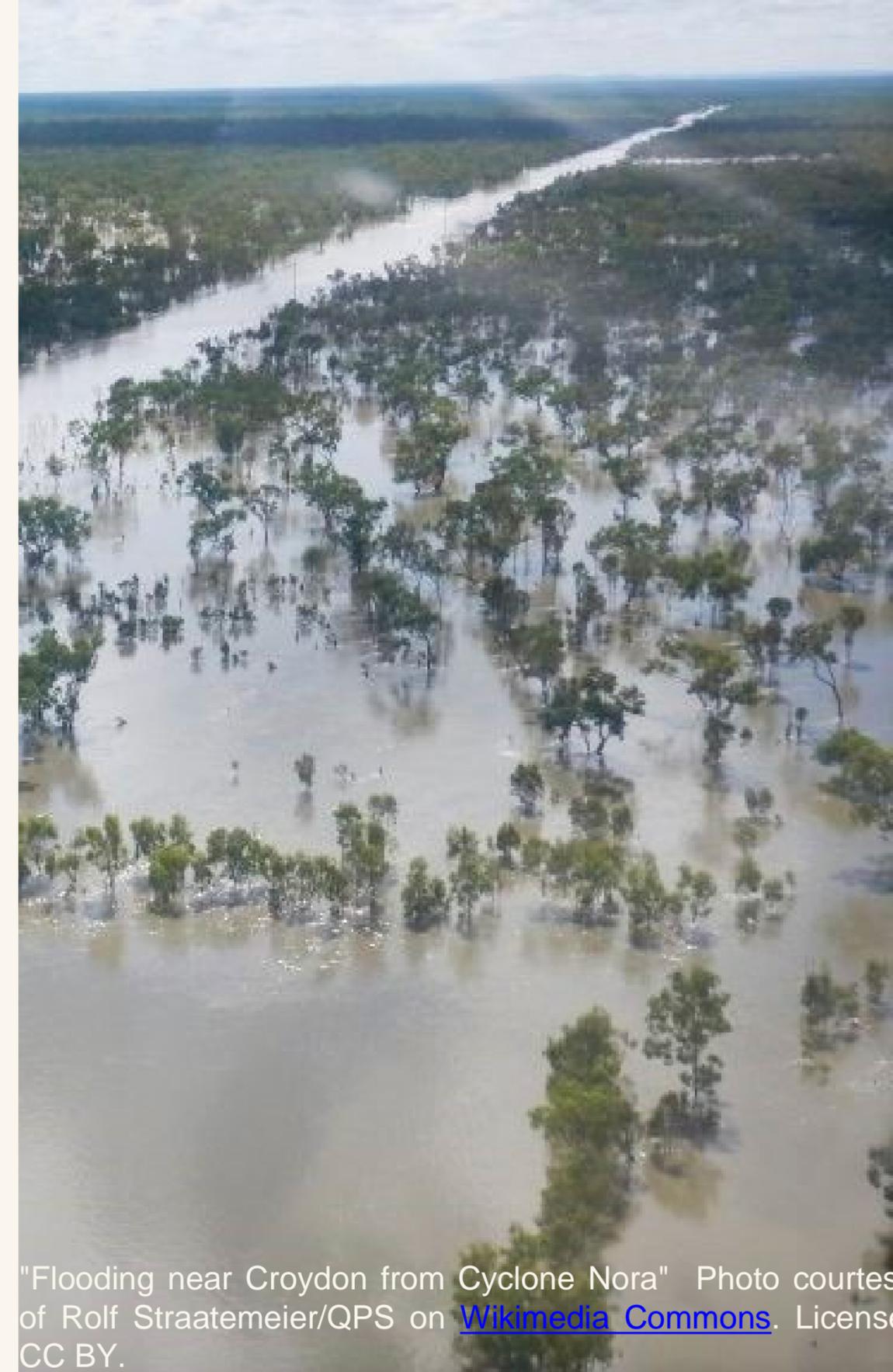
Climate change is causing increased extreme weather events than can temporarily displace people, render their homes uninhabitable, cause economic losses, loss of life, and personal injury.



Threats to Health

Threats or perceived threats to the health or well-being of oneself, family, friends, and future lead to psychological distress

- People living in areas contaminated by pollutants are vulnerable to the physical/mental health consequences that come with exposure.
- Location, mobility, available amenities, housing stability, and structural integrity all important variables that factor into an individuals' level of psychological distress from climate change.
- Many women face a unique challenge with the uncertainty of climate change: the decision to have children or not.



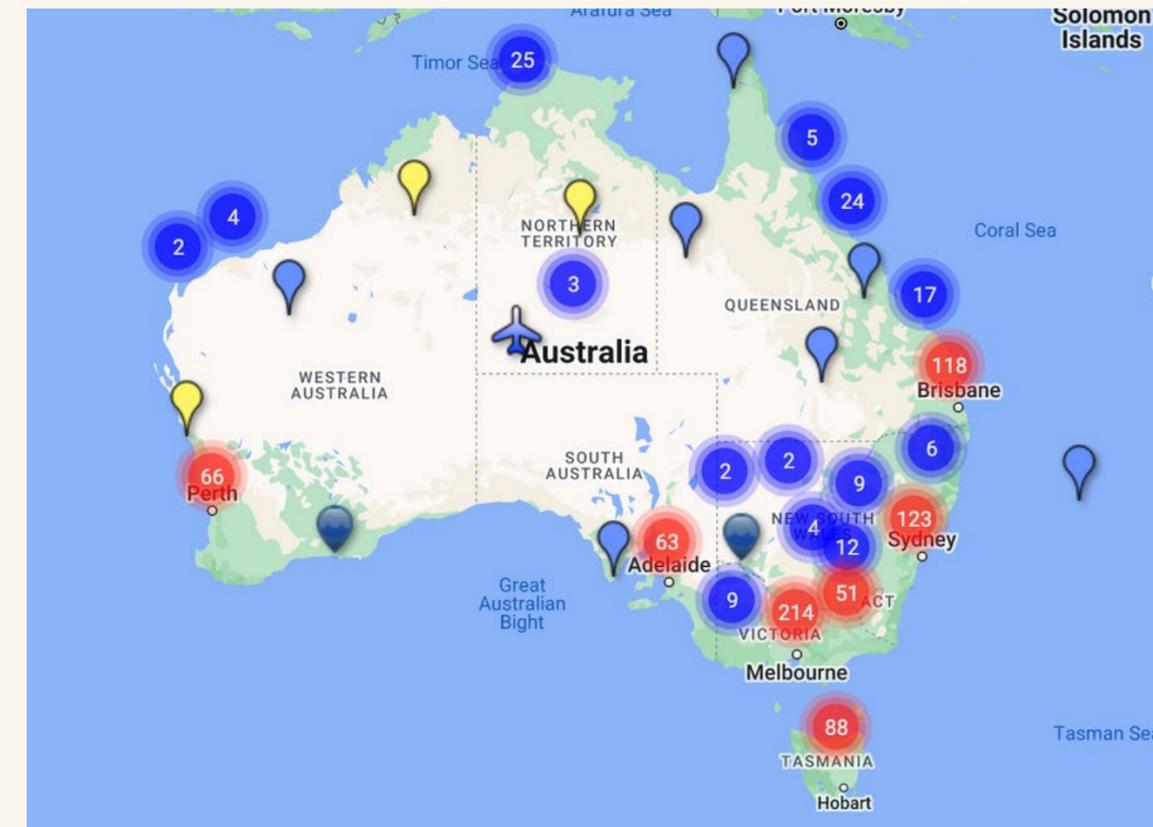
"Flooding near Croydon from Cyclone Nora" Photo courtesy of Rolf Straatemeier/QPS on [Wikimedia Commons](#). License: CC BY.

Exposure to Contaminants

Living in polyfluoroalkyl substance (PFAS) contaminated communities in Australia was associated with greater instances of self-reported psychological distress than in control communities.

Nina Lazarevic

"In contrast with acute environmental disasters, which follow more defined stages from warning and threat through to eventual recovery and rehabilitation, individuals in chronically contaminated areas are caught in a perpetual state of warning and threat"



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Living Conditions

Cultural and personal attachment

People can have cultural and personal attachments to their homes or land. In the Pacific Islands, one's home can be thought of as an extension of one's self, loss of home leads to psychological stress.

Heating and cooling systems

Heating and cooling systems, air circulation, and the ability to withstand extreme weather events are intrinsic to protecting physical and mental health in the face of climate change.

Homelessness and housing instability

For people experiencing homelessness or housing instability, the lack of protection from the elements exacerbates the negative mental health impacts of climate change.



Burdens on Women

Many women are citing climate anxiety, increased potential for complications during pregnancy, and fears for their children's future as reasons why they do not want to have children during this climate crisis.

Factors that influence women's climate anxiety and reluctance to have children

- Pollution
- Extreme heat
- Exposure to wildfire smoke



ACTIVITY #1

CASE STUDIES: WOMEN'S CLIMATE ANXIETY AROUND CHILDBIRTH

Assign the case studies

Divide the class into 3 groups. Then, assign each group one case study:

1. Pollution and fertility
2. Extreme heat and adverse pregnancy outcomes
3. Exposure to wildfire smoke and preterm birth

Read and summarize

Skim the reading for your case study and summarize its findings.

Discuss

Within your group, discuss the contents of the reading and consider these two questions:

1. Do you think this impacts women's decisions to have kids?
2. How could decreasing fertility rates affect a society at large?

Then, share out the main points of your group's discussion with the class.

Addressing Climate Distress

PART 3

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ACTIVITY #2

DISCOVER CLIMATE OPTIMISM

Watch

[How to Find Joy in Climate Action](#)



How to find joy in climate action

2,117,796 plays © | Ayana Elizabeth Johnson | TED2022 • April 2022

Make your own venn diagram of climate action

Identify the actions you are good at, actions that are needed, and actions that bring you joy, and find the center of your venn diagram.

Consider these questions as you make your venn diagram:

- Is it something you are already doing?
- Is it something you could start doing?
- How can this help address climate anxiety?



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Addressing Climate Anxiety at Scale

Addressing climate anxiety at the individual level

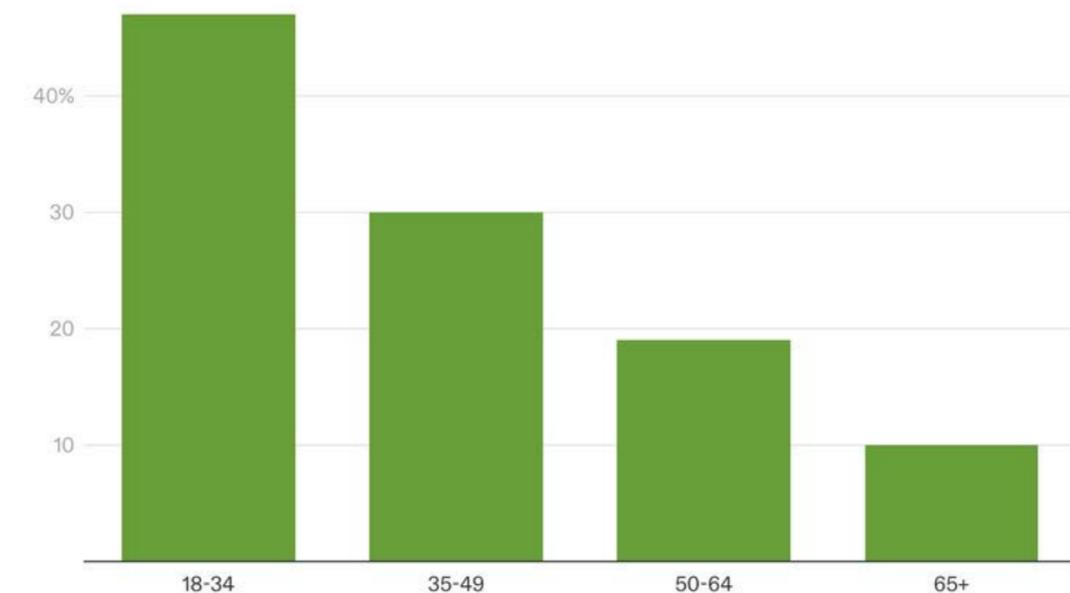
Increasing access to mental health services, legitimizing people's worries and fears, and building networks for people feel climate anxious can address climate anxiety on the individual scale.

Addressing climate anxiety at the systemic level

- We must stop blaming individuals for their experiences of climate distress—these widespread mental health problems merit systems-level changes to the discussion of climate change.
- Climate justice must include actions to prevent the climate change induced threats that disproportionately impact vulnerable populations to promote better mental health.

"Mental health problems," by age

Respondents who said they have been very or somewhat affected by climate change in the form of mental health problems (n=153)



Source: Heatmap Climate Poll



ACTIVITY #3

DISCUSSION OF THE METHODS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE ANXIETY



This image is in the public domain.

Discuss

In pairs or small groups of no more than 4 people, discuss possible methods of addressing and mitigating the impacts of climate anxiety.

Guiding questions

- How can we make access to these strategies more equitable and effective?
- How can climate justice help us confront climate distress/anxiety?
- How can we change the way climate change is talked about?
- How can we include more voices in the climate distress discussion?
- Can you identify more tactics of addressing climate distress?

Beyond the Module

PART 4



Photo courtesy of [Allan Lee](#) on Flickr. License: CC BY..

ACTIVITY #4

SELF-REFLECTION



Self-reflect on what you learned

Think about your own experiences learning about climate change, sustainability, and climate justice.

Guiding questions

- Has the climate change education you received included climate justice?
- How do you think climate justice impacts people's lives?
- How can you include climate justice in your coursework or career?
- How do you feel when you are learning about climate change or experiencing climate change?
- What do you think can help people experiencing climate distress?

Critical Essay

Prompt suggestion

Choose one of the activities in this module and write a short paper in response to the articles.

Consider these questions:

- How does the content of the article relate to what you study?
- What are some local examples of what the article discusses?
- What are the gaps in the article?

Policy Memo

Prompt suggestion

Write a policy memo about modifying climate change messaging to help people suffering from climate distress.

Consider:

- Key points and lessons learned from the resources (videos, articles, etc.) in this module
- What is needed
- What messaging currently exists, if it's effective, and if it needs to be changed
- The scale of change (individual or systemic)

PROJECT OPTION #3

Historical Essay on the Emotions of the Climate Justice Movement

Prompt suggestion

Read *Climate Change Isn't the First Existential Threat** and write a short paper including your thoughts on the article.

What can we learn about building and handling the emotional responses of a movement for environmental protection from America's ongoing fight for civil rights?



*Content warning for disturbing images and references to slavery and the Jim Crow era

Essay on the The White-Centric Discussion of Climate Anxiety

Prompt suggestion

Read *The Climate Anxiety Discussion Has a Whiteness Problem* and write a short paper including your thoughts on the article. Consider these guiding questions:

- How have POC activists and affected individuals been left out of the climate anxiety discussion?
- What do you think can be done to address all types of climate anxiety?
- How can we include more voices in the discussion?



For more resources on climate and environmental justice: **Please explore other modules in the Climate Justice Instructional Toolkit.**



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