



Puppet building at an art night in April 2024.
PHOTO: Joanna Bull

Nurturing Well-being: A KEY PART OF ECOLOGICAL ACTION

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Connecting to the natural world boosts mental well-being and resilience. But the ongoing destruction of the natural world threatens this connection and leads many to an ever-growing sense of worry about the future of the planet. To adapt to the realities of this change, we must build resilience by caring for our mental well-being, both as individuals and communities.

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Of late, a growing body of research has linked chronic stress on ecosystems to mental health consequences in humans¹, including eco-anxiety², eco-grief³ and solastalgia.⁴ Eco-anxiety refers to the stress and worry associated with the current ecological crisis and our future state. Described by the American Psychological Association as a “chronic fear of environmental doom,” this anxiety is reinforced by real-life local experiences of the climate crisis. Ecological loss, recently experienced in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia from fires and flooding, can lead community members to experience eco-grief. Much like other forms of grief, people can experience sadness in the absence of their past lived interactions with species, places or ways of knowing. For those aware of ongoing risks, these events highlight impending future loss, which can lead people and communities to lose their sense of comfort and solace, a phenomenon known as solastalgia.

Naming, normalizing and legitimizing these responses to ecological losses and climate change can help overcome associated feelings of loneliness, isolation or shame.

Everyone copes differently in response to these environmental realities. We face a fork in the road that leads us down one of two paths. On one side, some may cope by avoiding the distressing subjects, adopting a sense of acceptance that the situation is irreversible, or may place hope in intervention by outside forces through spirituality or technology. On the other side, these emotions can move some to engage in planning creative solutions, actions and educating others to inspire change. These different responses can polarize communities and inhibit a sense of belonging. So, what can we do?

We can actively seek social support from others through communities or organizations focused on ecological issues. Initiatives like the local **Climate Café** led by Dr. Nancy Blair on the third Thursday of each month welcome individuals to bravely and safely discuss their feelings about the climate crisis and climate emergencies. These social communities can help to reignite a sense of belonging and provide a safe space to discuss fears or emotions. Within community organizations, it is also important to foster empathetic communication by allowing time within our busy schedules to discuss, listen and validate fears. The **THRIVE Learning Centre** is a free virtual learning centre in association with the **Canadian Mental Health Association Nova Scotia** that offers workshops, including past workshops on eco-anxiety and mental wellness for non-profits. Building safe, open communities can help us work together to mobilize toward specific and much-needed actions.

We can find hope through action in the face of the daunting challenges of environmental destruction and climate change. In addition to community support, getting involved in the world of conservation, climate justice, sustainability or natural disaster recovery can provide a sense of agency. However, action requires energy, and the work involved in these initiatives is often challenging and multi-faceted. So, to cultivate hope, communities and organizations should balance broader aims and realities with achievable goals that can be celebrated together to foster a sense of achievement.

The unending nature of climate-related work means those involved often balance stress in response to ecological issues alongside a sense of exhaustion or overwhelm. Urgent crises and frequent emergencies can make it hard to grant yourself time to care for personal well-being. But physical and mental wellness provides a foundation from which to effectively work, fight or advocate to address these crises. Seeking professional mental health services can help cope with anxiety, depression or grief. The Canadian Mental Health Association provides a list of professional services available to Nova Scotians, including crisis supports, non-crisis supports and peer or self-help group supports. The list includes links to organizations and databases such as Couch of H.O.P.E. that provides free or low-cost counselling services; The Indigenous, Black & People of Colour Service Provider Database and The Affordable Therapy Network that lists low-cost or sliding-scale counselling options.



Connecting with community on a hike in the Backlands in July 2024.
PHOTO: Jillian Ramsay

There are also ways to begin to support yourself while balancing stress and eco-anxiety. Self-care is associated with a variety of preconceived ideas but ultimately boils down to a core set of activities: connecting with others and self, eating nutritious food, nature-based interventions, healthy sleep habits and engaging in movement. Specific approaches to these self-care practices can be as unique as individuals. Some individuals may face barriers to engaging in specific practices, so it is critical to have space to identify and modify these approaches to meet individual needs. Dealing with ongoing environmental challenges is stressful, but we can start by engaging community and exploring self-care to support the important collective work of ecological and climate action. Check out the list below to consider some options.

TAKE ACTION

To address ongoing ecological challenges, we need to care for our personal and community well-being. We can support this well-being by normalizing responses to ecological loss, employing empathy in our interactions, seeking social supports like **Climate Café** and ecological organizations, getting involved to take action, celebrating small achievements within our communities and seeking professional supports for our mental health.

Connection: Call friends or family, meet ups, classes, volunteering, meditation, journaling, art or music, community groups, **Climate Café** or **peer support groups**.

Eating nutritious food: **Loaded ladle-free** plant-based meals, **free healthy eating programs**, **Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia**, community pantries and food banks (@communityfridgedartmouth and @communityfridgehfx on Instagram, **Feed Nova Scotia find a food bank site**) and **Nutrition Education and Counselling (Dietitians)**.

Nature-based interventions: Visit natural parks and shorelines, nature journaling, home or community gardening, urban gardens or forests, indoor plants, environmental volunteering (shoreline cleanups, planting, monitoring), outdoor meditation or yoga, camping, hiking.

Sleep hygiene: Breathing exercises, consistent sleep schedules, bedtime routines, avoiding screens, caffeine, alcohol and heavy meals before bedtime, regular exercise, exposure to bright light during the day, reduced noise and optimizing temperatures in the sleeping environment, sleep meditations. Consult a healthcare professional if you have persistent sleep issues.

Movement: **NS Walks program** and walking groups, dance, swimming, yoga, cycling, gardening, taking the stairs, playing with your kids, community centre programming, rowing or paddling, gardening, fitness classes, **free virtual physical activity programs**, walking or wheeling meetings, housework, adaptive exercise and **sport programming**.

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