CLIMATE EMOTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR TEACHERS

SUMMARY

Feelings of anxiety, fear, and sadness about climate change are normal and valid, especially among young people who face an uncertain future but often lack a voice in decision-making. This three-page summary guide, followed by detailed guidance on pages 4–11, is intended to help teachers support students dealing with difficult climate-relatedemotions and distress. It also serves as a companion guide to the *Stay Tuned to Our Planet* program. The full resource can be accessed here.

HOW CLIMATE EMOTIONS SHOW UP IN THE CLASSROOM

There are a wide range of **climate emotions**, both pleasant and unpleasant, and all of them have a role to play. However, while some worry or sadness can be constructive and even motivating, persistent distress—such as climate anxiety/distress—can affect students' concentration, mood, sleep, and social engagement.

In the classroom, it is important to support students in expressing and responding to their climate emotions. **Recognising** them is the first step in offering meaningful support and helping students process difficult feelings in healthy, empowering ways.

HOW CLIMATE DISTRESS MAY SHOW UP IN STUDENTS

THOUGHT PATTERNS	EMOTIONS	BEHAVIOURS
• Constant worry about future disasters • Feelings of guilt over personal responsibility for climate change • Obsession over climate news (difficulty distinguishing between helpful research into climate change and compulsive researching driven by anxiety which makes one feel worse)	• Fear and anxiety, feeling overwhelmed by climate issues • Sadness or hopelessness, prolonged low moods • Meta-emotions (i.e., feelings about feelings), such as I feel anxious about the anxiety I feel	• Sleep disturbances including insomnia • Withdrawal from hobbies and social interactions • Physical symptoms like headaches and fatigue • Difficulty focusing and indecisiveness (e.g., regarding sustainability choices)

Not all stress means a student is unwell. Some distress is a normal and valid response, especially when discussing climate change. With the right support and a sense of purpose, students can experience stress and still maintain wellbeing.

Teachers can focus on promoting wellbeing rather than trying to eliminate all stress. Not all students will feel distressed—but for those who do, their emotions deserve space and support.

Some students may be more vulnerable, especially those with past experiences of extreme weather events, social isolation, or other ongoing stressors. If distress lasts more than two weeks or begins to affect daily functioning, additional support may be needed. Early recognition helps create a safe, supportive space for students to process emotions in healthy ways.

Importantly, before we can effectively support young people with their climate emotions, it is essential to first take care of our own wellbeing and engage in active self-reflection about our own climate emotions and experiences: **Teacher Wellbeing**

BUILDING RESILIENCE AND COPING WITH DIFFICULT CLIMATE EMOTIONS

Resilience means adapting to challenges and growing through adversity—not just "bouncing back," but learning and transforming. For young people, this includes recognising their own strengths, building their **emotional intelligence,** and feeling empowered.

Resilience comes from both external and internal sources:

- External: supportive adults, strong social networks, opportunities to act
- Internal: emotional awareness, coping skills, self-care, and a sense of agency

Agency matters. Collective agency involves working with others on projects or advocacy, helping build connection and hope. Individual agency includes personal actions like reducing waste or learning about climate solutions.

However, young people should know they are not responsible for fixing climate change. Small, meaningful actions can help build optimism, but must be put in context so that young people don't inadvertently feel unrealistic pressure and demands.

Coping strategies for climate emotions

PROBLEM-FOCUSED	EMOTION-FOCUSED	MEANING-FOCUSED
Taking action e.g. joining initiatives, lifestyle change, advocacy	**Managing emotions** e.g. mindfulness, creative expression, social support	**Building purpose** e.g. community work, educating others

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Young people need to know that their feelings are valid, that change is happening worldwide, that people like community leaders, schools and teachers are taking action, and that they can be part of the solutions.

Supporting students during class

CREATE ACCOUNTABLE SPACES	• Set clear ground rules for respectful discussion • Encourage open-ended, solution-focused conversations • Address misinformation calmly and factually
VALIDATE DIFFICULT EMOTIONS	• Acknowledge all feelings as normal and valid • Support emotional regulation through breathing, movement, or creative expression • Encourage students to reflect on and express their emotions
EMBRACE HOPE IN ITS DIFFERENT FORMS	• Balance radical hope (big change is possible) and reasonable hope (realistic goals) • Share stories of change and encourage collective action
GROUND LEARNING IN REAL CONTEXTS	• Adapt examples to students' lived experiences • Use hands-on, real-world activities to build agency and reduce anxiety
FOSTER CONNECTION	• Facilitate peer-to-peer support and group reflection • Encourage active listening and collaboration to build a sense of belonging

It's also important for teachers to reflect on their own feelings about climate change. Supporting students begins with self-awareness—recognising how our own responses to the climate crisis shape the way we guide and care for young people. By fostering emotional safety, agency, and connection, classrooms can become spaces for resilience, learning, and action.

CLIMATE EMOTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR TEACHERS

As we confront the complex and extensive impacts of climate change, it is crucial to foster emotional resilience within our communities and classrooms. Education plays a pivotal role in empowering young people to face these challenges. This resource has been developed for upper primary (Years 5-6) and junior secondary (Years 7-9) educators to support students experiencing difficult climate emotions. It serves as a companion to the *Stay Tuned to Our Planet (STTOP) Education Program* or as a standalone resource for teachers. You may go back to the summary here.

1. CLIMATE CHANGE AND YOUTH WELLBEING

In the face of climate change, feelings of worry, anxiety, and uncertainty are normal and valid responses. The consequences of climate change are visible not only through acute events—such as hotter temperatures, more extreme heatwaves, longer and more severe fire seasons, and shifts in rainfall and snowfall patterns (CSIRO & Bureau of Meteorology, 2024) - but also through slower, more subtle changes. These include rising sea levels, declining air and water quality, the gradual degradation of soil and ecosystems. In 2022 alone, over **two thirds** of Australians found themselves in areas impacted by extreme weather events like bushfires, floods, or severe storms (KMPG, 2023).

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the emotional impacts of climate change. In Australia, recent data suggests that more than 6 in 10 young people are worried about climate change (Gao et al., 2022). Two-thirds of 16 to 25-year-old Australians reported feeling anxious, afraid, or sad about climate change, with only 27% feeling optimistic (Hickman et al., 2021). Many young people cannot vote yet and are often excluded from decision-making, which may add to feelings of injustice, anger, and hopelessness. For 10-14 year olds, 43% are worried about climate change's future impact, and one in four believe the world will end before they grow up (Lucas et al., 2024).

The emotional impact of climate change affects teachers and young people differently. It depends on many factors, such as age, gender, cultural background, and previous experiences. The impact is especially profound for First Nations peoples and other cultural communities deeply connected to the land, as climate change threatens not only cultural heritage but also the connections to Country that sustain identity, totemic responsibilities, and cultural practices. The destruction of Country is not only an environmental issue, but a deeply personal and cultural loss—disrupting spiritual connections and knowledge systems that have been sustained for thousands of generations.

Schools play a critical role in fostering resilience. Through thoughtful guidance, schools can empower students and teachers to process their emotions, recognise their agency, and contribute to meaningful action—strengthening their ability to adapt and thrive in a changing world.

2. HOW CLIMATE EMOTIONS SHOW UP IN THE CLASSROOM

Recognising the signs of climate distress and other difficult climate emotions is the first step in providing support. While some level of concern is natural and can motivate us to take action and connect with others, persistent distress can interfere with daily life, learning, and relationships. Young people may be more vulnerable to distress if they feel isolated and don't yet have the skills to navigate difficult emotions. There may also be an increase of difficult climate related emotions during times of extreme weather events (whether direct exposure in your local community or indirect exposure via news reports).

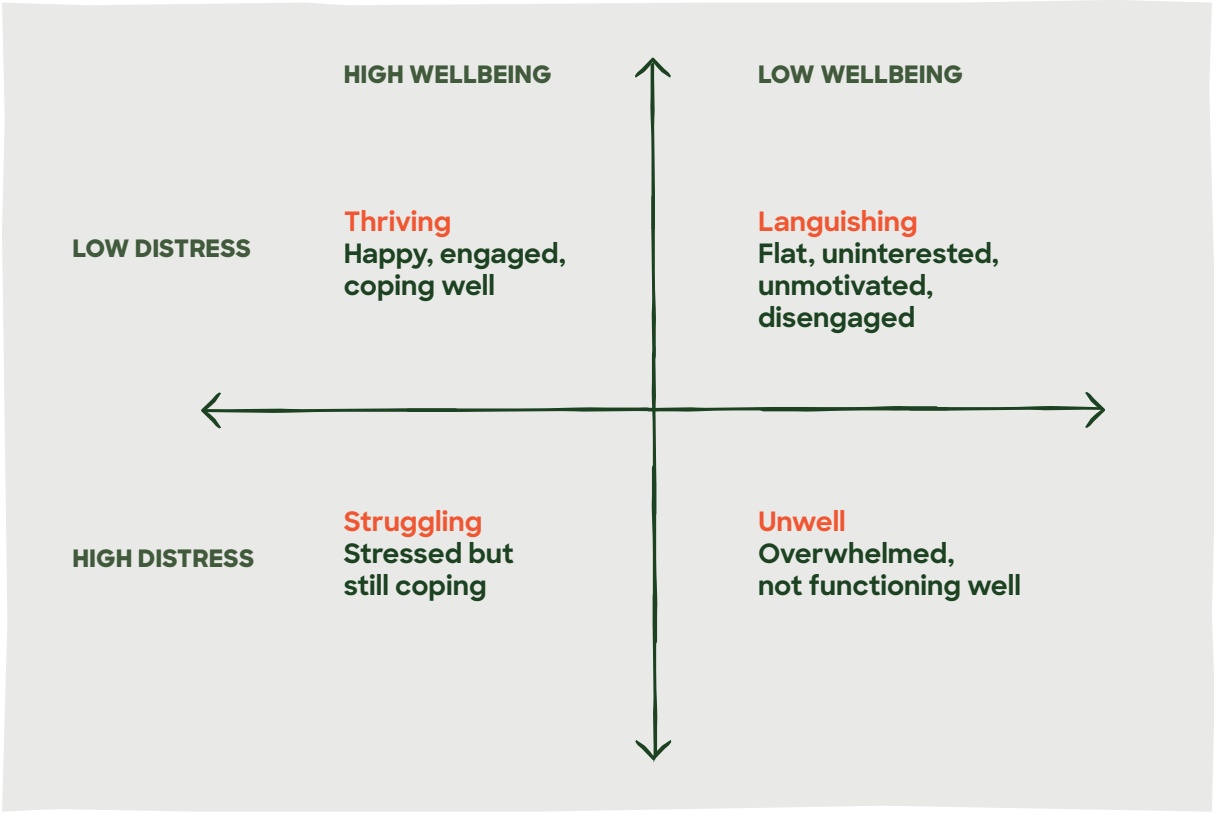
Understanding student wellbeing: The dual continuum model

Not all stress/worry means a student is struggling with mental ill-health – and experiencing high wellbeing does not mean the absence of stress. In the dual continuum model, mental health and mental ill-health are not just opposites on a single scale – instead, they exist on two separate but related spectrums:

A student experiencing **climate distress** might be in any of these zones – even those with **high wellbeing** may still feel deeply concerned about the environment. That doesn't mean they're unwell – but they may need support to process and channel their emotions.

Takeaways:

- Look beyond whether a student "seems stressed" – ask how they're coping.
- A student can experience climate distress and still have high wellbeing, especially if they have support, hope, and purpose.
- Focus on promoting wellbeing in the classroom, not just stress management.



How climate emotions may show up in interactions with/between students

THOUGHTS/WHAT STUDENTS MIGHT SAY	EMOTIONS	BEHAVIOURS/PHYSICAL SIGNS
Constant worry: persistent thoughts about disasters or the future **Difficulty focusing:** trouble concentrating/getting more easily distracted **Indecisiveness:** struggling to make choices **Excessive guilt:** feeling personally responsible for climate change	**Fear and anxiety:** overwhelmed or panicked about climate issues **Sadness or hopelessness:** feeling powerless or low for extended periods **Changes in mood:** noticeable and persistent shifts in emotional state **Emotional exhaustion:** feeling drained or numb when discussing climate change	**Obsessing over climate news:** constantly consuming distressing information* Researching may become unhelpful if students feel a loss of control, e.g., they feel compelled to keep researching even when they notice negative impacts **Sleep issues:** trouble falling asleep, nightmares, disrupted rest/relaxation **Loss of interest:** withdrawing or not being able to enjoy hobbies or social interactions **Physical symptoms:** headaches, stomach aches, or fatigue due to stress

*Acknowledge that curiosity and researching can be helpful – support self-reflection about whether the student feels it is helpful to them (how) and their perceived control over researching behaviours

When to be concerned

Signs of heightened anxiety or stress can range from mild and occasional to severe and frequent/constant. It can be difficult to determine whether a young person's distress is due to climate change or other challenges in their life. Regardless of the source, if a student shows a marked change in mood and/or functioning for more than two weeks, it may be a sign they need extra support.

Young people who lack social support, have few coping skills, or are experiencing other major life stressors (including climate related disasters) may be more vulnerable to climate-related distress.

3. BUILDING RESILIENCE AND COPING WITH DIFFICULT CLIMATE EMOTIONS AND EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

Resilience is the ability to adapt and recover from challenges. For young people experiencing distress, this means recognising their own safety and capabilities without dismissing or downplaying their concerns, and involves cultivating skills to manage and transcend their fears. 'Transformational resilience' means not just bouncing back to a previous baseline of functioning/wellbeing following a challenging situation, but experiencing growth and transformation through adversity. This approach acknowledges that such transformation is not always possible and is deeply intertwined with climate justice and individual privilege.

Sources of resilience are:

- **External:** supportive adults, education, strong social networks, and opportunities to contribute
- **Internal:** emotional awareness, coping skills, self-care strategies, and a sense of personal or collective agency

A key part of resilience is agency. This is the belief that we can act to make a difference. Having a sense of agency can help young people feel empowered rather than overwhelmed.

- **Collective agency:** working together with others (classmates, families, communities) to create change, whether through environmental projects, advocacy, or shared efforts toward sustainability
- **Individual agency:** taking personal actions such as reducing waste, learning about climate solutions, or speaking up about concerns.

Prioritise a focus on collective agency and social connection/support, acknowledging efforts of groups, and progress already made over time.

It's important for young people to understand that climate change is not their responsibility to fix—it requires collective effort. However, engaging in meaningful action, no matter how small, can build a sense of hope and control.

Coping strategies for climate distress

PROBLEM-FOCUSED	EMOTION-FOCUSED	MEANING-FOCUSED
Taking concrete steps to address the issue	**Understanding, processing, and managing feelings**	**Finding hope, purpose, and connection**
Advocating for change: writing letters to leaders, signing petitions, or joining school sustainability projects	**Seeking social support:** talking with friends, family, trusted adults, or teachers about their concerns	**Focusing on collective action:** working on community projects and seeing how people can work together
Making lifestyle changes: using public transport, reducing waste, or choosing sustainable products	**Engaging in stress reducing activities**: exercise, mindfulness, journaling, or creative expression	**Educating and inspiring others:** spreading awareness through school discussions and projects, or social media
Participating in initiatives: joining tree-planting programs, community clean ups, or renewable energy initiatives	**Sharing emotions in a safe space:** joining climate discussions or peer support groups	**Celebrating progress:** recognising positive changes, from policy shifts to local conservation efforts

Below is an interactive coping strategy resource you and your students may find helpful- https://www.ecomind.au/how-are-you-feeling

4. CREATING A SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Providing a safe and supportive space for these conversations on climate change is essential. Discussing climate change in the classroom can be challenging, as students may experience a range of emotions—fear, sadness, anger, or even detachment. Try to approach discussion and feelings that may arise with a sense of curiosity. It is also an opportunity for students and teachers to practice their distress tolerance skills and to acknowledge the discomfort of sitting with uncertainty.

Climate change is a chronic stressor, making ongoing emotional support essential. We can pick up some general tips from key principles in disaster recovery.

SAFETY	DISTRESS MANAGEMENT	CONNECTEDNESS	EMPOWERMENT
Creating an environment where students feel psychologically safe to share their experiences, emotions and perspectives	Teaching coping strategies (e.g. mindfulness, emotional regulation, and healthy expression)	Fostering peer support, classroom discussions, and a sense of belonging	Helping students understand their agency in addressing climate issues

Young people need to know that their feelings are valid, that change is happening worldwide, that responsible people like community leaders, schools and teachers are taking action, and that they can be part of those solutions.

Supporting students during class

1. Establish accountable spaces for discussion

- Encourage students to explore different perspectives with curiosity while maintaining a space of respect and accountability.
- Creating ground rules for discussions (e.g., listening without interrupting, respecting different views)
- Encouraging open-ended exploration of climate issues while ensuring discussions return to constructive and solution-focused conversations
- Addressing misinformation with evidence-based information in a way that fosters openness and avoids judgment

2. Validate all difficult emotions

Young people may express a range of different emotions during class discussion. Some students may be talkative, excitable, cry, fidget, or seem spaced out or uninterested. It is essential to:

- Emphasis that all feelings are welcome and can change over time.
  - Normalise difficult feelings by explaining that distress is a natural response to issues that challenge our lives and values
  - Support students to be aware of their emotional state - naming emotions, observing emotions/bodily sensations
- Encourage students to support themselves with emotional regulation through self-compassion, breathing and grounding, and tending to emotional needs - to feel seen, heard, validated and to motivate action.
- Encourage emotional regulation techniques such as breathing exercises, movement, or creative expression
- Emphasise the importance of looking after ourselves and each other as well as encouraging them to ask adults for help

There might also be an opportunity for emotional education, explaining that emotions can be signs that there is a ‘values conflict’ or injustice, and emotions can be a motivating force to take meaningful action.

Supporting students during class (continued)

3. Embrace hope in its different forms	Students may grieve environmental losses, whether it's the destruction of natural spaces, species decline, or changes in their own communities. Acknowledging what has been lost while fostering radical and reasonable hope is key. • Radical hope is about believing in major, transformative changes for a better future, despite challenging odds. It motivates bold actions and broad visions that go beyond current limitations. • Reasonable hope is grounded in realism, focusing on attainable goals and incremental changes. It helps manage climate distress by providing a clear path to meaningful, achievable outcomes. Both types of hope may elicit inspiration with pragmatism, motivating actions that range from ambitious reforms to practical, everyday steps. These can be fostered by: • Allowing space for students to express sadness or frustration • Reinforcing that emotions can be a motivating force for action • Sharing real-world examples of communities adapting and creating solutions • Encouraging collective action so students can feel that they are actively work toward a hopeful future
4. Position climate learning in real-world contexts	Consider the background of your students and the context they live in. Their experience of climate change, beliefs, and feelings may be influenced by: • where they live (e.g., farming community, mining town), • their cultural background • their family and personal history and direct or indirect exposure to extreme weather events Take time to consider the range of different responses your students might have to these materials based on these factors to help facilitate respectful, inclusive discussions. Localising teaching content and including examples can make solutions feel closer to home. The use of hands-on activities and experiences can also be used to build agency and encourage action. Research shows hands-on activities can reduce anxiety, embed problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and help build agency.
5. Foster connection and listening	A sense of belonging, shared purpose and being heard, helps manage stress and promote resilience—not just for climate anxiety but for other life challenges as well. • Encourage peer support and group discussions where students can share thoughts without judgment • Engage in collaborative activities that promote teamwork and community engagement • Make space for active listening, showing students that their concerns are acknowledged and valued

5. TEACHER WELLBEING

Teaching about climate change can be emotionally complex—not just for students, but for teachers too. Seeing students express distress or frustration may be difficult, and if you have strong personal feelings or past experiences related to climate change—such as living through extreme weather events—you may find these conversations emotionally activating.

Tips on teacher wellbeing

UNDERSTANDING YOUR OWN EMOTIONS

Before engaging students in discussions about climate change, take a moment to reflect on your own thoughts and emotions. Some questions to consider:

- How do I feel about climate change?
- What experiences have shaped my views on this topic?
- Are there aspects of climate change I find difficult or uncomfortable to discuss?
- What worries me most about teaching climate change to students?
- How do I typically respond to stress in difficult conversations?

Self-reflective exercises can help you recognise when your emotions might influence the way you teach. If you notice strong personal reactions, take a step back and acknowledge those feelings.

DRAWING ON EXISTING COPING STRATEGIES

You have likely supported students through difficult topics before—whether discussing war or grief. Many of the strategies you already use can be applied. Consider:

- What skills and strategies have been most helpful in the past?
- What barriers prevent me from using these skills in climate-related discussions?
- How can I adapt my approach to feel more confident and prepared?

If you're unsure where to start, talk to colleagues or school wellbeing staff. Peer support can be a valuable way to process emotions and share best practices.

MANAGING STRESS AND STAYING GROUNDED

Teaching climate change can sometimes feel overwhelming, but staying grounded can help maintain perspective, and hold space for complexity and learning. Ask yourself:

- How do I recognise when I'm feeling emotionally drained?
- What steps help me regain my balance?
- When under stress, how do I interact with students, and is there anything I'd like to change?

Building self-awareness around your stress responses can help you navigate difficult discussions with more confidence and ease.

SEEKING SUPPORT

If you are teaching students in a vulnerable context, you may want to speak with your school wellbeing team before, during, and after climate-related lessons. They can offer guidance on how best to support students and provide additional resources if needed.

Consider scheduling check-ins with other teachers. This can be a valuable way to:

- Reflect on how climate discussions went in your classroom
- Share strategies for managing student emotions and difficult moments
- Offer and receive support from colleagues who are navigating similar challenges

Prioritising your own wellbeing

Just as we encourage students to manage their emotions and take action in ways that feel meaningful, teachers also need space to process their own concerns. Practicing self-care, seeking peer support, and recognising the limits of your role can help you feel more prepared and confident in guiding students through this important topic.

6. LINKS TO RESOURCES AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Teaching climate change can bring up tough questions, and it's important to be prepared. Some students may express fear, frustration, or even climate denial, as the topic is emotionally charged and complex. While discussions should remain open and respectful, they shouldn't be derailed into debates that distract from constructive learning.

STTOP have a range of teacher support materials available. You can access them **here.**

FURTHER READING AND SUPPORT

A Guide to Emotions - Psychology Tools
https://www.psychologytools.com/self-help/a-guide-to-emotions

Climate Change Education Summit 2024: Speaker Series
https://ccesummitaustralia.deakin.edu.au/speaker-series/

How Are You Feeling - EcoMind
https://www.ecomind.au/how-are-you-feeling

Independent Education: Responding to Student's Climate Concerns
https://publications.ieu.asn.au/2022-september-ie/articles1/responding-students-climate-change-concerns

Learning to Live with Climate Change: From Anxiety to Transformation
https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/21bbadeb-3181-4217-bb6b-bd478512b702/9781000438291.pdf

NPR: How to Talk to Kids About Climate Change
https://www.npr.org/2019/10/22/772266241/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-climate-change

Psychology for a Safe Climate
https://www.psychologyforasafeclimate.org/

Supporting Infants and Children in Disasters - Emerging Minds
https://emergingminds.com.au/practitioners/supporting-infants-and-children-in-disasters-a-practice-guide/

The Change Empowerment Handbook: Psychological Strategies to Tackle Climate Change
https://psychology.org.au/getmedia/88ee1716-2604-44ce-b87a-ca0408dfaa12/climate-change-empowerment-handbook.pdf

The Existential Toolkit for Climate Justice Educators
https://www.existentialtoolkit.com/

World's Largest Lesson - Climate Change Resource
https://worldslargestlesson.globalgoals.org/resources/?_sft_language=english

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Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

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