

Nurturing the Sustainable Self: Talking to clients about environmental issues
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At the conclusion of the recent movie and companion book *An inconvenient truth* (Bender & Guggenheim, 2006 & Gore, 2006), former vice president Al Gore provides a list of what the audience can “personally do to help solve the climate crisis” (p. 305). This comes after a well-produced display of compelling and unsettling images and statistics regarding recent patterns of global climate change. The message of Gore’s film is that much of the climate change that is being experienced around the globe is human caused and it is a moral imperative for citizens of the United States – on par with the defeat of slavery, world wars, achievement of civil and voting rights - to address this issue.

Balancing personal and family needs with the ecological ramifications of our lifestyles, as well evaluating options for lifestyle change and environmental activism can be challenging for all of us. Maslach & Gomes (1996) note that the nature of being an activist involves cultivating and maintaining awareness of large and overwhelming problems and often carrying a burden of knowledge that society as a whole is unable or unwilling to face. So what do you, a mental health professional, say if one of your clients or patients is overwhelmed by the scope of current environmental issues and confused about what actions to take, and brings these questions to you? While it may not be common knowledge in the mental health field, there are several well-developed areas of theory and research that help to address this question. This article briefly surveys these, provides additional resources, and presents a four stage model of personal sustainability or *Sustainable Self* for addressing environmental concerns in psychotherapy and counseling settings.

Many of the concepts I will discuss are available to me through my training and practice as a clinical psychologist. Other sources are more personal, including past professional work for a large environmental group and as an outdoor and river rafting guide. Environmental work entails daily immersion in multifaceted, hard-to-grasp environmental issues (in my case pesticides, CFCs, and nuclear waste) as well as a potential for paralysis prompted by intense focus on one’s daily environmental impacts. Outdoor guiding provides more direct exposure to human impacts on natural areas (e.g. from logging and grazing) as well as the experience of passing between extended stays in restorative natural settings and the more intensive pace and stimuli of urban life.

When I talk about personal sustainability with my clients the lenses of ecology and sustainability allow us to conceive of personal identity, health, and behavior as embedded in larger natural systems. When aspiring to a

“sustainable self” we talk about living in harmony with one’s emotions, values, stage of life, talents, and sense of destiny. We also talk about living a balanced and ecologically sustainable lifestyle. Thus, being optimally healthy and personally sustainable also means living in harmony with the body, the natural world, and with the other beings with whom we share this planet.

I’ve had the best opportunity to explore these ideas in my weekly men's group, which has the concept of personal sustainability as a cornerstone. We've built cohesion and a sense of shared purpose through a sequence of interactive exercises--mapping childhood sense of place; identifying early family and cultural influences, and reminiscing about life visions formed in late adolescence. We have also expanded the frame of the therapy group by watching evocative movie scenes (e.g., the documentary *Rivers and Tides* about nature artist Andy Goldsworthy) and meeting and walking outdoors in Forest Park in Portland.

For some group members, the sustainability metaphor allows them to pull together life and work goals (e.g., being more reflective and having better communication with their spouse) into a comprehensive format. Other members link the concept of sustainability to coping with ongoing problems like anxiety. Others extend their conception of environmental sustainability to encompass their personal and spiritual lives. An engineer who is a student of Buddhism wrote: “I had a concept of sustainability ... although it was more toward renewable resources and preservation of our environment and sketchy with self. I came to a realization that to truly experience sustainability it first needs to begin with myself, and at best selflessly.”

Background sources: Ecopsychology and Conservation Psychology

Mental health professionals are encouraged to clarify their own reactions and coping responses to environmental issues and climate change so that they are more knowledgeable and comfortable when addressing these topics with clients. I will focus on two broad areas of research and professional practice that are useful for thinking about ecology and human/environment relationships: ecopsychology and conservation psychology. Other closely related areas of interest are wilderness therapy or “Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare” and sustainable design (see resources list). Although these areas tend to have their own professional cultures and languages, there is a lot of practical and conceptual overlap between them.

The idea of an “ecopsychology” -- bridging the gulf between the psychological and the ecological and seeing personal and planetary wellbeing as a continuum--was proposed by social historian Theodore Roszak in his 1992 work, *The voice of the earth*. After personally experiencing the effectiveness of therapy in the backcountry--for the teens that I worked with and for myself--and having been immersed in the environmental movement, *The voice of the earth* validated my experience

and inspired me to become a psychologist. From my current vantage point, I recognize limitations of Roszak's approach (e.g., narrowly equating psychotherapy with psychoanalysis) and disagree somewhat with his arguments (i.e., I believe Roszak's work ignored key areas within psychology that are helpful to the environmental movement, such as the conservation psychology research described below). However, the questions raised by Roszak are as provocative as ever: How do we understand society's destructive behavior toward the environment that from a larger perspective—such as global climate change--seems like madness?

The edited text, *Ecopsychology* (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995) remains a useful introduction to diverse thinkers and practices associated with an ecopsychological perspective. These include applications of a Jungian perspective to describe an ecological unconscious, use of addiction models to understand materialism and unhealthy reliance on technology, confrontations with grief regarding species extinction, and the rediscovery of indigenous spirituality and shamanic practices to provide healing and personal communion with the natural world.

I include under the header of Conservation Psychology those approaches to human/environment interactions that are more empirical and research-based. A classic in this regard is Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) *The experience of nature* with its description of the active ingredients of restorative natural settings--my favorite being the quality of "soft fascination" found in settings that aesthetically draw our attention in a pleasurable way while also leaving cognitive space for personal reflection, such as parks, gardens, or the ocean shore. This is contrasted with the sources of "hard fascination" we often experience in everyday life (i.e., rush-hour traffic) which demand all of our attention and generally leave us fatigued, rather than restored.

A more recent example of work in this vein is the growing body of research at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Human-Environment Research Laboratory that demonstrates that contact with green spaces is associated with improved focus and self-discipline and reduction of attention deficit symptoms in children, and increased neighborliness, less violence, and lower crime rates in inner-city neighborhoods (for a research example see Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001).

Of course, there are many resources outside of psychology that may be helpful to practitioners. The field of biophilia (Kellert, 2003) provides an evolutionary, biologically-based explanation for humans' need to affiliate with nature. Also, this article does not touch on fields such as conservation biology or environmental ethics, nor spend time with spiritual views about humanity and the environment of which there are rich and varied perspectives.

Addressing environmental concerns with clients

The model I describe here is inspired by stage models of behavior change (e.g., Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992) and assumes that impulsively moving into lifestyle changes or activism regarding environmental issues can be counterproductive without a better understanding and acceptance of the personal meaning of these issues and plan for long-term self-care. Personally, and in collaboration with a mental health professional, individuals grappling with environmental worries can ideally be seen as traveling through four stages: (1) recognition and validation, (2) centering and acceptance, (3) nurturing and celebration, and (4) grounded action. It is important to note that this is not about mental health professionals pushing an agenda. The assumption is that we may be dealing with individuals who are experiencing consciousness-raising regarding environmental issues, dissonance between their lifestyle and developing ecological values, and possibly clinically significant health symptoms (e.g., stress, worry, hopelessness, depression). It is not necessarily our job to educate people about environmental issues [though this issue is certainly debatable depending on one's focus (e.g., in health psychology)] but it may be unethical to avoid or mistakenly redirect clients away from these issues.

Recognition and validation

Journalist and new parent Liz Galst (Plenty Magazine, August/September 2006) shares her experience of developing anxiety and panic symptoms in the course of reporting on global warming issues. She writes of her "eco-anxiety," "At night I lay awake worrying about which of the myriad climate-related disasters scientists are predicting would come first-- flood, famine, heat wave, drought -- and how I might prevent each and every one of them. (p. 56)."

One of first things a mental health professional can do for a client who is experiencing unease about the environment is to recognize that concern about the quality of one's environment is logical and valid. It is helpful to note that there has been recognition and alarm about the dangers of human impacts on the environment throughout history. Air pollution caused by coal burning has been recognized since the 1300's and US cities began clean-air legislation in 1880's (for a background on pollution see Markham, 2004). 40 years ago, President Lyndon Johnson, referring to the nation's smog problems, warned, "Either we stop poisoning our air or we become a nation [in] gas masks groping our way through dying cities." (Easterbrook, 2006, p.29).

The sheer scope and complexity of environmental issues can be overwhelming. There are many barriers to communicating one's feelings about this as well as pulls toward disbelief and denial. Psychologist Joanna Macy has contributed much to the literature regarding the psychological effects of the threat of nuclear war and of environmental degradation. Macy (1995) notes that are several common fears that prevent people from talking

about their environmental concerns: fear of appearing morbid, unpatriotic, too emotional, or insufficiently informed -- lacking the facts and figures to effectively debate their concerns or identify solutions.

It is best to adopt a broader systemic focus when addressing environmental issues with clients. Mental health providers must guard against reductionism and mislabeling based on their theoretical stance (e.g., addressing clients' concerns on purely intrapsychic or interpersonal grounds) or bypassing the larger issue by immediately focusing on helpful techniques (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy or stress management). A goal would be a best practice standard of a careful assessment, which may include diagnosis.

For clues to understanding the impacts of environmental anxiety or despair on individuals' lives, it is helpful to review the diagnostic criteria for Adjustment Disorder, a "psychological response to an identifiable stressor or stressors that results in the development of clinically significant emotional or behavioral symptoms" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 679). Symptoms of adjustment disorders may include hopelessness, sadness, crying, anxiety, worry, headaches or stomachaches, withdrawal, and inhibition. The DSM-IV further notes that "stressors may affect single individuals, an entire family, or a larger group or community (e.g., as in a natural disaster)" (p. 679).

Someone experiencing significant impairments linked to anxiety or despair about the environment may be considered to have an adjustment disorder. Presumably, the stress of global climate change will not be going away soon, and the potential for an environment-related adjustment disorder may be chronic. Diagnosis in this case presents interesting philosophical questions (e.g., distinguishing between pathological and nonpathological reactions to environmental issues, differentiating between despair about the environment and "normal" bereavement, and determining what is "expected" regarding coping with these perceived threats). Regrettably, discussions in the mainstream psychological literature of guidelines or practices for diagnosing adjustment or other more serious disorders (i.e. anxiety or depression) related to environmental concerns appears to be rare.

Centering and acceptance

If your client's unease about the environment is determined to be a freestanding issue (whether or not it is a diagnosable "disorder"), the next and potentially most important step for them is accepting this, while maintaining poise in their life. The existential challenge here is to understand and accept the limits of one's control and maintain a healthy balance between attachment and detachment from one's expectations, especially regarding the environmentally-related behavior of others.

A reminder for helping clients make peace with environmental despair is that feelings of concern for nature arise because of something positive and healthy: our affiliation and attachment to nature. Macy (1995) notes that feelings of pain for the world are natural, and responses such as fear, anger, grief, and even guilt are normal and "a measure of our humanity" (p. 251). Affiliation with nature can be explained in evolutionary terms (through the lens of biophilia) and by cultural and personal factors. In the United States, ideals of nature and wilderness are recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem (Nash, 1982).

Connection with the natural world--and ambivalence about humankind's relationship to the earth--may manifest most strongly when people consider the future of their children and their duties as a parent. In *Hunting for Hope* (1998), environmental essayist Scott Russell Sanders is driven to accept the consequences of his environmental pessimism after being confronted by his teenage son: "Your view of things is totally dark. It bums me out. You make me feel the planet's dying and people are to blame and nothing can be done about it. There is no room for hope. Maybe you can get by without hope, but I can't. I've got a lot of living still to do. I have to believe there is a way we can get out of this mess. Otherwise what's the point? Why study, why work -- why do anything if it's all going to hell?" (p. 9).

Sanders does find sources of hope and meaning, in his spiritual faith, relationships with his growing children, and small acts like making a clearing in the snow to plant the first seeds of spring. In a passage that captures the essence of sustainability on a personal scale, Sanders notes, "If we set out to solve the world's problems, we're likely to feel overwhelmed. On the other hand, if we set out to act on our deepest concerns and convictions we may do some good. We can begin making changes in our own lives without waiting for such changes to become popular, without knowing whether they will have any large-scale effect, but merely because we believe they are right" (p. 188).

As a basic environmental centering practice, relaxation breathing and mindfulness exercises are helpful, particularly in the context of a safe and restorative green space like a park or garden, or in the presence of loved ones. Using a stage model as a guide, clients can be reminded of the importance of contemplation and preparation before moving into "action."

Positive reframing can also be very effective. There has been success in addressing past environmental issues such as automobile smog, acid rain, and the global "ozone hole" with the solutions often coming cheaper, and quicker than predicted (Easterbrook, 2006). On a personal level, many people can produce evidence of past success in making small or large-scale "environmental" changes in their lives, such as quitting smoking or moving on from an unhealthy job or relationship.

The challenge presented by personally “taking on” global environmental issues is immense. The instantaneous, visceral connection with far off events afforded by modern communications technology is unique given the history of humankind. Working through despair, confusion, feelings of powerlessness, and at times, of being overwhelmed, is a modern rite of passage.

Nurturing and celebration

A corollary of the recognition of our interconnectedness with nature is the realization that taking care of oneself is not ultimately separate from caring for the natural world. Moreover, the ability to nurture oneself and celebrate one’s core values is necessary to avoid burnout and is crucial for long term, sustainable action in any endeavor, particularly environmental involvement or activism. Mental health professionals working with individuals involved in the environmental movement should remain on the lookout for the individual, interpersonal, and self-evaluational components of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of ineffectiveness (Maslach & Gomes, 1996).

It is stressful to focus on far off, abstract environmental threats, such as global climate change, without balancing this with exposure to and enjoyment of green spaces in one’s local area and neighborhood. As conservation psychology researchers Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan (1998) note, much of what constitutes restorative natural settings consists of “nearby nature” (p. 1): parks, street trees, vacant lots, and backyard gardens. For individuals experiencing despair or hopelessness about the environment, art, ritual, and play (as well as psychotherapy) can also provide catharsis and integration (Macy, 1995).

Healthy ecosystems are in balance, as are healthy lives. An effective activity I use with many clients is drawing a “personal ecology” diagram: a large sheet of paper on which they map the in-flows and out-flows of energy in their lives--where they are putting their time and efforts, sources of restoration and joy, and situations or relationships that are draining or unfulfilling. This deceptively simple exercise provides a bird’s eye view of one’s priorities and a rough estimate of balance. From this big picture people come to realize the importance of their hobbies, friendships, diet, rest, exercise, outdoor time, and spirituality in balancing the energy outlays of career and family. They can determine whether their efforts are bringing commensurate rewards and where they are stuck or losing energy to depression and worry.

Concern for the natural world without celebration is a recipe for disillusionment. Celebration of nature without concern for our impacts is an indicator of irresponsibility or denial. Clients can be encouraged to balance their concern with celebration, or to be in the words of writer and activist Edward Abbey, “a part-time crusader, a half-hearted fanatic.” Abbey reminds

us to “Save the other half of yourselves and your lives for pleasure and adventure. It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it” (in Gookin, 2003, p. 107).

Grounded action

Gandhi is known for his injunction to “Be the change you want to see in the world” and sustainability can begin on an everyday, personal level. This includes balancing work and personal/family life, getting sufficient rest and exercise, maintaining a healthy diet, and making mindful consumer choices. If a client wants to move further into involvement regarding the environment, it is important to come from this grounded place, otherwise there is a higher risk of disillusionment and burnout. Individuals, including mental health professionals, must make a careful inventory of their actions. If they are already working toward what they perceive to be moral or ethical causes, that may be action enough. Moreover, contributions to environmental health do not necessarily need to be in the form of large, public acts but engaging in what Joanna Macy (1995) calls “interactions that produce value” (e.g., with loved ones and fellow citizens, with spirituality, music, art and literature, or by planting seeds and shaping materials) that “increase the sum total of one’s conscious participation in life” (p. 257). If someone wants to answer Al Gore’s call to help to solve the climate crisis, she can begin by connecting with like-minded peers at local Northwest organizations like the Northwest Earth Institute that provides courses and support groups regarding sense of place and sustainable living, and the Oregon Natural Step Network that provides advice on green business practices (see resource guide).

Personal Sustainability

The four step Sustainable Self model I described is simply my revisioning of some of the psychological concepts and tools we work with everyday: the value of self acceptance, positive reframing, and personal self-care; stage models of behavior change; and strategies to increase wellness and avoid burnout. Achieving a sense of personal sustainability--a “sustainable self”--provides rich territory to explore for insights about personal identity as well as one’s place and role in the biosphere. Using personal sustainability as a framework, one can work toward wellness while also making lifestyle choices that contribute to the health of the community and the natural environment. Empowerment to live according to personally relevant and environmentally sustainable values helps to alleviate a sense of powerlessness about environmental issues. Imaging one’s health and daily energies as a resource to be used sustainably helps to prevent overwork, and maintain creativity and performance.

The advice to rest in contemplation and take care of centering and self nurturing before committing to action, captured in the meditation saying: “Don’t just do something; Sit there” may, in the short-term, run counter to the

efforts of my colleagues in environmental organizations to get more bodies onto the front lines of green economic and cultural change. However, as mental-health professionals, we are ethically mandated to ensure the safety of our clients first, before we endeavor to make a difference for them or help them to make a difference.

About the author

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Web based resources:

1. International Community for Ecopsychology:
<http://www.ecopsychology.org/>
2. For an introduction to conservation psychology see Clay, R. A. (April, 2001) Green is good for you. *Monitor on Psychology*, 32.
<http://www.apa.org/monitor/apr01/greengood.html>.
3. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign Human-Environment Research Laboratory: <http://www.herl.uiuc.edu/>
4. Wilderness Therapy/Outdoor Behavioral healthcare:
<http://www.obhic.com/index.htm>
5. Introduction to Sustainable Design:
<http://www.asid.org/resource/Sustainable+Design+Information+Center.htm>
6. Northwest Earth Institute (<http://www.nwei.org/>)
7. Oregon Natural Step Network (<http://www.ortns.org>)

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