

Mental Health and Climate Communication

**Guidance on effective
climate change communication
with children**



Guidance prepared by
the Climate Psychology Alliance
for the **Schools Climate Summit,**
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Report prepared by Caroline Hickman, University of Bath.
Climate Psychology Alliance.

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Contents

1. Overview of climate psychology

The number of children & young people affected

The neurobiology of emotions, i.e. why emotions are crucial to learning and psychological safety, and the role adults play in the regulation of young people's emotions and behaviour

Calm & Alarm and Climate Change

Empathic resonance

2. How do children & young people feel about climate change

Scale and size of these feelings (mild, medium, significant & severe)

Psychological defences against eco-distress or eco-anxiety (splitting, denial, disavowal, mature defences)

3. Additional things to keep in mind when thinking about children & climate change & effective communication:

Children's defences are often different

Eco-anxiety or distress is different

Fairness & Moral Injury

Adults Feelings may need to be prioritised by the child in order to feel safe

Rupture & Repair & Resilience

4. Some creative solutions:

Stop, Breathe, Feel, Think, Act

External action & Internal action

Unfairness & Fairness

Resilience

Hopeful & Hopeless

Stories

Worry Jars

Emotional Icebergs

Emotions Wheel

Inside Out

How do you feel today

Whales

Emotional X Rays

Mindfulness exercise

Stay on your rock

Body, Mind & Feelings

1. Overview of climate psychology

Climate change & the bio-diversity crisis are an unprecedented threat on a scale that has never been seen before in human history, and it is affecting everyone. We have no prior experience of dealing with something on this scale on which to base our solutions and actions, or to give us guidelines on how to cope with the emotional turmoil that accompanies threats of this size. Climate psychologists are researching and building a knowledge base to help people navigate these threats, to contain and reduce stress and trauma, to empower people to take action, and to support people with their fears, grief and anger.

People have different feelings and understanding ranging from very aware & scared; to worried but reassured that solutions can be found, through to numb, disconnected, or even dismissive. It is likely now that everyone on the planet has some knowledge about climate change, and can tell you what they think about it, which means they will also be having feelings about it even if they are not always consciously anxious or scared, they may try not to think about it. Climate change & the bio-diversity crisis is affecting the mental health of everyone, adults and children, in every country in the world, and research tells us that it is most strongly affecting the mental health of children and young people.

The number of children & young people affected in the UK

'I'm scared all the time now, and so are my friends even though sometimes they say they're not, but I can see that they are really. It's the weather that is scary, and you can't not look at that. Who wouldn't be scared when you think about it?' (Adam, aged 14)

- A YouGov poll in 2020 with Friends of the Earth found that 70% of 18-24 year olds were more worried than they had been the previous year.
- Global Action Plan (2020) reported that 1:3 teachers were seeing high levels of climate anxiety in students, and 77% of students interviewed reported that thinking about climate change makes them anxious.
- The Royal College of Psychiatry in Nov 2020 reported that over half (57%) of child and adolescent psychiatrists in England are seeing children and young people distressed about the climate crisis & the environment.
- A United Nations Development Programme & Oxford University survey in 2021 had responses from 1.2 million people in 50 countries, more than 550,000 were under 18. Nearly 70% of under 18's said that climate change is a global emergency.
- A Newsround survey in 2019 asked 2000 children aged 8-16 years old if they think adults do enough to protect the environment, and 53% overall and 61% of 14-16 year olds said no, adults were not doing enough.

70%

of under 18's say that climate change is a global emergency

contd./1. Overview of climate psychology

The neurobiology of emotions: Why emotions are crucial to learning and psychological safety, and the role adults play in the regulation of children's emotions and behaviour

'I was scared when I learnt about climate change last year, it was terrifying and some of my friends wanted to forget about it and just talk about boys again, but I wanted to talk about it because I couldn't stop thinking about it. I felt better when we talked about it in class and could say how we felt.'

(Katy aged 12)

Humans need connection, and our brain cells form connection through our relationships. From this we can attune, our bodies & nervous systems tune into each other. Children need connection with warm, responsive adults for their brains to develop healthily. Learning happens well when the child is emotionally regulated and engaged.

For children the important questions are 'Am I safe?' and 'Do I matter?' If they feel safe and that they matter then their brains are able to develop and function with resilience and flexibility. If they do not feel safe and that they don't matter then healthy growth and functioning are interrupted until they can feel safe.

If adults understand about the effect of CALM & ALARM then talking with children about climate change can be done without causing upset in children. The adult's nervous system will pattern the child's. Both calm and alarm are 'catching', so if the adults stay calm, the child will also be able to stay calm.

CALM builds resilience, allows the child to think clearly (even about difficult things), promotes empathy and a capacity to care for others,

helps the child to develop creativity, emotional flexibility, builds relationship skills and allows the child to make choices about their behaviour.

ALARM triggers the fight/flight/freeze responses, leaves the child with ongoing vulnerability to stress and anxiety and makes it hard for the child to think, or choose behavioural responses or cope with feelings.

Calm & Alarm and Climate Change

Why is all this important when teaching about climate change? First teachers need to feel supported themselves in their schools and communities so they can regulate their own feelings about climate change, then they can regulate the children's feelings. Some children already have a lot of information and anxiety about the state of the planet, and this will cause them to be sensitive sometimes to emotional triggers, they could feel stressed just at the mention of the subject, or maybe have had to shut down emotionally to try to cope with feeling scared or upset. Climate change is not just an academic subject, it wakes up many feelings in everyone, and some of these are painful feelings. This doesn't mean that we should avoid talking about it, we must talk about it, but we need to find ways to do so without triggering feelings that are unbearable for the child, that they feel they can't cope with. Anxiety is often expressed in behaviour in children, so they may not say that they feel anxious, they may just 'act out' and show how they feel. Articulating complex feelings can be difficult at any time, for any of us, even more so if you do not feel it is safe to do so. A relational approach to talking about climate change is therefore vital, we cannot just teach the facts without taking care of the feelings.

contd./1. Overview of climate psychology

Empathic resonance

'The thing about climate change is; it's scary, but when I was told that it was ok to feel scared I felt better, not un-scared, but being told that it was ok to feel scared stopped me from being scared about being scared if you know what I mean?'
(Jazz, aged 13)

Core human needs are; to be seen, to be heard, to make sense & to be understood, then we do not feel alone. When we feel that someone has empathy for us and we feel understood we then can feel that we have the emotional resources to cope, we feel resilient and supported even when talking about scary subjects like climate change, we feel that people care about us, and our feelings become an important and valued part of learning.

How can we show empathic resonance when teaching about climate change? First by using language of emotions, listen for the feelings and needs behind questions and behaviour in children, ask questions to develop a deeper understanding by showing a warm curiosity, wonder about how they are experiencing things, and acknowledge, validate and accept feelings and needs.



2. How do children and young people feel about climate change

'I just feel everything, all at once, scared, angry, frustrated, depressed, guilty – why aren't people doing something about it! Some days I just think 'what's the point' But then other days I want to get out there and tell everyone until they do something.' (Aaron, aged 15)

Anxiety is often the first feeling that we recognise when learning about climate change, and it is an understandable and healthy emotional response. How we respond to external reality is often how we measure our mental health, and the external reality is becoming more frightening as we hear increasingly bad news about the planet. Not having these feelings could be seen as mentally unhealthy in fact. We are living through uncertain and worrying times, so anxiety or eco-anxiety makes perfect sense. But this can be followed by feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, grief, sadness, depression anger, blame, frustration, guilt, shame, despair. We can feel hope and determination and courage, have fantasies that we will be rescued from this bad dream, or apocalyptic fantasies. I like to suggest that what we need is exactly this emotional

bio-diversity; just as we need environmental bio-diversity of clean air, rich soils, plants, trees, fish, horses, birds, cats, giraffes, koala bears and ants, so we also need their emotional equivalent – all these feelings make sense, and we will often cycle through them repeatedly on different days. The important thing is to 'allow' and validate all these feelings, do not disallow any of them. There is nothing worse than feeling depressed and then feeling that you are not allowed to feel depressed, you are likely to end up feeling ashamed or depressed about feeling depressed. It can often be 'the feelings about the feelings' that cause us most unhappiness. What is important is that we do not ideally get 'stuck' for too long in any of these feelings, that we are listened to and validated, that we are told 'it's ok to feel whatever you are feeling'. Ideally we would not want anyone to be overwhelmed by painful feelings so that daily life is made difficult, but neither would we want people to shut down, go numb or be self-critical or critical to others about how they feel.



contd./2. How do children & young people feel about climate change

Scale & size of these feelings

Not everyone will feel in the same way, feelings will range from mild to medium, significant and severe along a spectrum. We can move towards the severe from the mild, but are less likely to be able to move from the severe back to mild. This does not mean that once someone has severe distress that they cannot reduce this or ever be supported to feel better. But reassurance will not be effective in helping someone to feel differently once they have severe distress, here people will need strong empathic understanding and to feel that their feelings are being taken seriously in order to feel better. It is more a matter of learning to live with and tolerate this distress and learning to balance this with some optimism and finding a radical acceptance and meaning in order to regain joy. Other feelings such as courage and determination are most helpful here. In relation to eco-anxiety we could look at this spectrum as follows:

Mild – feelings of upset are transient, they come and go & can respond to reassurance – you feel better when someone shows you optimistic stories for example, and this can lead to a focus on an optimism & hope that others will stop things before they get too bad – such as a belief that scientists or the government will save us. Sometimes to maintain this position (maybe in the face of worsening climate news) someone could appear to be defensive and struggle to hear other people's worries that might be more severe.

Medium – upset more frequently, less transient feelings, they will often feel stronger, stay longer, here people can have doubt in 'others' capacity to take action, there will be a willingness and desire to make some changes in lifestyle, and making these changes will usually work well to reduce anxiety or upset.

Significant – here however we would see someone has minimal defenses against anxiety, they will hear news about fires or floods or biodiversity loss and probably feel overwhelmed and despairing. It is harder to mitigate distress, guilt & shame by taking action. There is very little faith in others (such as governments or others in powerful positions such as big business) taking action, with feelings of betrayal and abandonment. There can be a significant impact on relationships, for example losing friends because they are not as worried as you are.

Severe – At the most distressing end of the spectrum we can see intrusive thoughts so for example it can be hard to focus on anything else because fears about climate change intrude constantly. Often daily functioning can be powerfully affected such as sleep, appetite and ability to hold a conversation or read a book. People can struggle to get any respite or relief. There is often some anticipation of human extinction and collapse of society in some way. There is often no belief in others ability to care, and often the only way for someone to get relief from these feelings is by becoming emotionally 'shut down' or numb. People may be unable to study, go to school, unable to work. People at this point can become suicidal because there is a severe loss of personal security, so their capacity to feel safe in the world is significantly affected. People can catastrophise and feel absolutely hopeless about the future of the planet. There can be a powerful sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. Attempts to help people see any positives in the news or to feel optimism could be met with contempt and anger. If you continue to try to encourage someone to 'feel better' you will likely be rejected strongly.

contd./2. How do children & young people feel about climate change

Psychological defences against eco-distress or eco-anxiety:

Psychologically we defend against things that are unbearable, that make us feel vulnerable, that threaten to overwhelm us and that do not make sense. Defences are our way of protecting ourselves from the anxiety and distress, they develop unconsciously and function out of our awareness, so we don't realise that we are defending against painful feelings. In the short term they serve a purpose of protecting us from anxiety and distress, however in the longer term they blunt and numb and distort our understanding of reality, which then gets in the way of us taking action. Being willing to look at our defences against ecological distress and then face the complex feelings that are being defended against is crucial if we are to find a way through these difficulties psychologically. Reducing our defences would enable us to feel more, which would mean it was more likely that we would feel we needed to take urgent action to address the climate emergency. Some of the main defences:

Splitting – things might be seen as 'all bad' or 'all good' with little tolerance of ability to see both the positive and the negative in the same situation. There is no tolerance of ambiguity or ambivalence. There would probably be a level of certainty even in the face of evidence that there is another side to the story.

Denial – denial that climate change is real, or even happening, or anything like as bad as people claim it is. Here you can see arguments such as the natural cycles of the climate on the planet change over the years, so the current changes are natural and not linked to carbon emissions or human activity in any significant way. Denial prevents people from having to take any meaningful action to mitigate or manage climate change. Because 'it's natural'. Another way to think about this is as 'negation' – saying what something isn't true (when to others it clearly is)

Disavowal – here people would see that climate change was real, and a concern perhaps, but the next minute say that it doesn't matter. *'Oh climate change is scary isn't it, did you see that TV programme last night, I didn't sleep well after that but anyway, I can't wait for my holidays this year, I'm planning to go to xxxx in the summer, then I am saving up to fly to New York to go Christmas shopping, and then I'll need some winter sun of course.'* The ability to think is distorted and bent, so feelings of anxiety about the climate crisis are not felt for long, everything is distorted and confused.

Mature defences – these help us to reduce our distress, but do not distort the reality of the seriousness of the climate crisis. We would be able to face the seriousness of the situation but without overwhelming despair or distress. So, they are helpful.

Acceptance, Altruism, Anticipation, Courage, Emotional self-regulation, Emotional self-sufficiency, Forgiveness, Gratitude, Humility, Humour, Mindfulness, Moderation, Patience, Respect, Short term suppression, Tolerance, Self-talk (kindness and comforting talk with oneself)

3. Additional things to keep in mind when thinking about children and climate change and effective communication:

Children's defences are often different:

Children have not developed defences in the same way as most adults have done – so they often do not have the capacity to rationalise or compartmentalise, split or deny their feelings about climate change.

Eco-anxiety or distress is different: For children whilst they can feel very anxious and upset about environmental destruction, what makes this even more painful, unacceptable and frustrating is the fact that the people with the power to do something about this are failing to act (adults, governments, big business, fossil fuel companies, anyone who has a vote). This can be experienced as a betrayal, abandonment and lack of care for the impact of climate change on children. And so there is a double distress, that towards the planet and then the other towards the failure of others to act to protect children's futures.

Fairness & Moral Injury: Children are often very strongly attuned to 'fairness'. They have often not yet learnt that life can be unfair, or they may have discovered this because of adverse life experiences – but then they often have not accepted this unfairness as 'just how things are' and they are very aware of just how much it hurts when things are unfair. There is a particular hurt call 'moral injury' which is a violation of 'what's right'. For many children climate change and adults perceived (and actual) failure to act to protect children is experienced as a moral injury.

Adults feelings: Children can be aware that many adults feel guilt and shame and want to protect their children from climate change, but they can feel relatively powerless as well.

It is important that children are not left feeling responsible for adult's distress or guilt or grief. Children can feel guilty and feel that they have done something wrong if they become aware that an adult is feeling bad because the children are feeling bad. Children can then try to protect the adult from the bad feelings by minimising or denying their own distress. It is important at times to allow children to see and hear how adults are feeling about climate change, it can create a shared understanding and intergenerational connection and commitment to work together to find solutions. But the adult must make sure that the child does not try to 'fix' or take responsibility for the adults' feelings. When appropriate it can be very helpful for an adult to share their feelings about climate change with children in a contained way that models to children how to feel complicated and often uncomfortable feelings and not fall apart or collapse or use these painful feelings to hurt someone else. We need to 'show' children how to navigate these feelings, they will copy the way that adults they respect and trust manage their own feelings.

Rupture & Repair & Resilience: It is important for adults to remember that we are not perfect and it is ok to get something wrong when talking with children about climate change (rupture in the relationship). What is important is that the adults then 'repair' the relationship, perhaps by admitting they got it wrong, or recognizing that they made a mistake, or that they did not notice how the child was feeling. What is important is that the 'repair' is done. And that this process is invaluable in helping the child to develop the emotional resilience and intelligence they need.

4. Some creative solutions

This is the process I have developed to help children (and adults) develop a holistic relational approach:

Stop – This is scary stuff, pause, try to be responsive and not reactive, wait

Breathe – Connect with your body, where are you feeling in your body, practice breathing exercises, when we are anxious we hold our breath or shallow breathe, panic can affect breathing (and this creates more anxiety), slow down your breathing and count or breathe using a sound track of waves or wind to physically regulate

Feel – Connect with how you feel emotionally, name the feelings, see if you can allow more than one feeling to be present, do not judge any feelings (they all have their place), remember empathy for yourself (be kind)

Think – Now thinking may be more possible because there is more regulation of the body and emotions, now look at the thoughts you are having, are they racing about, scary, repetitive, identify rational thinking, intellectual knowledge, facts, research

Understand – Wisdom is a combination of the rational and emotional minds, here we may see intuition, balance between thinking & feeling, mindfulness (see slide 1)

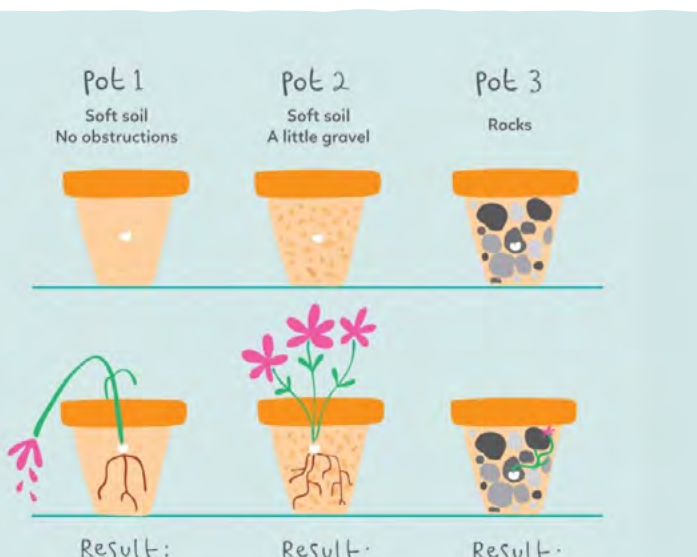
Act – Now take action externally in the world

External action & Internal action – whilst there can be an emphasis on external to take action on climate change, this needs to be balanced with some internal actions – to take care of the emotions as much as the recycling

Unfairness & Fairness - Use children's strong attachment to fairness and dislike of unfairness to help talk with children about the systemic aspects of climate change, link this to social and global injustice. This creates a broader systemic perspective for children which puts things into context and makes things less personal, so this can build resilience and understanding.

Resilience – see plant pot slide 2. We need grit and struggle to grow resilient roots which then create resilient stems and flowers and plants. So try to reframe struggles emotionally as grit that is helping to grow lovely strong resilient roots.

Creative solutions – because climate change can be hard to fully understand or comprehend – using art, theatre, puppets, stories are all powerfully helpful in finding ways to talk about complex things with children.



contd./4. Some creative solutions

Hopeful & Hopeless – encourage children to see both sides of things, in every conversation about climate change ask 'where are the feelings of hopelessness & their good friend hopefulness' always identify BOTH. It is a false binary to split into either one or the other – paradoxically these are both attempts to feel in control again and escape the vulnerability and uncertainty that we can feel in the middle. Introduce the idea of Radical Hope. This sits in the middle and can see both sides.

Stories about climate change are wonderful for creating spaces for dialogue, use stories to help children talk about how they feel about climate change but in a slightly 'sideways' way. I would not encourage children to start by thinking about climate change might affect them directly, I would start with stories so the feelings can be imagined and connected with in a more moderate way at the start. This helps children start to get familiar with the feelings before feeling them fully and personally.

Worry Jars - I have often used 'worry jars' where children can go to the jar and select a pebble at any time if they are having worries (see slide 3)

Emotional Icebergs – slide 4. Really useful for talking with children about the feelings that might be under the surface. One primary feeling may be on the surface, but there will be lots more underneath.

Emotions wheel – slide 5 It can be really difficult to name feelings sometimes, and we often also only know a few feelings which doesn't always give us the subtle understanding of how you are feeling. The feelings wheel can really help with this, you can just suggest that the child just points to the feelings they are having; or use it as the basis for a conversation about feelings in relation to climate change. Using it can expand the emotional literacy for a child.

Pixar – Inside Out – a great film for facilitating a discussion about the importance of all feelings (joy and sadness) and also the scale of the unconscious (under the surface) see slide 6.

How do you feel today icons – again, similar to the emotions wheel – but more fun slide 7.

Whales – I often use animals to talk about the interrelationship between humans and the rest of nature and climate change slide 8. These help us to begin to connect with feelings but in a safe way, less direct and more through love and care for the animals.

Emotional X Rays – instead of an X Ray of the body, we are going to look at an X ray of your feelings about climate change (slide 9 & 10). Give the child an outline and ask them to fill it in, or they can draw an outline

Mindfulness exercise – naming 5 things you see, 4 things you feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell and 1 thing you taste

Stay on your rock – slide 12. An exercise to help visualize what you have to do if feelings are swirling around. Imagine yourself sitting on a rock, all the feelings are in the water, don't jump off your rock but sit on your rock and stay calm and watch the feelings as if they were water & fish

Body, Mind & Feelings – just another way to identify & disidentify from feelings & thoughts

Slide 1

Rational Mind

- Approaches knowledge intellectually
- Thinks logically and uses past experience
- Uses facts and research as well as planning
 - Focused

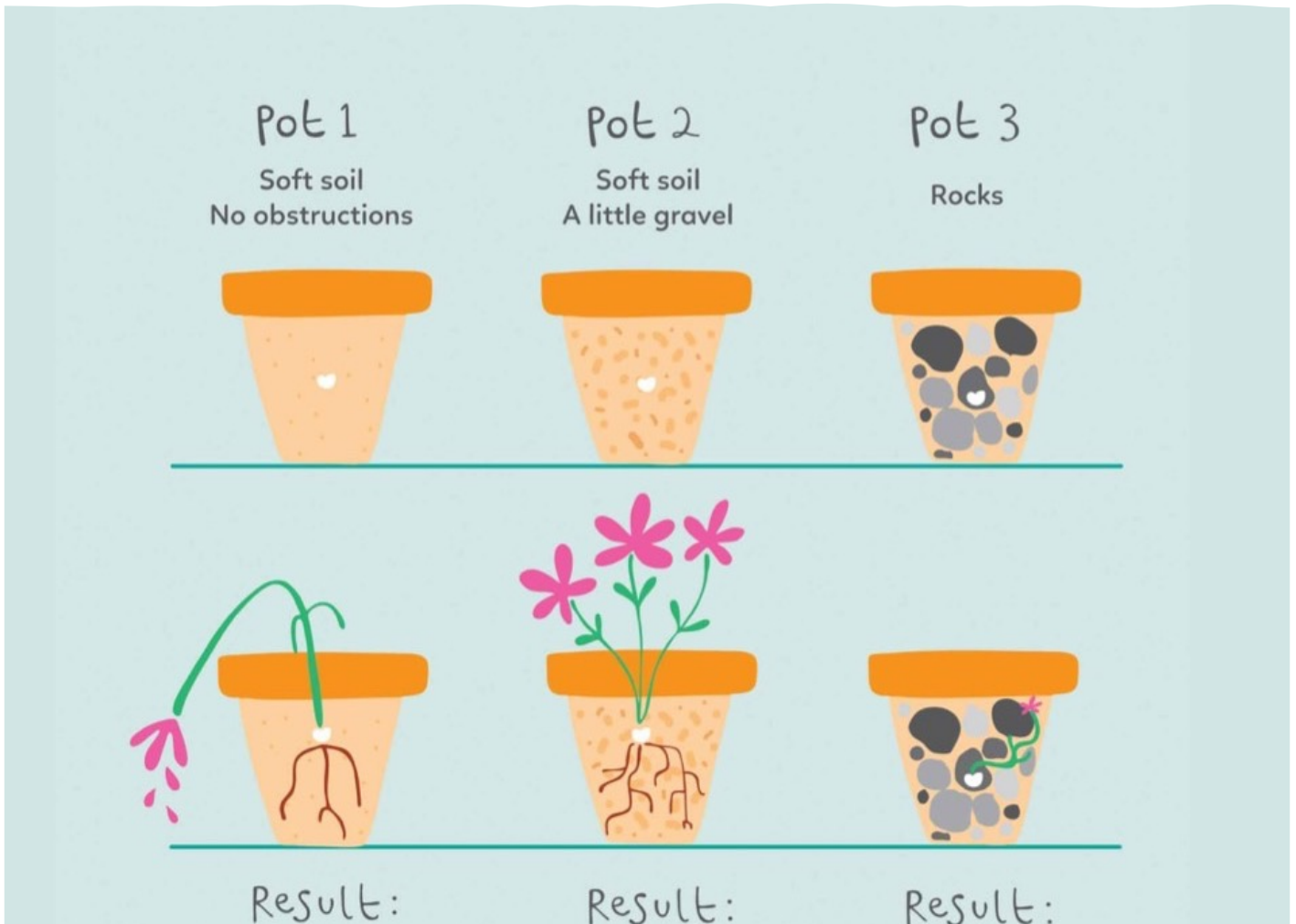
Wise Mind

- Intuitive thinking
- Arrangement and balance between Rational and Emotional Mind
- Living mindfully

Emotional Mind

- Reason and logical thinking difficult
- Uses only emotions to make decisions
 - Reactive
- Tells us how we are really doing
 - Uses core psychological needs

Slide 2



Slide 3

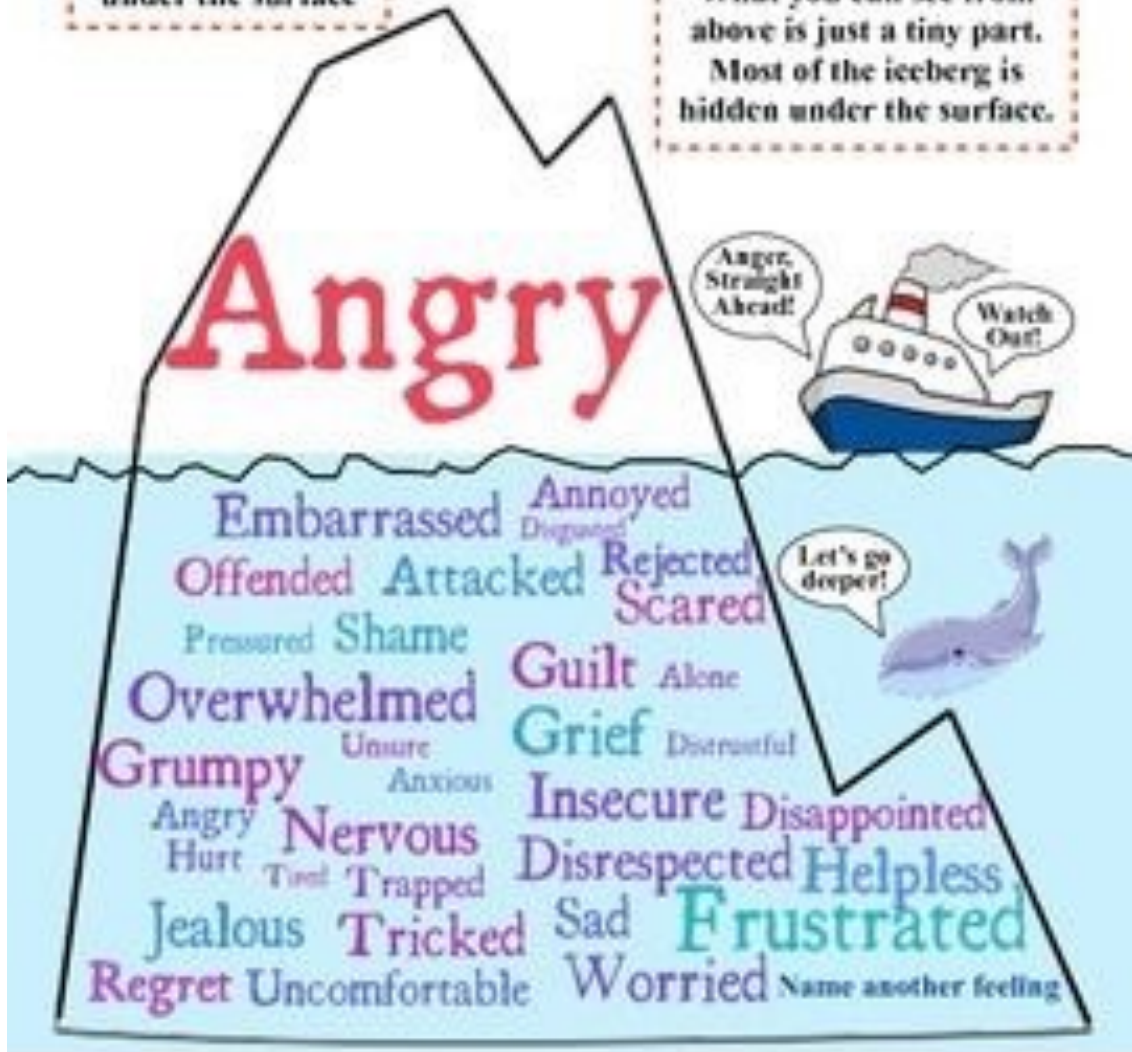
The Worry Jar helps contain and organise worries



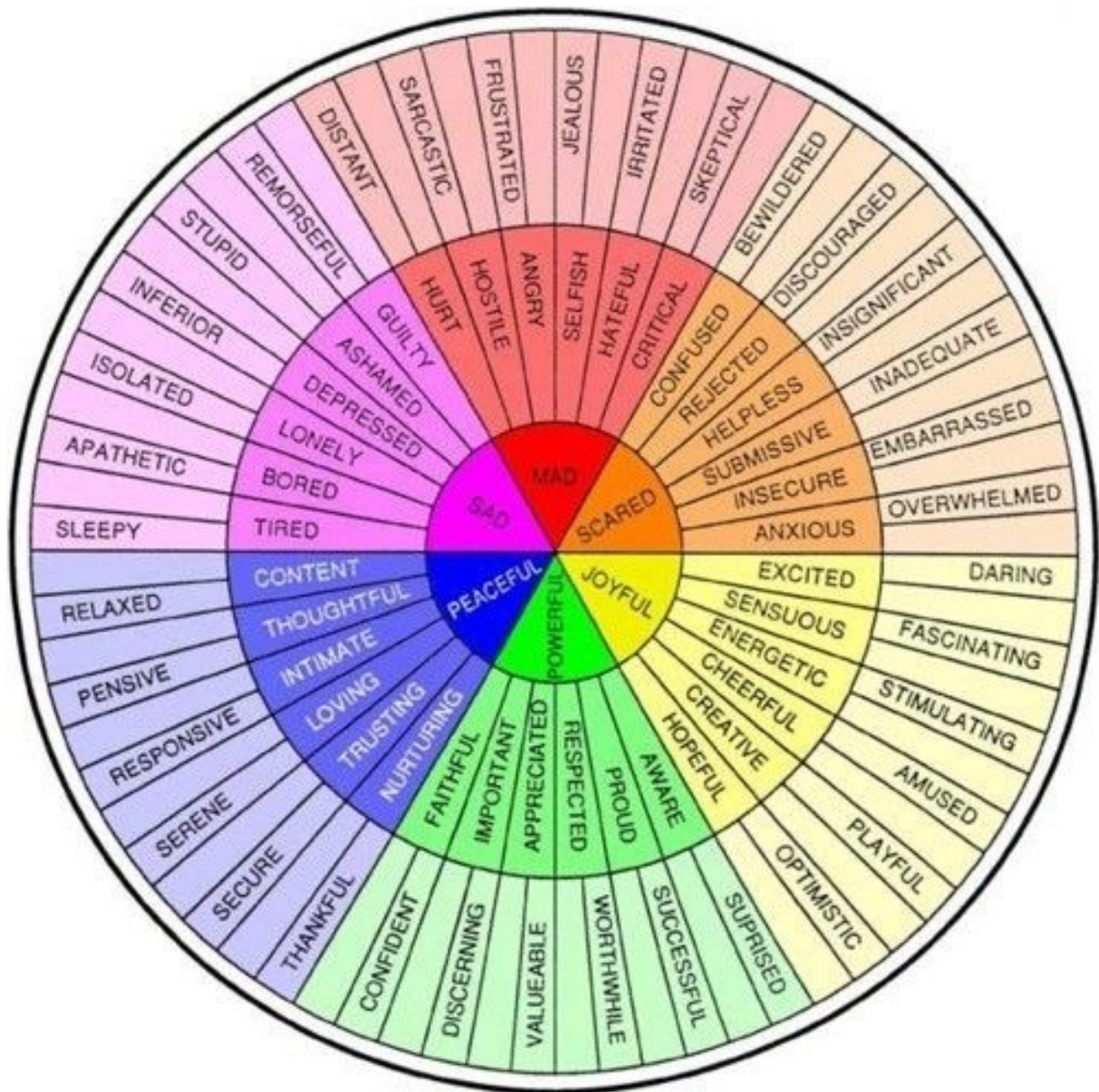
Anger Iceberg

Sometimes when we are angry, there are other emotions under the surface

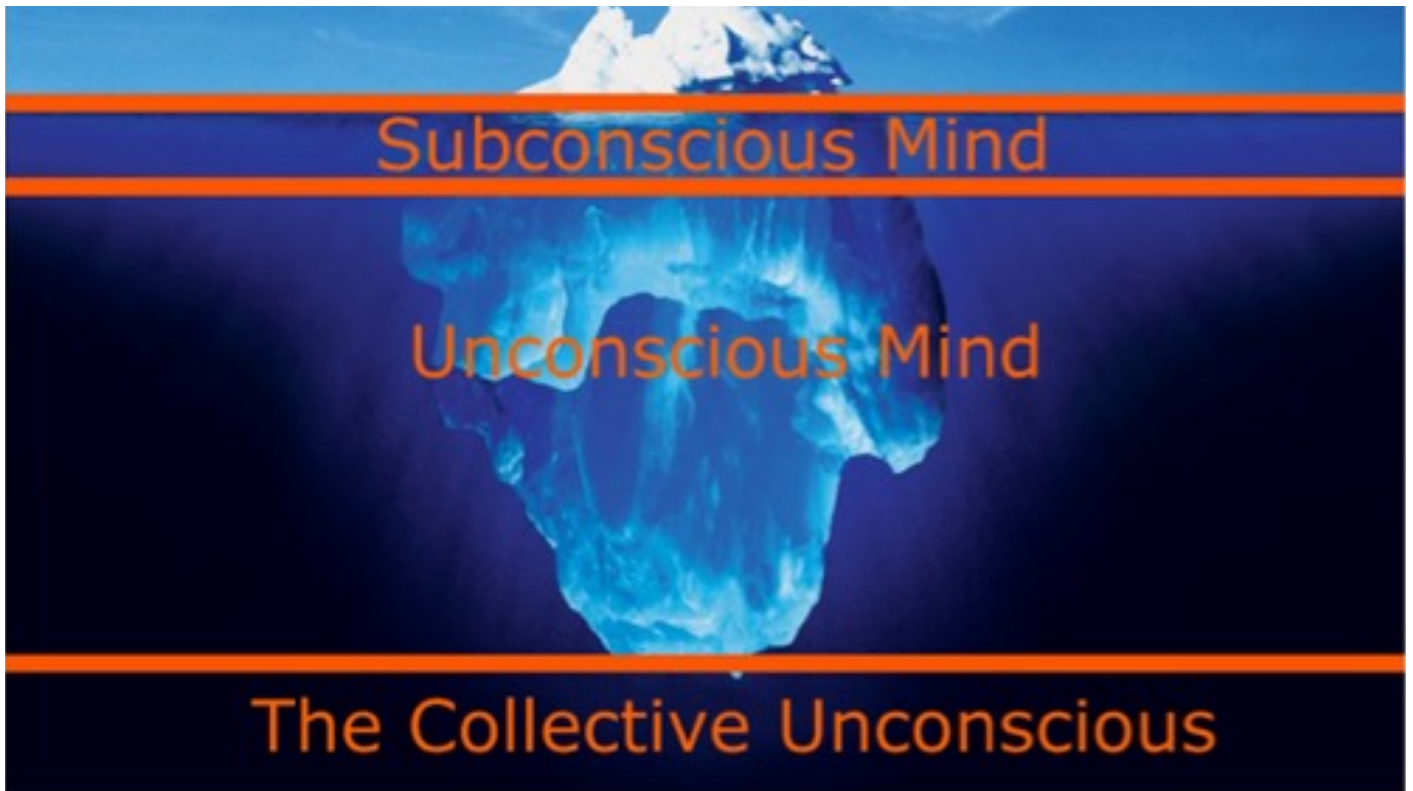
Icebergs are giant floating pieces of ice found in the coldest parts of the ocean. What you can see from above is just a tiny part. Most of the iceberg is hidden under the surface.



Slide 5



Slide 6



How do you feel today?



Whale's Tale: The Importance of Whales



Whales feed in cold water and breed in warm water.



Most whales only have one offspring, making repopulation difficult for the endangered species.



Whales can eat anything from plankton to other types of whales depending on the species.



Whales carry their offspring between 9-15 months and nurse them for about a year.

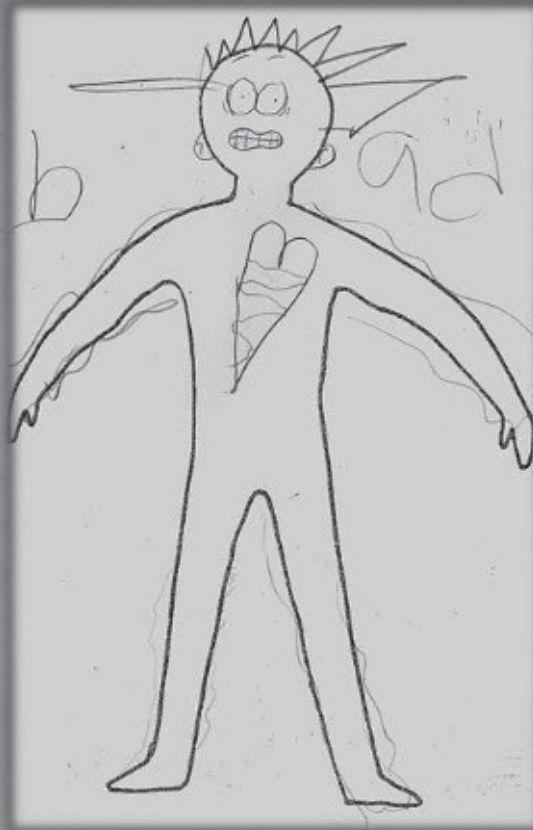


It is estimated that whales pull 400,000 tonnes of carbon from the air annually.



Through their diet, whales help to keep the ocean's ecosystem in balance.

Slide 9



Emotional X-Ray: Scared

Slide 10



Emotional X-Ray: Helpless

Slide 11

*For use during a panic attack,
when you need to stay calm,
or anytime you feel "disconnected" from your body.*

Look around you. Identify + name:

5 things you **see**

4 things you **feel**

3 things you **hear**

2 things you **smell**

1 thing you **taste**

Slide 12



Slide 13

Remember
body, mind,
feelings

Stay on
your rock

**I have a body, but I
am not my body**

**I have a mind (thoughts)
but I am not my thoughts**

**I have feelings, but I
am not my feelings**