

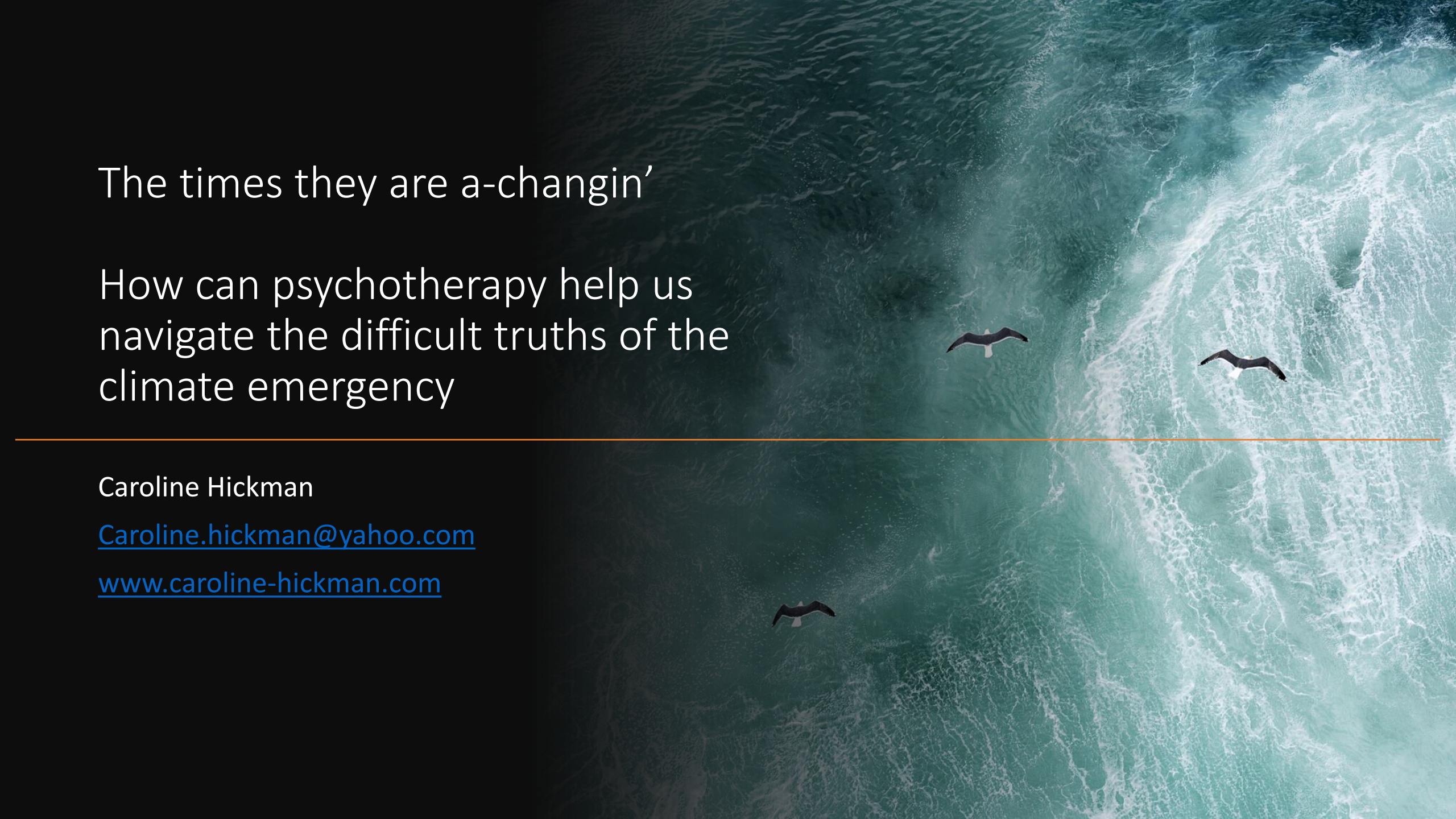
The times they are a-changin'

How can psychotherapy help us
navigate the difficult truths of the
climate emergency

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Overview

The cumulative impacts of climate change in the world today are clear, with record heat waves, wildfires, sea level rise, ice melting and flooding leading to both physical harm and emotional distress

When we examine the health impacts of climate change on people, we can see there are multiple *direct* and *indirect* effects of climate change ranging from acute short term stress reactions (shock) to extreme weather events (panic attack following extreme heat)

Longer term impacts of infrastructure and resource disruption (unable to go to school following impact of wildfires or flooding), air pollution

Indirect impact - indirect adverse experiences observed by witnessing the harm being caused to others such as news reports showing animals and people fleeing wildfires or listening to stories told by survivors of traumatic events (Lawrence et al 2021, Obradovich et al, 2018).

And the psychological distress in response to the overarching threat of climate change which is a chronic long-term stressor (climate anxiety, vicarious trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, complicated grief).



BE SURE
TO WASH YOUR
HANDS AND ALL
WILL BE WELL.

COVID
19

RECESSION

CLIMATE
CHANGE

BIODIVERSITY
COLLAPSE

MACKEY
mackyart.com

IPCC Report Feb 2022

'Delay is death' Antonio Guterres

The report told us that 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming is now extremely difficult to avoid with severe consequences for human health, worsening social inequality and increasingly poor mental health, detailing the impact climate change is having on mental health for the first time.

Natural disasters and prolonged drought are increasingly being linked to post traumatic stress disorder, trauma, anxiety, and depression.

'The facts are undeniable. This abdication of leadership is criminal. The world's biggest polluters are guilty of arson of our only home'

What's really going on?

I wish I was mad

Tell me how should I live in a world that doesn't care

It's ok for you....

It's not eco-anxiety, it's eco-terror

Why don't people care?!





Climate Trauma Lens

- If we fail to look through a trauma lens and to conceptualize client problems as related possibly to current or past trauma, they may fail to see that trauma victims, young and old, organise much of their lives around repetitive patterns of reliving and warding off traumatic memories, reminders, and affects
- Climate Change Lens
- Personal, Family, Social, Collective, National, International, Political, Planetary



Being a Therapist in a time of Climate Crisis

- Therapists are already skilled at supporting people to cope with liminal spaces (in between the old & the new world)
- Explore relationship with the planet, with ourselves and the planet as it moves into crisis
- We understand & can support people to navigate the process of change
- We understand projection, defenses, wishful thinking
- Empathy & understanding – what can get in the way of this – examine our own defenses and fears
- Feelings linked to climate change – guilt, grief, fear, anxiety, loneliness, depression
- Understanding conscious & unconscious process

Being a Therapist in a time of Climate Crisis

- Attachment issues (ambivalence, secure & disorganised are all played out in relation to climate & biodiversity crisis)
- Explore fantasy & reality expressed by clients – climate crisis is real, but may also have fantasies about how it will all develop – links to existing underlying mental health issues and vulnerabilities
- Understand denial can be a way for people to manage terror and try to control the uncontrollable
- ‘Think the unthinkable’ and a safe space in which to do this
- Working with shame and guilt
- Developing a global mind/sensibility – beyond the personal and into the collective – helps to connect



Being a Therapist in a time of Climate Crisis

- Shadow & soul work
- Borderline states – climate crisis as a borderline state – neither one thing nor another
- Both/and thinking rather than either/or
- Dreams, stories, symbols – all help to create a map
- Terminal ‘end of life’ issues & separation & loss, grief & bereavement
- Imaginal work – cannot see the future, but can engage with imaginal and stay with the trouble
- Community
- Therapeutic Triad



What water? I
don't see any





Paul Hoggett (2019)

- We are living in a time when a tragedy which is without precedent is unfolding in front of our eyes.
- We are witnessing catastrophic rates of species extinction and biodiversity loss, soil and ocean exhaustion and runaway climate change



Gus Speth

- 'I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that within 30 years good science we could address those problems.
- But I was wrong.
- The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.
- And we scientists don't know how to do that'

The Culture of Uncare

Sally Weintrobe (The Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis)

- The climate crisis is not easy to explain
- The subject is too big to think about 'all in one go'
- Current 'dominant' western culture encourages people to deny or minimize the problem
- And when people do show concern – this is met by those in power with silence (or indifference, or denial, or attacks)
- Culture of uncare drives self & group idealization (ours is the best & only way)
- This is what action challenges
- We need a nightmare & dream to understand what is wrong & imagine a better world
- And create a culture of care, a sustainable world, active hope & strength & reparation





"Can you give me a hand moving these?"

Eco-anxiety & distress

We live with an awful uncertainty about whether we will take sufficient, sustained, effective action in time to reduce the spread of the more extreme impacts already appearing globally

Congruent & healthy response to the reality we are facing

But for children & young people it is also linked to adult action/inaction – relational trauma

The capacity to be in touch with external reality has long been regarded as an indication of mental health and conversely not having that capacity regarded as mentally unhealthy

How are we
responding to this
cognitively &
emotionally?

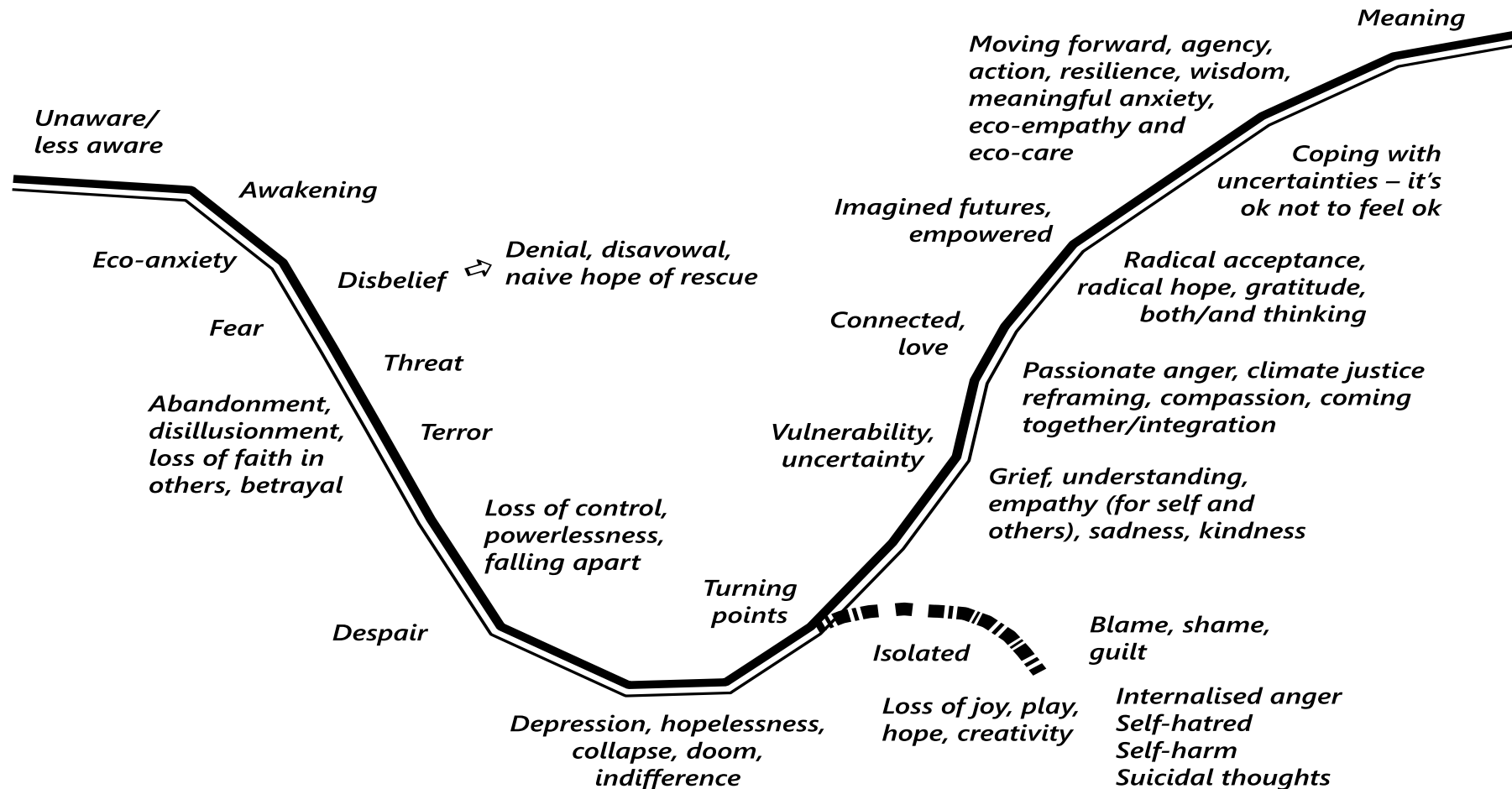
Emotional bio-
diversity


Internal & External

False Binary
Apocalypse or Hope

- Eco-anxiety
- Grief & Solastalgia
- Hope & Hopeless
- Anger
- Blame
- Frustration
- Guilt & Shame
- Sadness & Grief
- Fantasies of rescue
- Apocalyptic Fantasies
- Defensiveness, Avoidance, Denial, Delay & Disavowal
- Nihilism
- Despair

Hickman (2023) Holding the Hope. PCCS Books





2020 BACP survey

- Overall, 55% of people feel that climate change has impacted on their mental health and well-being.
- Of those who said climate change has affected their mental health, 65% were concerned about the impact on the natural world; 63% about increased frequency of natural disasters; 58% were worried about what the world would be like for future generations; and 30% were worried about how their life would be affected.
- This survey shows the impact on the younger age group is higher:
 - By age:
 - 61% of 16-24
 - 60% of 25-34
 - 44% of 45-54
 - 54% of 55 – 64
 - 56% of > 65

ACE's

A helpless anticipation of a future traumatising constant event such as climate change, leads to a child remaining in a constant state of anticipatory anxiety and readiness to run away from the threat or to try to fight it.

But with climate change there is nowhere to run to because it is a globally adverse experience and traumatising event.

Children and young people have few resources to either mitigate or avoid the multiple stressors of climate change discussed above. The sense of helplessness and powerlessness combined with a real threat such as extreme heat or wildfires could lead to a child being in a constant state of anxiety (Shemmings & Shemmings, 2011).

SO WHAT DO
YOU HEAR IN
THE SEASHELL?

I HEAR THE SEA LEVEL
RISING. I HEAR BLUE FIN
TUNA BEING HUNTED. I HEAR
BOAT PEOPLE CRYING. I HEAR
VILLAGES BEING SWEEP AWAY.
... I WANT MY i-POD BACK



Psychosocial climate anxiety scale (Hickman 2020)

- The scale differentiates between different levels of climate anxiety from mild, to medium, significant, severe, to critical.
- As people first become aware of climate change there is a tendency to start at the milder end, progressing towards severe and critical as they become increasingly informed and aware.
- Sometimes people have a sudden and more shocking awakening and go from relatively unaware to severe or critical rapidly, which tends to lead to a psychological crisis.
- The crisis can be accompanied by a breakdown of existing beliefs, securities, trust in other people and in the world generally.
- Based on clinical case studies the scale is useful in differentiating between levels of suffering and disruption to daily life.

Psychosocial climate anxiety scale

Mild – feelings of upset are transient & can respond to reassurance, focus on optimism & hope in others (maybe ungrounded)

Medium – upset more frequently, doubt in ‘others’ capacity to take action, making some changes in lifestyle

Significant – minimal defenses against anxiety, harder to mitigate distress, guilt & shame, little faith in others to take action, significant impact on relationships

Severe – intrusive thoughts, sleep affected, struggle to get any respite, anticipation of human extinction, no belief in others ability to care, may be unable to work

Critical - Suicidal. Loss of personal security - severe

Dreams & reality & climate anxiety

- Dreams (nightmares) of having to kill pets, children or elderly parents as food sources run out and social breakdown threatens social order, or of being killed themselves by parents or older siblings.
- Dreams that their parents have collected drugs so the family could commit suicide together.
- Dreams about fuel shortages leading to them being unable to travel to get to loved ones (parents, partners, family) or to safety more generally (breaking down in unknown places and being threatened by strangers who live there).

Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey (2021)

Hickman, C. Marks, L. Pihkala, P. Clayton, S. Lewandowski, E. Mayall, E. Wray, B. Mellor, C. Susteren, L.

Lancet Planetary Health

- Distress about climate change is associated with young people perceiving that they have no future, that humanity is doomed, that governments are failing to respond adequately, and with feelings of betrayal and abandonment by governments and adults.
- Climate change and government inaction are chronic stressors which have significant, long-lasting and incremental negative implications for the mental health of children and young people.
- The failure of governments to adequately address climate change and the impact on younger generations potentially constitutes moral injury.
- Nations must respond to protect the mental health of children and young people by engaging in ethical, collective, policy-based action against climate change.

10,000 Children and Young people, aged 16 – 25

Australia

Brazil

Finland

France

India

Nigeria

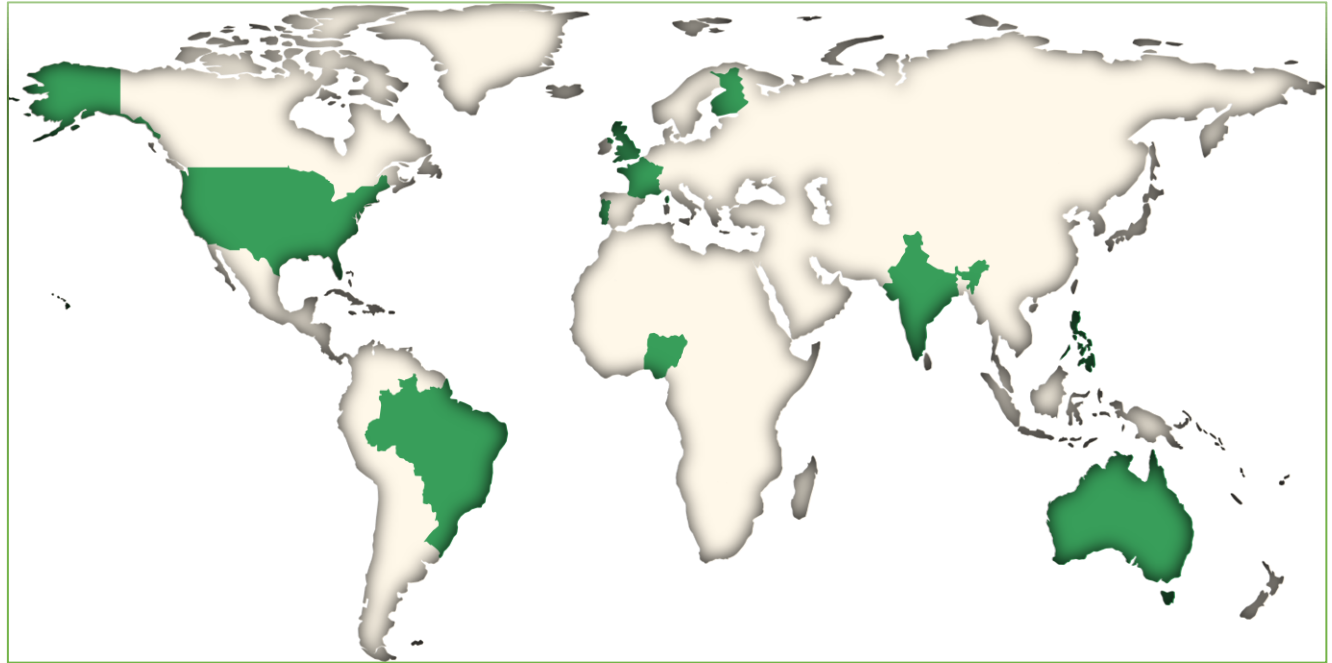
Philippines

Portugal

UK

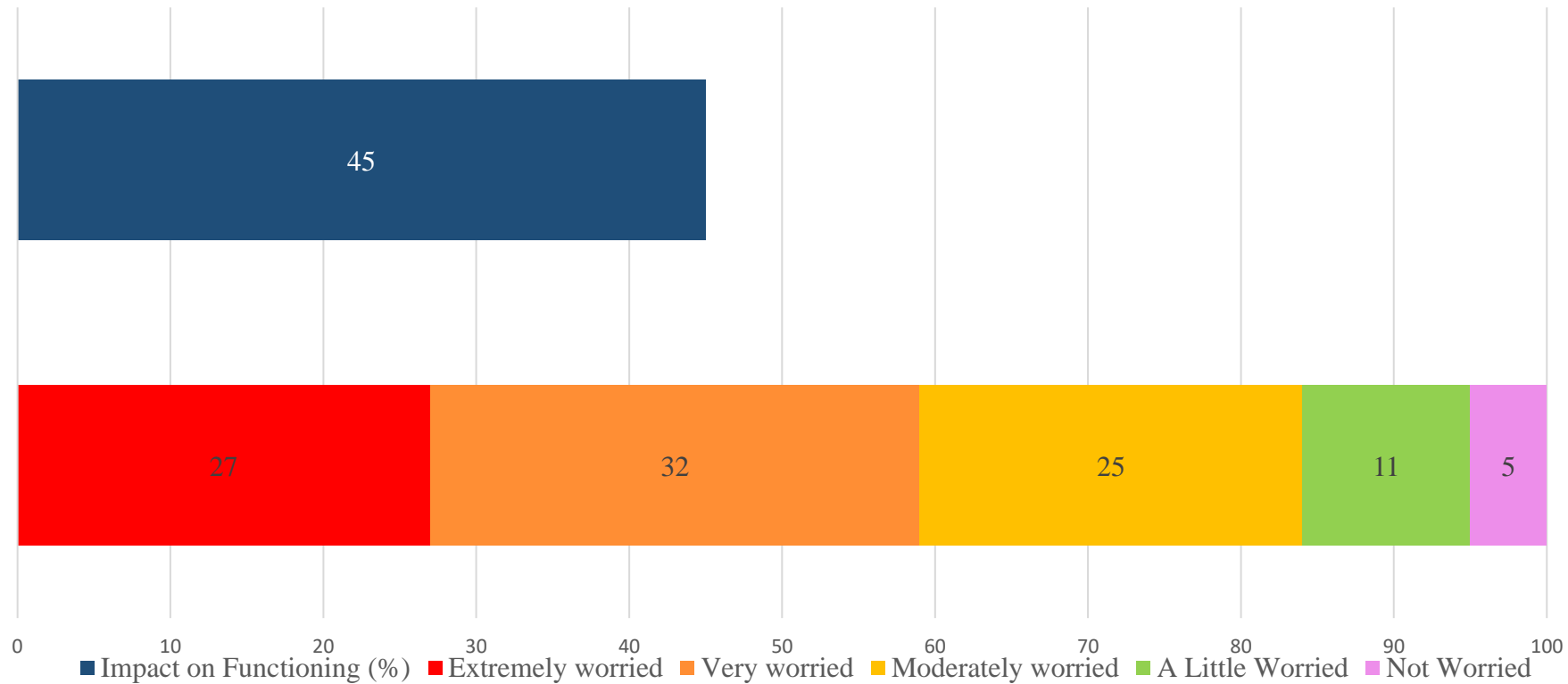
USA

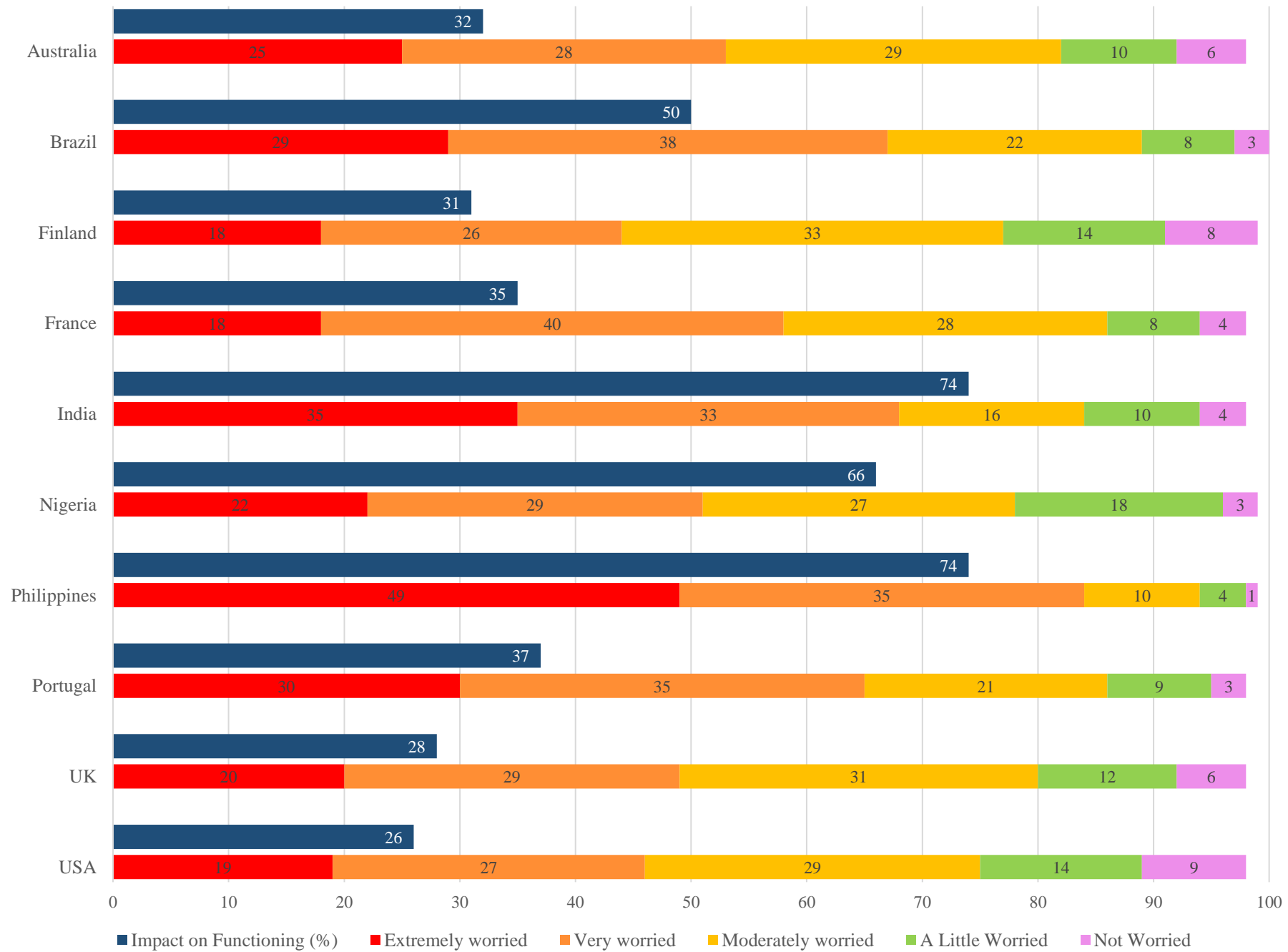
Representative samples from each country



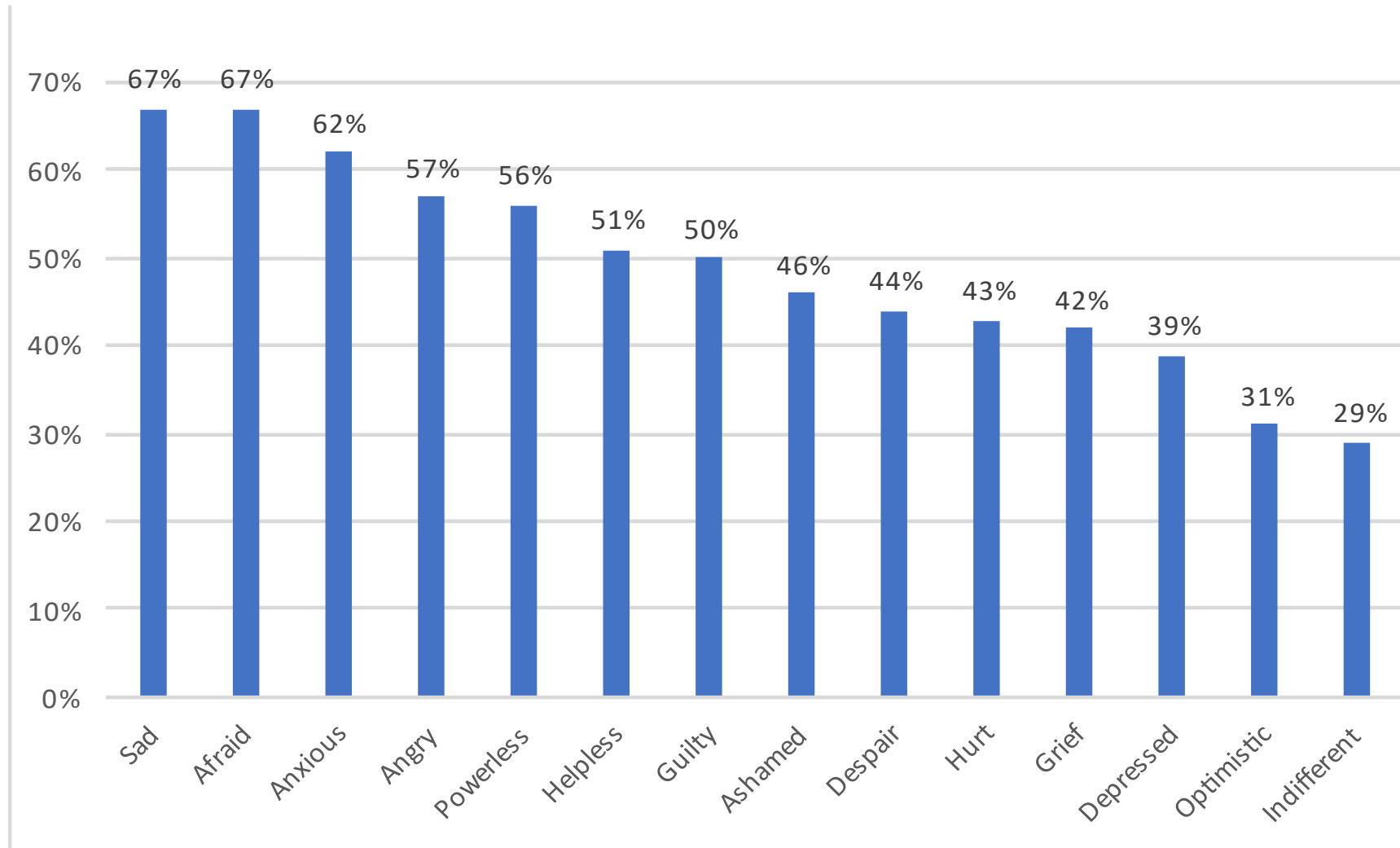
8 out of 10 children and young people across the world, including UK, worry that climate change is threatening people and the planet

45% report **negative impact on daily functioning** (eating, concentrating, work, school, sleeping, spending time in nature, playing, having fun, relationships). In the **UK this is 28%**.





Climate change makes me feel... (% worldwide)



Over half (55% worldwide – 53% UK) think that **they won't have access to the same opportunities that their parents had**

Over half (52% worldwide - 39% UK) think that their **family's security will be threatened** (e.g. economic, social, physical security)

Eight out of ten (83% worldwide -
80% UK - 92% Philippines) think
that **people have failed to take
care of the planet**

Three quarters (or more) think
that **the future is frightening**

75% Worldwide

73% UK

70% Nigeria

92% Philippines

Over half think that **humanity is doomed**

56% Worldwide

51% UK

42% Nigeria

73% Philippines

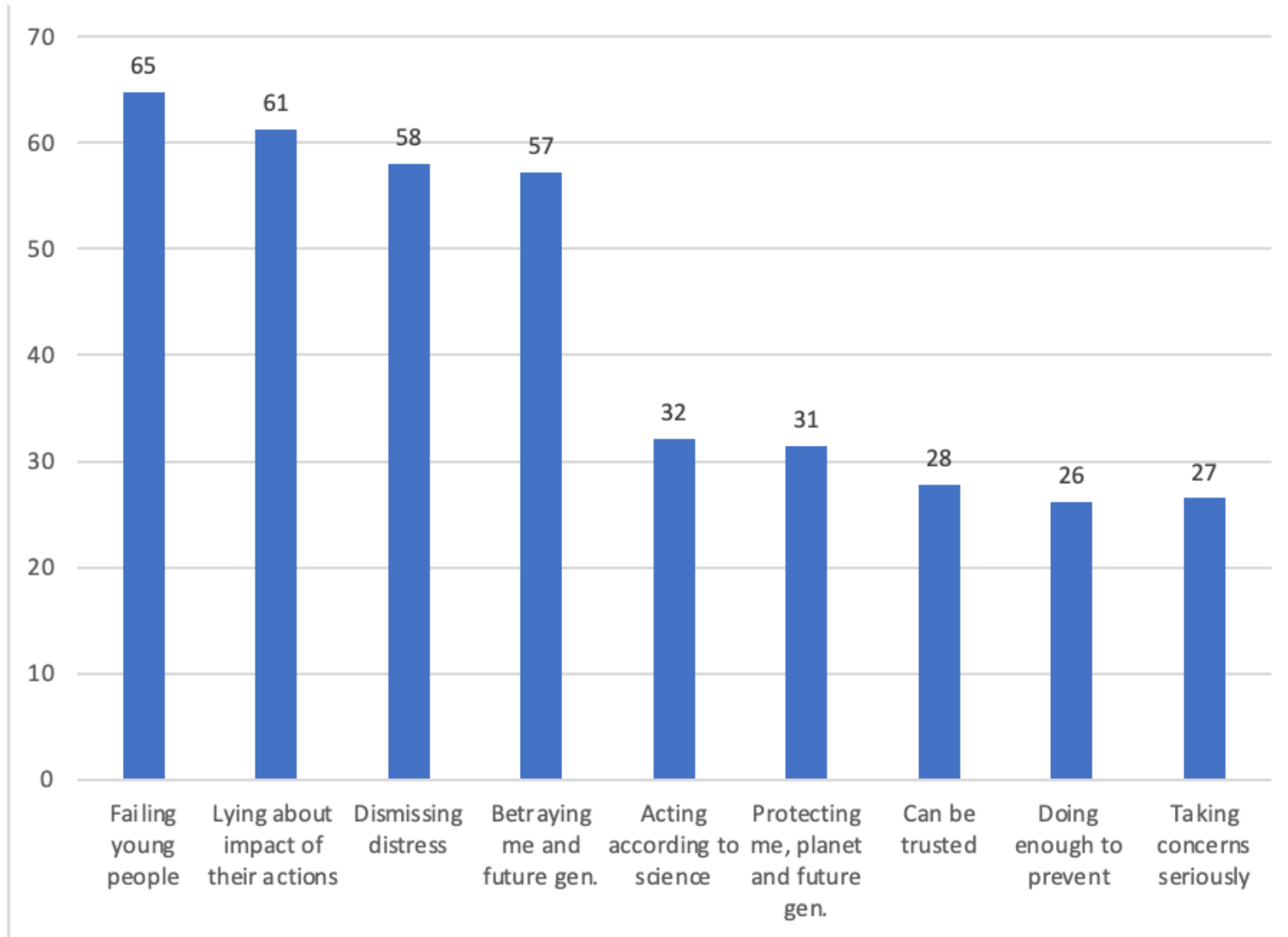
Children and young people reported they have been dismissed or ignored by other people when they try to talk about climate change

Worldwide and in the UK (48%)

Nigeria (66%)

Philippines (51%)

In relation to climate change, I believe that my government / other governments are (UK respondents)



Many young people report feeling betrayed by governments, worldwide and in the UK

Anguished

Angry

Abandoned

Ashamed

Afraid

Belittled

There can be hope...

Reassured

Valued

Protected

Hopeful

Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey

Caroline Hickman

Dr Liz Marks

Dr Panu Pihkala

Prof Susan Clayton

Dr Eric Lewandowski

Elouise Mayall

Dr Britt Wray

Dr Catriona Mellor

Dr Lise van Susteren



Climate crisis as a human rights issue

‘By endangering and harming fundamental human needs, the climate crisis is also a human rights issue.

Legal bodies recognise an intersection between human rights, climate change, and climate anxiety.

Subjecting young people to climate anxiety and moral injury can be regarded as cruel, inhuman, degrading, or even torturous.

(Hickman & Marks et al 2021, p871)

Mature Defences

- Acceptance
- Altruism
- Courage
- Emotional self-regulation
- Gratitude
- Humility
- Humour
- Mindfulness
- Patience
- Respect
- Short term suppression
- Tolerance
- Self-talk

Your dog is worrying my sheep



...There's global warming, acid rain, floods, drought, over population...

Psychosocial Solutions

- Face our denial
- Come to terms with our irrationality (human)
- Get under the surface of our feelings
- Make a place for feelings in technical solutions
- Confront narcissistic entitlement
- Needs vs wants
- Grieve what we have done & lost
- Understand and confront apathy in a realistic way (CC is not distant from us – optimism bias)
- Loss of old ways of living (and defensive shells)
- Examine, understand & repair our relationship with the natural world

Facing multiple uncertainties

- The intensity & scale of the climate crisis prompts us to look carefully at how people (adults & children) experience uncertainties
- And uncertainties are always experienced unequally
- It is insufficient to just tell people to follow advice without listening to and discussing their questions & concerns
- Science & facts need to be balanced up with equal attention to feelings
- Understand the need to go through difficulties rather than avoid them
- Learning to welcome, tolerate & reduce uncertainty
- Psychological support needs – **emotions**
- Cognitive understanding - **thinking**
- Practical suggestions for action – **doing**

Eco anxiety reframed

- *Eco-understanding*
- *Eco-empathy*
- *Eco-compassion*
- *Eco-courage*
- *Eco-community*
- *Eco-awareness*
- *Eco-connection*
- *Eco-belonging*
- *Eco-meaning*
- *Eco-care*
- *Eco-aliveness*



Radical Hope

I am only a single private person, studying in Germany, but I feel the urge to thank you and your colleagues so much for the research about climate anxiety amongst youth around the world.

What the study reveals makes me, for the first time ever, feel that I am not alone with the future and climate anxiety I experience every day. I still don't know what places to go there are in order to learn how to cope better with this anxiety. Still,

I consider the recent study as an incredibly important step for us young people around the world to imaginary, emotionally connect and even visually realize that no one of us is alone with this huge issue.

I profoundly hope that the message of your study reaches politicians around the world as well as all socio-psychological professions so that they can react to the needs of us young people.



