

## Spectrum line of ecological emotions

### In brief

This activity helps people to share their emotions and thoughts about the ecological crisis. If wanted, you can focus explicitly on climate change.

**Length:** minimum 60 minutes, preferably 90-105 minutes. It is important to move towards empowerment near the end, and to provide enough time for this.

**Number of people who can attend:** preferably around 20. For experienced facilitators, it is possible to include a quite large number of people.

**Requirements for the facilitator:** Please do not lead this activity if you have not done inner work about ecological emotions yourself. You also should have at least basic experience of facilitating group work. If you are not very experienced, it is wise to guide this with a colleague.

However, you do not need to be a professional therapist to facilitate this activity.

### Further ideas and tips

More information and tips about facilitating this kind of work can be found at:

- Carbon Conversations Facilitator's Guide, Rosemary Randall ([free download after registration](#))
- Coming Back to Life, Joanna Macy & Molly Young Brown (see also [their site](#))
- Emotional Resilience Toolkit for Climate Work, October 2019 ([freely available online](#))

### Basic outline:

- one emotion word is mentioned at a time
- Instruction for participants: "There is an invisible spectrum line in the room: one end expresses that you feel this emotion in relation to the ecological crisis (or, climate crisis) strongly or very often. The other end expresses that you feel this emotion seldom, not at all, or just vaguely."
- people move into a position according to what they feel like
- pair discussion: why am I where I am along the line? What do I think about this "ecological emotion"?
- facilitated discussion with the whole group, starting from the comments of the participants
- a common sequence that I use: concern – fear – anger – grief – empowerment (or hope).
- if possible, offer a chance to take a break after the activity. If embodied activities, natural settings, or even nature photography and music can be offered, that helps to reorient. At least you can recommend for the participants that they do something of this kind themselves.
- if there is more time, after a break (or the next day) there can be a discussion about the activity.

**Experiences:** I have used the spectrum line nearly 20 times (between 2018 and 2020), with various kinds of people, and it has proven very fruitful. Lots of people have expressed either in public or in private that they have benefited from the activity. Bodily movement makes it possible for people to get involved in a holistic manner.

Things that people have mentioned in their feedback:

- the relief of peer support: "Hey, others have similar emotions, too!"
- increased self-knowledge: "I hadn't given words to my eco-emotions before, and now I noticed what I actually feel"
- increased empathy: "It was good to get to know how others feel." / "I felt compassion for the ecological grief that she had."

- the relief of having a chance to discuss dark emotions: “It is rare to get a chance to discuss eco-anger or eco-guilt.”

### **Instructions to be given at the start:**

Emphasize that this is, and needs to be, a safe space.

\* confidentiality (subjects of discussions may be shared, but nothing about who said what)

\* “Everybody has a right to choose the level of depth (and intimacy) with which they share”

\* “There may be critical observations in the joint discussions about some dynamics related to emotions, but we shall not criticize anyone for his or her own emotions. All emotions all permitted to be discussed here, there are no “right or wrong” experiences here.”

\* “It is allowed to show emotion here: for example, if you feel like crying at some point, it is ok.

But it is not the aim of the workshop to “get emotional”, and rage or strong anxiety should be avoided. If you start to feel very anxious, let the facilitator know.” (Then it is a good idea to let the person have a break, or to direct the discussion into less murky waters; in extreme cases, guide the person to be present here and now, to breathe deep, and say that he or she is safe)

\* “At some points, I may interrupt discussions, so that we are able to finish in time”

\* “Any questions about the method?”

### **Some observations about sequences of emotion words:**

As I mentioned above, the most common sequence that I use is concern – fear – anger – grief – empowerment (or hope). But I evaluate the situation and may do changes according to what shows up in the session. It is important to start with an ice-breaker (concern is easier than guilt, for example) and to finish with something more uplifting. For most Finns (and, I think, Europeans), anger and grief are very important to address. But, if there is time, it is good to discuss also guilt and related feelings (“feeling to not being able to do enough”). People easily get very involved with this activity, so it is important to watch the time. Sometimes I have had to omit grief and move straight from anger to empowerment.

Here are some observations about grief and guilt:

Certain groups of people have special needs for discussion of particular emotions. There is more context-dependency here than I can describe.

**Grief:** lots of environmentalists (including environmental researchers), and “nature lovers”, have much complicated ecological grief. This presents challenges and opportunities for facilitating workshops. On one hand, it is very important that environmentalists get an opportunity to share and discuss grief. On the other hand, many settings – such as academic ones – often exclude the possibility of holistic methodology, such as having a time and place for expression of grief. Several times I’ve been sad about the fact that the participants clearly would benefit from more embodied methodology after discussing grief, but there has not been a possibility for that. (If there are, you may give people a chance to do something in natural settings, or perhaps even have a small “ritual”.) But the move from grief to hope / empowerment has always worked in my workshops, when facilitated with care.

**Guilt:** people who are not so active in environmental/climate work often have more guilt (and even shame) than environmentalists. However, a certain feeling of “not being able to be and do enough” (feeling inadequate) is very common for all contemporary people.

### **Instructions related to the emotion words**

I have underlined some key messages.

### **Concern/worry**

- How often or how strongly do you feel concern or worry in relation to ecological issues or climate change? (Please take a position along the spectrum line.)
- Please share a couple of thoughts with a person near to you. Why are you where you are along the line? What do you think about ecological worry?

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

- who do we worry for? It is very common to worry for the future of children, for example. (For the facilitator: sometimes people project or split their own worry/fear into worry for others, especially children. This doesn't mean that they wouldn't be worried for children, but they may deny their worry and fear regarding themselves.)
- what is (ecological) worry linked with? (Often helplessness; frustration)
- what does worry do to you? Do you feel eco-anxiety?

### **Fear**

- How often or how strongly do you feel fear in relation to ecological issues or climate change? (Please take a position along the spectrum line.)
- Please share a couple of thoughts with a person near to you. Why are you where you are along the line? What do you fear in relation to the ecological crisis / climate change?

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

- how is fear different from worry/concern?
- how does fear feel like in your body(mind)?
- how is fear different from anxiety? (sometimes the lines are blurred, especially in relation to global threats, but usually fear is a more concrete reaction to a more clearly felt threat, often leading to either fight, flight or freeze)
- "There can be discerned a scale: worry – fear – anxiety"
- "It is often very cathartic when we are able to discuss our fears openly in daylight, instead of feeling them alone in the dark"
- "When discussed openly, fears can then be evaluated, and preparedness can follow if necessary."

### **Anger**

- How often or how strongly do you feel anger in relation to ecological issues or climate change? (Please take a position along the spectrum line.)
- Please share a couple of thoughts with a person near to you. Why are you where you are along the line? What kinds of anger have you encountered in relation to ecological issues?

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

- what different kinds of anger there are (in general)?
- What's the difference between frustration, anger, indignation, hate, fury, and rage? (You may pick some of these)
- According to several studies, frustration is one of the most common ecological emotions. Many people feel frustration because environmental politics and climate politics are so slow, and sometimes inefficient. Some people, who would like to deny the problems, feel frustrated about the whole ecological & climate discourse.

- A very important point: "It is important to note that anger has many forms. At its best, righteous anger and indignation can be very powerful energies that help to make nonviolent social changes. But in worse cases, anger gets channeled into rage in social media, or even aggression on the streets. Anger can be a powerful asset, but it needs to be channeled constructively."

- "How have you been raised in relation to anger?"

- "Especially many women report that they have been told as kids and young that they should not show their anger. What possible problems may this cause? Does it have consequences also for ecological emotions?"

### **Grief**

- How often or how strongly do you feel grief (or sadness) in relation to ecological issues or climate change? (Please take a position along the spectrum line.)

- Please share a couple of thoughts with a person near to you. Why are you where you are along the line? What do you think about ecological grief?

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

- "What different kinds of ecological grief exist?" (Ranging from mild sadness to powerful, traumatic grief)

- "In industrialized societies, there are often problems about public recognition of grief. Have you experiences of this?"

(There are usually no periods for mourning anymore; special clothing or symbolic signs for grief, such as a black armband, are nearly extinct nowadays, but used to be commonplace)

- "Some forms of grief are so difficult socially and politically that there is socially constructed silence about them; they are forms of so-called disenfranchised grief."

- "The so-called 'cultural politics of emotion' have an effect on ways of grieving. For example, in many societies it is thought that grief is something feminine, and that men can't ever cry in public."

- "It is understandable that people feel it difficult to admit their grief. However, grief can be very relieving, if the process is constructive. Trying to hide one's grief usually results in worse consequences than actual grief."

- If there is time: "What could be done with ecological grief?" (symbolic action or places; discussion with peers; sometimes even grief groups, or lament)

### **Guilt**

- How often or how strongly do you feel guilt in relation to ecological issues or climate change? (Please take a position along the spectrum line.)

- Please share a couple of thoughts with a person near to you. Why are you where you are along the line? What do you think about ecological guilt?

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

- What do people do with eco-guilt?

- How much eco-guilt is suitable?

- Are there possibilities to receive forgiveness for eco-guilt? Or are we stuck forever in feelings of inadequacy?

- What is the difference between eco-guilt and shame?

- What is the relation between individual guilt and structural problems?

- "There is both paralyzing guilt and animating guilt: sometimes guilt can lead us to do better. We should not demonize guilt, but we should also avoid getting stuck forever in over-individualized forms of eco-guilt."

### *Hope / empowerment*

(These are technically two different things, but time limits – and limits related to people’s resources to do inner reflection and sharing – usually limit the workshop so that these are combined. The idea is to offer the group a possibility to move forward from dark emotions and towards the light. This usually happens very well, if the facilitation is ok.)

- How often or how strongly do you feel hope or empowerment in relation to ecological issues or climate change? (Please take a position along the spectrum line.)
- Please share a couple of thoughts with a person near to you. Why are you where you are along the line? What kind of things bring you hope or empowerment?

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

- “There are various definitions of hope. Some equate hope with optimism, but these two can be separated. Optimism refers to an estimation of probable success. Hope can be a deep conviction that life has meaning, regardless of whether there is eventual success or not.” (Cf. Vaclav Havel on hope.)

- “However, optimism as an attitude to life is a slightly different thing. It is important to separate between pessimism as a life attitude and optimism or pessimism as modes of hoping. It is possible to be a life-affirming person who is currently pessimistic about climate politics, for example.”

[ - “However, there are also various definition of not-hoping: some people are looking for a calm attitude of not hoping or not despairing.”]

- “Sometimes there is a problem of ‘negativity bias’ and sometimes a kind of ‘positivity bias (wishful thinking)’. We should remember that news in media is usually bad news, because of many reasons (the structure and ethos of media, problematic ‘fear culture’, and so on). There are more good things and signs of hope than what we see in the daily news feed. But there may also be a problem of privilege, of not seeing what one’s actions do to ecosystems and other humans. I suggest that we need a kind of ‘Binocular vision’, a skill of seeing two levels, both good and bad things.”

- “There is also a difference between despair and hopelessness. Despair can be a natural emotion: sometimes a person who feels despair is able to act even more ardently. Hopelessness, in the sense of not seeing any way out, can lead to a loss of meaning.”

### *Joy / Pride*

Usually time does not permit to include these emotions, but especially if there is a chance to run two sessions (and relax in between), discussions about these two can be very valuable. Sometimes I have used these words separately and sometimes together: it is best if there is time for both, separately.

Joy:

- How often or how strongly do you feel joy in relation to

a) nature?

b) environmental action?

Please take a position along the spectrum line.

(You have to choose between these two, if you do not run two rounds of joy.)

- Please share a couple of thoughts with a person near to you. Why are you where you are along the line? What kind of things have brought or bring you joy?

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

- As eco-psychology and many strands of environmental psychology emphasize, natural environments (or elements of nature in built environments) often strengthen “positive” emotions.
- What is the relation between grief and joy? (being able to feel grief helps also to feel joy)
- Is it ok, or easy, to confess feelings of (ecological) joy among other people? Why / why not?

Pride:

- How often or how strongly do you feel pride in relation to environmental action?
- Please take a position along the spectrum line.

After a couple of minutes of chat, open the floor for comments about topics that people discussed in pairs. Questions that you may ask and points that are good to raise:

(There is usually a much wider difference between participants here than with other eco-emotion words. Many people, including many long-time activists, find it very difficult to feel any pride for their choices and lifestyle, because they suffer from a bad kind of “species shame” and constant feelings of inadequacy. It is important to give space and recognition for various takes on this matter, but also very important to raise the question following questions)

- Why is it often very difficult to show or feel eco-pride?
- What do you think, would it be good or reasonable to feel a certain pride for good things, even if there is always ambivalence? (I strongly suggest so.)
- What different forms of pride there are? Which are good, which are problematic? (Bragging is usually not productive, and there are people who are proud in an elitistic way)
- Some research psychologists claim that eco-pride motivates good behavior better than eco-guilt. What do you think of this?

### **Finishing the session**

- thank the participants for their courage in sharing
- if there are points that need to be raised, mention them (for example, if there was unfinished arguments about eco-guilt, you can point out that this was a theme that there were several opinions of, as is in research, and further elaboration is encouraged)
- recommend holistic activities (for example, running, dancing, spending time in nature, listening to or playing music etc.)
- tell of other options to discuss eco-emotions (such as the Good Grief Network); tell that if somebody feels distressed afterwards, it is good to find a safe discussion partner (I have not heard of people who felt worse after the session than before the session, but of course it is possible that a session like this stirs up many things in a person)

For additional information:

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