

Coping with the climate change conundrum: **Addressing emotions**

Summary

This activity is meant for teachers to help students identify their emotions related to climate change, as well as provide some coping strategies. This document was created by Ducks Unlimited Canada in consultation with Inês Lopes, PhD, psychologist and education consultant.

Required Reading

For this activity you need *The Climate Change Conundrum* cartoon. Make sure your students have read the cartoon and have it available.

Educational Objectives

- ⊕ Learn to identify someone else's emotions (in the cartoon)
- ⊕ Equip students with knowledge and understanding of their emotions
- ⊕ Learn to recognize their own emotions and coping strategies when learning about climate change
- ⊕ Encourage students to take action
- ⊕ Encourage balance between inaction and overdoing it
- ⊕ Give students perspective on their actions and how these fit within broader social responsibilities

Why is it important for young people to address their emotions?

Today's youth receive a lot of information on climate change. When they connect how climate change impacts their lives now and how it will impact their future, it can be overwhelming. That's why it's important not only to educate students about climate change, but to also help them recognize the different emotions they might be experiencing and their coping strategies. This will better equip them to identify their emotions, get reassurance that it is normal to feel this way, and most importantly, that they are not alone in these feelings. With this reassurance, learning more about climate change and taking action becomes possible, and youth become more capable at working through negative emotions.



STEP 1: IDENTIFYING THEIR OWN EMOTIONS

Ask your students to identify their own emotions when learning about climate change.

STEP 2: IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS IN THE CARTOON

Ask your students to identify the main emotions in each of the cartoon panels. Below are a few examples of possible answers:

| | | |
|---------------|--|--|
| Page 1 | Panel 2 (oceans rising) | Main emotions: anxiety/ecoanxiety ¹ /fear/panic |
| | Panel 3 (I put in effort to bike) | Main emotions: discouragement – also frustration, loneliness or stress of being “in the minority” (“only one trying” feeling) |
| | Panel 4 (Did you read the news?) | Main emotions: pessimism, fatalism, anxiety/ecoanxiety – also anger, frustration |
| | Panels 5/6 (We could always.../ Or we could...) | Main emotions/thoughts: overconfidence in solutions to come, denial (of other more realistic solutions) |
| | Panels 7/8 (image/All of this is too much...) | Main emotions: powerless, helplessness, confusion, anxiety/ecoanxiety, feeling overwhelmed |
| | Panels 9/10/11 (Are you OK/I know it can seem like a lot.../Time to make a change) | Main emotion (for club members): empathy Main emotions (for main character): empowerment, relief, optimism |
| Page 2 | Drawings 1/2/3 (transportation, waste, energy + conserve wetlands + local students) | Main emotions: sense of purpose, self-efficacy ² , empowerment, pride, accomplishment |

1 **Ecoanxiety** is a chronic fear of environmental doom. Clayton, S., Manning, C. M., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. (2017). Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, and ecoAmerica.

2 **Self-efficacy** is the belief we have in our own abilities, specifically our ability to meet the challenges ahead of us and complete a task successfully (Akhtar, 2008)



STEP 3: VALIDATING THEIR POSSIBLE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

1 Ask: Is it normal to feel this way?

- + Is it normal to feel angry, anxious, sad or discouraged when you hear about climate change?
- + More and more teens are taking a stand for the planet. There's of course Greta Thunberg and the huge climate movement she has triggered, like Fridays for Future. Do you think her emotion of frustration is valid? Do you think her call for action was necessary?
- + In your surroundings, do people think your feelings are normal? Do you feel understood? Do some people dismiss your feelings or minimize them?

2 Validate their emotions.

Take a moment to state that these emotions are common and normal. You may say something like “Being angry when hearing the news, when seeing some people act in ways that are not eco-friendly, when thinking of the legacy of past generations and that’s all normal... but is it productive to be angry? Who are you hurting when you are angry? How can you step out of that angry feeling? What are your coping strategies (e.g. joining a green club, starting a wetland awareness project, meditating, talking to like-minded people, going for a walk in the woods, etc.)?”

For some students, stress about climate change might have been present for a while. For others, maybe climate change is a new topic. They might not have heard much about it, learned about it or talked about it at home.

If their emotions cause too much panic, they may wish to seek professional help. Not because it is not normal to feel this way, but because they might want to find ways to better cope with them.

STEP 4: ADDRESSING ABSENCE OF EMOTIONS OR DENIAL

For some, there might not be any emotions. They might not have thought about this issue before, they might be avoiding thinking about it (too scary) – and it is also possible that they are in denial.

It is a delicate issue to address if, for instance, they or their parents are climate change deniers. It is true that climate change is a very complex phenomenon and many scientific uncertainties related to it still exist. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the vast majority of scientists now agree that climate change is happening and that it is mainly caused by humans. On the positive side, it means that many of the solutions are also in human hands. Denial as a coping strategy will also be addressed when presenting the Coping Strategies Model in the next section.



STEP 5: PRESENTING THE COPING STRATEGIES MODEL

1 Ask: Even if we are legitimately sad, frustrated, anxious, discouraged or feeling any other emotion, what's the best thing to do? And what about if we're unsure or in denial about climate change?

Despite our legitimate feelings, one of the best antidotes is taking action for what can be controlled.

2 Present the Coping Strategies Model (Refer to Appendix A).

Different people have different ways of reacting to a situation. When thinking about climate change, people may typically adopt one of these four categories of coping strategies. We start with a central question to ask ourselves: Do I have control over this situation (any given situation)? Depending on the answer, you may fall into one of four categories (read each category out loud with your students):

- + (In green) Half of the categories are high in self-efficacy, more helpful, and lead to more positive results and feelings.
- + (In red) The other half are lower in self-efficacy and less helpful, and lead to more negative feelings and results.

3 Ask:

- + **What are your best options? (Actions and Acceptance)**
- + **Is it possible to overdo it?**
- + **Should we find moments to take care of ourselves?**
- + **Is doing nothing the best strategy?**

It is true that climate change is a big and complex problem to tackle. It seems like any little action is so minor when we think about all that's needed to minimize its impacts. But it's important to find balance between not doing anything and overdoing it. Youth must find moments for play, relaxation and self-care. Some overdo it and then "burn out," which isn't neither good for them nor the planet in the long run. One must also seek "sustainable development" for themselves. Not addressing the issue by denying it or avoiding it isn't recommended either, but some teens are not there yet in the process.

STEP 6: ADDRESSING THEIR OWN COPING STRATEGIES

1 Ask: Now, let's talk about you... (Refer to Appendix B).

- + Using the Coping Strategies Model presented, can you identify your own coping strategies?
- + Are they helpful?

2 Help them identify options in their two 'A's.

Have them write their answers in Appendix B.

- + **Actions:** Can you list concrete actions you could take? (e.g. responsible consuming, transportation, starting a project, learning how to do compost at home)
- + **Acceptance:** What are your self-care/taking a break/relaxation/acceptance/letting-go methods (e.g. yoga, meditation, a walk in the woods, listening to music, painting, guided relaxation, physical activity, a hobby)?



STEP 7: SUMMARIZING THEIR TWO BEST OPTIONS FOR COPING STRATEGIES

1 Summarize their two best options – the two 'A's (the green zone):

- + If you **can control** any given situation: **ACTION**. Take Action, create change.
- + If you **can't control** a situation (or the whole situation; or if you've done enough – there's only 24 hours in a day!): **ACCEPTANCE**. If you cannot change something, if you can only change something to an extent, or if you've done enough for the day, then **acceptance** and **letting go** are your best bets. Acceptance does not mean you accept a situation ("It's OK to pollute") but rather that you accept that you've done as much as you could for now ("I accept that I've done enough today and need to take a break, too.").

In this way, you're not denying the situation, but you're not obsessing or overdoing it either (the red zone).

STEP 8: SUMMARIZING THE LEARNING POINTS

1 Summarize the main learning points:

- + There are many different emotions youth can go through when learning about climate change.
- + These are valid emotions; it is normal to feel like that (sad, frustrated, anxious, etc.).
- + Nevertheless, it is also important not to get paralyzed by those emotions and instead take action, within one's limits. It is better to focus on what they can do rather than what they think they can't (like in the "mountain is too big").
- + It is important to remember oneself and take moments of self-care (not exhausting oneself or feeling guilty for not doing enough).
- + Some people are climate change deniers. It is sometimes used as a coping strategy. It is important not to "force the idea" on teens when they are not ready for it. However, stating the facts is important. Mention that the vast majority of scientists say it is already happening and that humans can mitigate climate change if they adopt certain behaviours.
- + Your two helpful coping strategies (the two 'A's): **1 action** or **2 acceptance and letting go** (of what one cannot change or the extent to which they can get involved realistically). It's important to mention that acceptance doesn't mean accepting a situation but rather accepting that we've done enough or that one person alone cannot alone solve everything.
- + It helps to see the big picture of responsibility. Individual actions are very important, but teens must not feel the weight is all on their shoulders. It is important to have changes at the social and political levels as well.



APPENDIX A: COPING STRATEGIES MODEL

Question: Do I have control over this situation (any given situation)?

| | Yes | No (or if you've done enough) |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Efficiency + (helpful) | Actions Changing a situation Developing skills Seeking advice to solve problems | Acceptance (doesn't mean accepting the situation, i.e. climate change – it means accepting you've done enough or that you alone cannot solve everything) Letting go Taking a break Self-care |
| Efficiency - (not helpful) | Denial (It's not happening) Avoidance (Not paying attention to it, by ignoring it or because it's too painful) Procrastination (We'll find the solutions later) Deresponsibilization (it's not up to me to make a change/others will do it/environmentalists are on the case) Giving up (It's too much, let's not even try) Helplessness (I feel there's nothing I can do/I can do too little) | Panic Rumination "Over-trying" (burning out) |

Reference: Adapted from Lucie Côté's integrated model (2013). Améliorer ses stratégies de coping pour affronter le stress au travail in Psychologie Québec. Vol 30, No 5, p. 41-44.



APPENDIX B: MY COPING STRATEGIES

Question: Do I have control over this situation (any given situation)?

| | Yes | No (or if you've done enough) |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Efficiency + (helpful) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actions Changing a situation Developing skills Seeking advice to solve problems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acceptance Letting go Taking a break Self-care |
| Efficiency - (not helpful) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Denial Avoidance Procrastination Deresponsibilization Giving up Helplessness Inaction Passivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panic Rumination "Over-trying" (burning out) |

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