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Being a therapist in a time of climate breakdown

edited by Judith Anderson, Tree Staunton, Jenny O’Gorman and Caroline Hickman,
Oxon, Routledge. Taylor and Francis Group, 2024, 282 pp., £24.29 (paperback), ISBN
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BOOK REVIEW

Being a therapist in a time of climate breakdown, edited by Judith Anderson, Tree Staunton, Jenny O’Gorman and Caroline Hickman, Oxon, Routledge. Taylor and Francis Group, 2024, 282 pp., £24.29. (paperback), ISBN 978-1-032-56560-6

This new anthology, *Being a Therapist in a Time of Climate Breakdown* (2024), has a broad relevance for practitioners of psychotherapy, including and particularly those fostering the primacy of embodied practices. The book offers a contribution to critical psychotherapy discourses about climate breakdown, bringing us into the realm of material bodies of all kin(ds), through which flow the relational, intra-active subtleties of how we affect and are affected by the world. The content of this book ranges from intellectual discourse, empirical research, paradigmatic positionality, applications in practice and lived experience. Individual *Voices* of lived experience interrupt 22 chapters and the contributions are framed within an overall structure that comprises five sections. Section one, *The Trouble We’re In*, sets the scene with a compelling argument for the centrality of climate justice in the work of therapists. As the reader, you are subsequently led through different sections that address systemic understandings, the process of becoming a climate aware therapist, manifestations of the ecological self and concluding with the final section entitled *Community and Social Approaches*. The supporting literature throughout the book is broad, up to date and relevant.

This important contribution to psychotherapeutic discourse troubles individualistic Western notions about subjectivity (and meritocratic, Thatcherite ideas that only individuals, rather than society, exist) and mental health interventions, bringing the issues of climate breakdown to the centre of ideas about subjectivity and emotional wellbeing. As Jenny O’Gorman argues in Chapter 3 (pp. 42–52), holding climate breakdown as a context for our work is an ethical duty of care that enables us to move beyond the intrapsychic towards the psychosocial. This theme is echoed in different ways throughout the book, up to and until the final chapter, when Chris Robertson (pp. 257–256) reminds us that this climate crisis is in us and also with us, rather than something taking place outside the consulting room.

Climate breakdown is not an easy issue to think about. The science is compelling and the reality is confronting, in the enormity of its implications and in the small, everyday manifestations of that science in our lived experience. As I write this, I glance at a tattered Guardian newspaper cutting from 2007 that has fallen out of a book, in which Mark Cocker describes a

tortoiseshell butterfly lying lifeless on the doorstep, having emerged from hibernation in an unusually warm February, as a tiny, yet powerful reminder of the catastrophic impact of global warming (Cocker, 2007).

Overall, the anthology *Being a Therapist in a Time of Climate Breakdown* challenges us to think about our responsiveness to mental health within the accelerating phenomena of climate breakdown. Steffi Bednarek (Chapter 4, pp. 59–69) critiques normative notions of mental health located in Western psychotherapeutic paradigms that have emerged through dominant values of capitalist, patriarchal, colonial societies. Contextualising climate breakdown, in combination with theories of socio-political justice and identity politics, can bring a critical eye to structural inequalities, nudging us into the dynamic interface that connects individual inner worlds with wider socio-economic, political and environmental landscapes. In Chapter 9 (pp. 126–135), Trudi Macagnino argues for therapy to be ‘... re-visited as a collective eco-psycho-social endeavour rather than a purely individualistic one ...’ (126) and Nick Totton (Chapter 15, pp. 191–196) identifies the urgency to create new paradigms of therapy that foster ecological consciousness and are responsive to the reality of climate breakdown.

A variety of applications to practice include, for example, body psychotherapy (Tree Staunton, pp. 167–177), wild therapy (Nick Totton, pp. 191–196) and climate cafés (Gillian Broad, pp. 229–236). In the final chapter, (pp. 257–265) Chris Robertson describes *Through the Door*, an experiential workshop confronting practitioners with an invitation to enter difficult climate conversations. This occurs within liminal spaces created to enable participants to straddle multiple realities of becoming climate aware in Western capitalist society. In Chapter 17 (pp. 205–214) Johnstone and Jones offer a pragmatic structured praxis with *The Spiral of The Work That Reconnects*, an approach that leads participants through four phases, from *gratitude*, to *honouring our pain for the world*, to *seeing with new eyes* and finally to *going forth*. I used the ideas in this chapter for a workshop for trainee therapists and found that it served as an effective container for moving through feelings of hopelessness and grief, towards opening a door to the activation of hope. Hope, as a theme, appears in different guises. Macagnino (pp. 126–135) notices a productive kind of hope in her research participants that is undefended and creative, and manifests through an emergent quality that can lead to change. Will Baxter (Voice 11, pp. 214–215) shares a symbol of hope in the beautiful photograph of a barn owl, hunting silently in the night with wings outstretched.

Language, as a representation of experience, can be problematic, creating unhelpful binaries that differentiate this from that, leaning towards the rational and limiting our thinking about the world (Frizell, 2023). This anthology helpfully presents a number of approaches to therapy alternative to language, including embodied and creative perspectives. For example, Tree Staunton’s chapter ‘*Coming to Our Senses: Turning Towards the Body*’ (pp. 167–177) opens a window into the potential of accessing a different kind of embodied wisdom, shifting us from ‘*ego-centricity to-centricity*’

(page 176). Similarly, in Chapter 14 (pp. 183–190) Kelvin Hall discusses ‘zones of encounter’ (183), a concept in which insights emerge through kin-aesthetic meetings between the client and the living world around them, that enhances the capacity to be present. In Chapter 6, Fredenburgh and Milner (pp. 84–93) argue for systemic perspectives that challenge a socio-cultural propensity for productivity that marginalises the nuanced wisdom of material bodies of all kinds. In terms of creativity, Celia Turley and Jo McAndrews (Chapter 7, pp. 94–106) bring a refreshingly radical account of collaborative theatre-making that explores motherhood, care and the climate crisis, emphasising the importance of the creative process and performance making in community building. Caroline Hickman (pp. 112–123) integrates a range of creative approaches in her work with children and young people as they navigate the climate crisis in therapy through stories, dreams and artwork, the findings highlighting the prevalence of eco-anxiety amongst children and young people. Young people and creative processes are also represented in the *voices* that intersperse the chapters. For example, Elouise Mayal (Voice 8, pp. 144–146) contributes a photograph of a baby owl that sits in her hands, a striking metaphor for the necessity to build cultures of care that nurture the young in the face of climate breakdown.

As broad reaching as this book is, the creative arts therapies are largely absent. Arts psychotherapies, as alternative tributaries, provide vital portals to other ways of making sense of the world and as such their inclusion would have brought added further layers of depth in this call to action in the face of climate breakdown and as practitioners and clients ‘approach the world with a sense of wonder’ (Bednarek, pp. 68). Similarly, the inclusion of perspectives from the Global South might have provided practice-based challenges to Western psychotherapeutic paradigms.

The book successfully brings forward 12 *Voices* that serve as welcome interruptions to the theoretical, research and practice-based narratives. The editors explain in the introduction that the climate-anxiety expressed in these voices represent ‘their capacity to care’ (pp.5) rather than presenting evidence of pathology. These voices include cartoon, artwork, interviews, photography, climate activism, disability activism, parent activists, ecologists and personal reflections, animating the central theme effectively through immediate, lived-experiences. For example, in the quest for social justice the voice of Helen Leonard-Williams (Voice 5, pp 82–83), reminds us that disabled people are more likely to live in poverty and isolation, with access to support often hard to come by. This voice underscores the systemic socio-economic and political thinking that is needed in tandem with ideas about climate breakdown within the psychotherapy professions. Those who are multiply marginalised through social oppressions, such as racism, misogyny, homophobia, disablism, transphobia, ageism, classism and faith-based phobias, for example, can suffer adverse consequences of climate breakdown acutely.

Conclusion

As we enter discourses about climate breakdown, we also enter the realm of material, bodied substance, through which flow the intra-active subtleties of how we affect and are affected by the world. Our secure social, political and environmental bases are crumbling and this book moves with a tide towards providing psychotherapeutic support that is delivered with an awareness of the centrality of climate breakdown. The diverse collection of ideas is an urgent call to action and a plea for therapists to welcome climate justice, political justice and social justice into the therapeutic arena, both implicitly and explicitly, acknowledging the reality of this existential threat. The range of chapters and voices open doors to the many ways in which a critical lens can be brought to theory, practice, research and lived experience. It is an enriching book to read that invites broad, in-depth discussions about climate breakdown within a range of psychotherapeutic paradigms.

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