

Mind map of ecological emotions

In brief

The exercise enables people to create a mind map of their own ecological emotions (or emotions related to broader sustainability issues). A brief list of emotion words is used in support of the activity.

Topics

Very often we have used this exercise with a focus on climate change emotions (in brief: climate emotions). However, the mind map tool can be used with many framings. It can be drawn in relation to a specific issue of concern, such as a wildfire or flood that is causing distress. Naturally it can also be used for non-ecological issues, such as emotions about a pandemic.

To whom?

The major group that we have used this with is educators, but the exercise can be used with people of different age and profession. With the educators, the aim is to increase their emotional skills and also to enable the possibility that they would offer this exercise to their students. As with all emotional exercises, it is important for the educator to try this exercise first on their own or with a colleague and reflect on their own emotions evoked by the exercise.

Objectives of the exercise

- strengthens the ability to recognize in oneself various emotions and especially ecological emotions
- increases the vocabulary related to emotions / affect / feelings / moods
- provides an opportunity to structure one's own emotional landscape, which is often innately confusing and unstructured in relation to the difficult topics in question (such as climate change);
- teaches that it is possible to talk about ecological emotions with others
- increases understanding of other people's emotional landscapes
- brings more awareness of the fact that people have different feelings about the environmental crisis, and that people can be in various positions among the stages of reacting to it
- provides a low-threshold start to working with ecological sentiment, while at the same time facilitating (and in part enabling) the use of more advanced methods.

Phases of the exercise

The following describes the steps for implementing the exercise.

Attunement to the subject matter / Introduction phase

What kind and length of introduction is needed depends on the situation in the group. At the very least, a brief introduction is needed as to why it makes sense to address the issue. This can be done, for example, in the following ways:

- if you are into it, tell briefly about the significance of emotion work and the complexities of ecological emotions
- show a short video
- ask participants to read a short text in advance or listen to a podcast
- show a short powerpoint presentation

A list of resources that can be utilized here is forthcoming. The material used here should not be too threatening (no doom and gloom!). Some tips:

- The BBC series about Climate Emotions: <https://www.bbc.com/future/columns/climate-emotions>

Working phase

a) Give participants some kind of list of emotion words. [Forthcoming: You can download a list of emotions suitable for adults here and a list for young people here]. The instructor can edit the list of emotions as needed, but it is a good idea to include many kinds of emotions.

b) Ask participants to pick from a list, or come up with words themselves, to describe their feelings about climate change (or any other chosen sustainability challenge). As further instructions, you can tell that

- words can be written in uppercase or lowercase if you want to describe the intensity of individual emotions in that way

- words can be connected by lines, dashes, or arrows

- images or other graphic elements can also be added to the concept map if desired

You should allow at least 10 minutes to make a concept map, but preferably more. The time available and the number of drawing media also affect this. In our workshops, usually 15–20 minutes have been spent on the map.

Discussing the mind maps

Making a mind map is valuable in itself, as it helps the individual to structure his or her feelings. However, the best option is if the mind maps can be discussed with others. This requires appropriate time and a sufficiently safe group. If the plan is to discuss the mind maps together, this should be mentioned before the exercise. It is also possible to structure the workshop so that only those who so wish will tell about their mind maps. Sometimes, if the facilitator himself/herself tells of his/her own map, it encourages others to do so.

The basic option is to discuss the mind maps in small groups of 2-3 people. Everyone takes turns presenting their own mind map: the facilitator should give a rough time frame for this (for example: if there's 15 minutes for this phase, everyone is given 3-4 minutes to present their own mind map, so that there's some extra time available). Make sure to mention that everyone is free to choose the level of depth in which they feel safe about when discussing their own emotions.

The facilitator should emphasize that it is the responsibility of others to listen actively and respectfully. Once the presentations are finished, people can ask more specific questions. At least the following rules are central to a safe discussion about emotions:

- The atmosphere must be safe. I don't attack anyone and I don't criticize anyone's emotional experience per se.

- The atmosphere must be confidential: I will not share the comments made in the discussion with outsiders without the permission of the person concerned. Topics may be mentioned on a general level (for example: "We talked about grief, anger and hope in the session").

- I will listen actively and respectfully

- I have the right to choose the level of intimacy that suits me

- I will avoid feelings of superiority and inferiority

Closing discussion

The facilitator should at least wrap up the discussion. The best option is that there would be a time for joint reflections with the whole group. Here are some topics that can be discussed:

- How did it feel to make the mind map?

Was there surprises?

Was there something which was difficult?

- How did it feel to discuss the mind maps together?

What insights did this give?

- How do you feel, would you like to offer this kind of exercise for the people who you live with or work with?

In our experience, some teachers who have done this exercise have been motivated to offer this to their students. In these cases, it is good if some support can be offered to those teachers: who can they contact for it? Perhaps another similarly motivated teachers in the area, thus forming a network?

Possible follow-ups and alternative methods

- If the group is safe enough, you can make an exhibition among the group by hanging the mind maps on the walls. Then people can walk through the space and take a look at various maps (usually without names on the maps). It is also possible to take photos of the maps (with the permission of participants) and organize a virtual exhibition.

- Preparing a new, more extensive mind map after the joint discussions, and perhaps adding more graphics.

- Integrating embodied activities into the exercise.

Please see also the more demanding but also potentially very rewarding method called [The Spectrum Line of Ecological Emotions](#).

Sources

This activity was designed by Dr. Panu Pihkala, an interdisciplinary researcher of eco-anxiety and a workshop facilitator. It was originally published in a Finnish educational project "[Toivoa ja toimintaa](#)" (Hope and Action, or: Finding meaning and increasing agency), organized by the Finnish Association of Teachers of Biology and Geography BMOL ry. The draft was commented by experienced climate change educator Pinja Sipari, the coordinator of the project.

(See also Pihkala's blog: <https://ecoanxietyandhope.blogspot.com/2020/07/mind-map-of-ecological-emotions.html>)