



A brief guide to eco-emotions



An information pack for activities with young people and students



Hello to everyone interested in youth and student affairs!

We want to welcome you to join us on a trip into environmental emotions. This small guide offers tips on how to cope with the global environmental crisis. It is designed for anyone working with young people (aged 15 to 29).

Young people are facing a future overshadowed by the climate crisis and other related emergencies, and it is no surprise that more than half of young people are experiencing worry or anxiety as a result. It is up to adults to build the safest possible future for young people by strengthening their mental health, their sense of community and their agency. Your work with young people makes a huge difference!

Young people need adults to take responsibility and to have the courage to face up to the facts and emotions of the environmental crisis. This is not easy, and we should seek support from our own communities to achieve it.



This guide combines the current research and practical experience of the ecoanxiety and mental health support project (“Ympäristöahdistuksen mieli”, coordinated by MIELI Mental Health Finland) on strengthening mental health and emotional skills. It provides information and methods for

- Learning about environmental emotions
- Strengthening emotional regulation skills, alone or with others
- Clarifying values and the meaning in things
- Strengthening compassion and a sense of community
- Influencing a positive future.

You can use this guide to support your work over several sessions or pick out the exercises and approaches that interest you most and apply them to your own work. At the end of each chapter, we have compiled exercises and activities that have inspired us.

We, the authors, have been dealing with feelings about the environment and the future both personally and through our work for years. We welcome you to a world of environmental emotions, compassion and emotional skills.

*Best wishes from the writing team,
Hanna, Satu and Taneli*

[ympäristöahdistus.fi](http://ymparistoahdistus.fi)



Contents

1. Introduction: The environment and the emotions in us.	5
Glossary of terms related to the environmental crisis and emotions	8
How can environmental and future anxiety manifest itself?	9
Exercises to get to know your emotions	12
2. Encountering young people’s environmental feelings as an adult	16
How do I encourage young people to talk about their feelings about the environment and the future?	19
Working with your own emotions	24
3. Emotional skills – tools for coping with the environmental crisis.	27
First aid for regulating your state.	28
4. In search of relevance and values	35
Tips for working with values	36
5. Encountering questions about the environment and the future together	41
Strengthening community spirit.	43
6. Looking to the future	47
Experimenting with futures thinking and active hope	49
7. More information on environmental emotions	53

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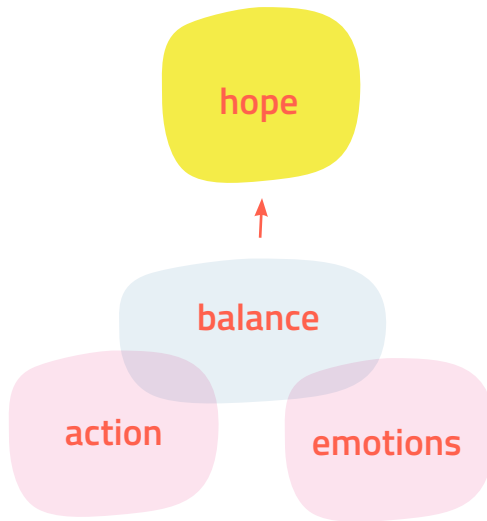
1. Introduction: The environment and the emotions in us

We all, inevitably, experience a range of emotions about the environment and the future. Anxiety about the environment and the future is like the tip of the iceberg; beneath the surface there is a wide range of emotions and states, even if they don't show up as anxiety. However, we may lack the opportunity for deeper encounters with our emotions in the midst of everyday life. Our emotions can remain uncharted territory for all sorts of reasons.

Basic human needs are also mirrored in the environmental crisis. We need security, continuity, care, respect and opportunities for self-fulfilment. The climate crisis, biodiversity loss and other related emergencies are **chronic stressors** that undermine the fulfilment of many of our needs. Unlike many personal crises, the environmental crisis affects us all, with no end in sight.

Increasingly, those working with young people are confronted with emotions related to the environmental crisis and the future on many levels:

- 1** Within themselves, in their own life, and within their immediate circle
- 2** With young people, students or young adults
- 3** As part of different communities, e.g., in a study or work community
- 4** In society, through the media and other social discourse.



To cope with the environmental crisis, like any other burdensome or stressful issue, we need to:

1) **take action** in accordance with our values, 2) face and process all kinds of **emotions**, and 3) achieve **balance** through rest and recovery.

So, what is the right amount of each of these three elements?

It depends a lot on the situation and resources available. To counterbalance action, we need both emotional processing and recovery. However, we cannot just go round in circles processing our emotions, nor can we just focus on recovery.

Active hope is based on actions that are in line with our values.

Action and active hope are needed in order to solve problems of the scale and complexity of the environmental crisis.

This guide deals specifically with emotional skills. These are skills

that help us to tolerate, regulate and share our thoughts and feelings and to deal with challenging situations. Emotional skills can be developed throughout life, regardless of one's background.



Emotional skills can be strengthened throughout life

Many of us have learned in childhood that it is not acceptable to cry unnecessarily, or that it is better to try to ignore emotions if possible. The avoidance of emotions is still common in many cultures globally. Not all of us have the childhood experience of turning to a trusted person to deal with our troubles.

The good news is that it's never too late to learn about emotions, and it's worth refining our emotional skills throughout life. Our inner security increases when we stop to face our own and others' feelings and thoughts with compassion.



Glossary of terms related to the environmental crisis and emotions

- **Environmental crisis:** the complex set of problems posed by climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental pollution.
- **Climate change:** a self-perpetuating phenomenon caused by the use of fossil fuels, intensive agriculture and overconsumption, in which global warming gases, such as carbon dioxide, accumulate too much in the atmosphere – perhaps the most visible part of the environmental crisis. Today, climate change and its associated multiplier effects are called a climate crisis because of their threatening nature.
- **Physical and social consequences of the climate crisis:** melting glaciers, rising sea levels, more frequent extreme weather events, droughts, hurricanes, floods, changes in ocean currents, difficulties in food production, areas rendered uninhabitable by heat or food shortages, spread of species and diseases to new areas, conflicts, and increased refugee populations.
- **Environmental emotions or eco-emotions:** an umbrella term for all emotions related to the environment, nature and climate.
- **Eco-anxiety or environmental anxiety** (also called ecological anxiety or eco-distress): a distressing state of mind of some kind, which may include a range of feelings related to the environmental crisis (e.g., guilt, helplessness, fear). Not a psychiatric, treatable illness, but a realistic and understandable reaction to the state of the planet.
- **Climate anxiety:** a form of eco-anxiety. The environmental crisis is most visible in the news as climate change, so this often causes the greatest and most acute feelings of anxiety.
- **Other crises linked to the environmental crisis:** in a complex world, the climate and environmental crisis is linked to armed conflicts, refugees, pandemics, etc.

How can environmental and future anxiety manifest itself?

The range of emotions related to the environment and the future is diverse. Our own feelings and possible anxiety are conditioned by our life experiences and our repertoire of ways of reacting. Eco-anxiety can manifest itself in physical stress symptoms, sleep problems, worrying, panic attacks and compulsive behaviour, for example. Combined with other psychological stress, eco-anxiety can lead to a decline in functional capacity. However, eco-anxiety, like other types of anxiety, usually acts as a necessary force for change.

Explore the following examples of how environmental emotions manifest themselves. Do you recognise them around you?

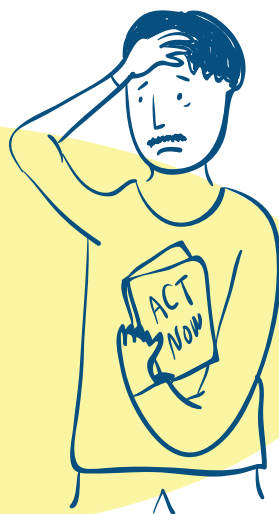


- **Oliver, 16**, has always been interested in nature. He deeply mourns the loss of biodiversity and the fact that Nature will never be the same again. Sometimes, he can't get out of bed and the meaning of studying seems questionable. His parents don't understand; they think that school should come first.
- **Sara, 18**, has previously been treated for other mood and anxiety disorders. She has made radical lifestyle changes and has tried to reduce her own emissions to zero. This has made her daily life difficult, and yet she has a feeling that nothing she does is enough. Her thoughts revolve around climate action, and she finds it difficult to rest.



- **Laura, 25**, has applied for a career in environmental science, with the aim of being part of the solution to the environmental crisis. The more she has studied, the greater the problems have started to look. Her own role in solving them has, in her own eyes, become less and less important. Her thesis is unfinished and it's hard to motivate herself to sit at the computer every day.

- **Noel, 28**, is grieving the break-up of a long-term and supportive relationship and fears loneliness afterwards. One partner was determined to have a child, while the other was equally determined that, for climate reasons, they cannot have children. This led to a break-up decision, although the relationship has, otherwise, been fine.



- **Olivia, 35**, has gone through burnout and is now hesitant to return to research. She has begun to doubt the meaning of her work, and is also worried about her children's future. She would like to avoid the whole issue of the environment because of its distressing nature.

- **Paula, 38**, has recently begun to experience a nagging concern and surprising guilt about environmental issues. She has tried to suppress those feelings, but they won't leave her alone, and, especially on hot summer nights, it has been difficult to sleep. She is determined to start taking action, but wonders what a person approaching middle age could do. There would be so much to fix, and, on the other hand, she would also have to continue to live a so-called normal life.



- **David, 41**, is an experienced youth worker to whom young people have recently begun to open up about climate anxiety. He finds that the subject feels alien to him. There are no words and he feels conflicted; he should be able to take on all the young people's problems, but, at the same time, he feels tired and wants to get out of the situation. In the workplace, it seems that there is an unspoken agreement to avoid these questions – who could he share these ideas with?

Read longer stories about environmental anxiety in the [**My Story series**](#) (in Finnish).

Information and news about the environmental crisis are a burden on mental health. However, mental health is also burdened by

- A lifestyle oriented towards competition, success and materialism
- A sadly widespread lack of compassion in our society
- Over-emphasised, lonely individualism
- The narrowing of humanity to consumerism
- Acting against our better judgement, denying the facts and going against our own ethics
- Knowledge of various social and international crises.



Exercises to get to know your emotions

The purpose of these activities is to lower the threshold for talking about environmental emotions, to explore the range of emotions and to put them into words. When performing the exercises, it is good to allow all kinds of thoughts and feelings. Everyone has the right to share their inner experiences as much as they want. The situation should be calm and unhurried. Guiding the exercises does not require any special skills, but it is a good idea to prepare for the situation by, for example, testing and reflecting on the exercises by yourself or with your colleagues first.



A Wall of environmental emotion words

The aim of this exercise is to express a wide range of emotions related to the environment and to familiarise you with environmental vocabulary. It can be done with all types of groups or as an individual exercise.

Compile different emotive words on, for example, a flipchart, post-it notes or a virtual platform. What feelings and thoughts about the environment, the climate crisis or the future have you noticed in yourself or around you? Collect as many different shades of emotions and reactions as you can come up with. Not all of them have to be first-hand experiences – reactions in the news or on social media can also be collected. You can then pick out a few of the words that speak to you the most and reflect together on why those particular feelings are the most important.

You can use the following list of environmental vocabulary as inspiration.





A shared line of environmental emotions

The aim of this exercise is to deepen the understanding of environmental emotions and emotional words and to enable sharing of emotions in a safe situation. It is suitable for all types of groups.

Choose a suitable space, either outdoors or indoors, and draw an imaginary or real line on the ground. Agree that at one end of the line there is no emotion at all (0) and at the other end there is maximum emotion (10). The facilitator says one environmental emotion word at a time. After hearing the emotion word, participants take a moment to think about it and then use the line to position themselves at the point that describes how they feel. Participants then exchange ideas with the person closest to them: why am I at this particular point? How does the feeling manifest itself? In what situations do I feel this emotion? After a moment of pair discussion, the facilitator asks the pairs to share their ideas with the whole group.

Emotional words: worry, fear, sadness, anger or rage, frustration, guilt, wonder, interest, a drive for action, caring... Think of more emotional words, e.g., based on the previous exercise, and choose the appropriate number of words for the time available.

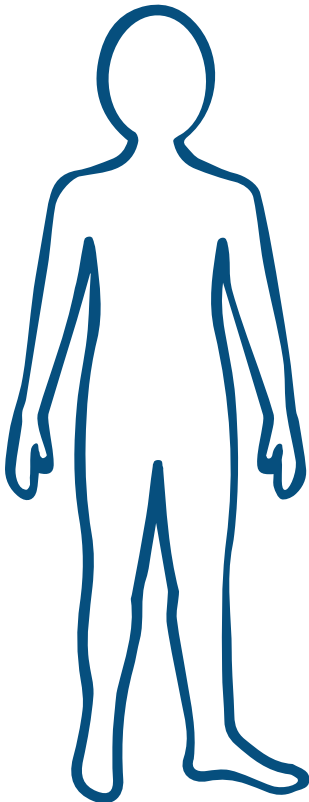




How do emotions feel in the body?

The aim of this exercise is to help you see the mind-body connection and focus on your own experience. The exercise can be done alone or in a group, with everyone working individually. At the end, the outputs of the exercise or the insights that emerged from it can be shared in a group discussion.

Emotions are holistically present in our bodies. But when we are stressed, attention is often focused solely on our head or thoughts, with less attention paid to the rest of the body.



- Use the picture below as an example or draw your own body image.
- Draw, colour or write where in your body you feel the effects of climate change, natural hazards or other threats. If the feeling starts somewhere and moves to another place, you can draw that too.
- Do you notice sensations in your body that are difficult to call feelings? You can describe them too.
- Make another drawing of the feelings you get when you think of something close, dear and important to you (e.g., a close person, a pet or an important place).
- What emotions and sensations did you find in your body? Do you notice a difference in your bodily reactions between feelings of threat and feelings of safety? How did it feel to draw and colour? Was the exercise difficult or easy? Did you discover something new about yourself?



2. Encountering young people's environmental feelings as an adult

Adults face the same uncertainties as young people when confronting big, global questions. Sometimes we may feel inadequate, and it is human nature to protect ourselves against this insecurity, for example by hiding behind the expert role we have been given. Environmental issues also often raise fears of political polarisation, and are avoided or met with silence. Most importantly, we need to seek community support to deal with these complex issues and emotions, for example from our own workplaces.

As a society, we are in a period of transition on climate and sustainability issues; there is a lot of turmoil and controversy. Some young people have already thought about climate issues in enormous depth and may be more mature and wise than many middle-aged people.

Research and our own experience show that young people want honesty and are not fazed by adults admitting their own ignorance and uncertainty in the face of big global issues. The best moments of encounter with young people can bring a strong sense of presence and sharing. Even if we don't know what to say or do, we can focus on listening and giving our time.

"In our work, we often see that adult youth workers are unable to face the emotions of young people. and they go looking for ways to send the young person somewhere. They'll think about whether there is an illness or a diagnosis and start thinking about a psychologist or a period of specialist care. Sometimes this may be necessary, but not always.

The fact that we don't have all the answers is true in many areas of life, but we, too, often lack the courage as adults to say so out loud. It is often difficult for us to step out of the professional space behind our table and for example sit next to the young person . It's too common to search on a computer and try find someone else to help them. This disengagement or habit of redirecting young people is the main reason why many of them are already losing faith in adults, and in making a difference or being heard."

- Youth guidance centre worker -



How to get started in encountering environmental emotions

- Set aside time and ensure a peaceful setting for learning about environmental emotions.
- At the beginning of the discussion on environmental issues, it is useful to agree on the principles of a safer space: how to make the discussion as constructive as possible and allow everyone to be heard. Find [principles for a safer space for example here](#).
- It is worth remembering that it is not useful to argue about scientific facts, such as the veracity of climate change.
- Climate and environmental actions can support one's wellbeing, but it is not constructive comparing their superiority or quantity. We are all different, and we find ourselves in different situations and with different capacities.
- Too much focus on individual choices can exhaust young people who may have already been making these good choices in their own lives for a long time. It may also obscure the perception of the need for social and structural solutions to problems. It is, therefore, worth avoiding too much focus on individual climate action.
- When designing environmental and climate actions, it is useful to focus on influencing community and society, rather than on individual environmental actions.

How do I encourage young people to talk about their feelings about the environment and the future?

The key to addressing feelings and anxiety about the environment is to express our appreciation and acceptance of the young person's experience both verbally and non-verbally. Emotions can be treated as messengers of things that matter to us, and there is no need to rush to resolve anxiety. Here are some tried and tested guidelines for talking about the environmental crisis and the anxiety it can cause. You can adapt the example sentences in your own words.

Express your interest in hearing the young person's experiences and ideas. Let them know that you are willing to think about the issues together, even if you don't have any ready-made solutions.

What you said sounds important. Tell me how you have thought about this.

This is thought-provoking. I don't really know how to respond to this issue, but let's think about it together.

Point out that reactions of anxiety and worry are normal and understandable.

It's totally understandable that our current disconnected way of life creates concern and anxiety. The scale of the problem is huge, and it would be a miracle if it didn't cause any distress.

The root of the problem lies in society, not in you or any other individual.

Point out that environmental issues concern us all: we all depend on the non-human parts of Nature and their balance. Could you share some of your own thoughts and reactions to the environmental crisis with the young person?

These environmental issues concern us all. We are really in the same boat. I worry about this too, and sometimes I feel quite anxious myself.

Young people need adults to have the courage to talk about the facts and feelings of the environmental crisis. Tell them that there is no need to rush to resolve eco-anxiety or other feelings.

Let's just talk. Anxiety is not usually dangerous. Let's listen to what your anxiety/feelings have to say.

Make the point that no one should be left to face these issues alone.

We should have more places where people can talk about these issues and get support from each other.

Think out loud about the importance of finding the right balance between action, keeping up to date with environmental information and news, and rest and recovery.

Should we think about what is helpful to you right now? I don't mean to deny or ignore the facts and urgency of the environmental crisis, though.

Present a two-level perspective – the ability to see both positive developments as well as threats and problems. Challenge your own/ others'/ society's and social media's predominantly black-and-white thinking.

While the disaster news is true, there are also positive things happening. It's often hard to see them at the same time.

Apart from these big problems, have you noticed any positive news or changes?

Allow them to reflect on big and difficult questions and existential angst.

I, myself, find that thinking about the environmental crisis seems to bring the issues of life and death very close. These are really big questions, and that's why it's important to think about them.

Henry's story

Henry, 18, is severely distressed by the state of the environment and has started to skip school a lot.

He is convinced that it is better to die before the environmental crisis escalates and society collapses. He has thought a lot about death and mourns the loss of other animal species to extinction. On that scale, even his own death doesn't seem like a big deal. He thinks that it would be a good thing if humans were to disappear without destroying other life.

The school social worker listens calmly and replies that they do not really know how to solve the problem, even if they really want to. They ask more specifically about Henry's thoughts on death: has he planned to do something to himself? They then go on to ask him what he thinks would help him and what he wishes he could do.

The social worker encourages Henry to speak by saying that they are interested in his thoughts and that they will find out more about the subject. They admit that they are also scared by the state of the world.

At the end of the discussion, Henry says: "I'm glad you didn't say anything meaningless, or that we should focus on the positive aspects or something. I don't really want to die yet."





What if a young person is experiencing severe eco-anxiety?

- **Eco-anxiety involves a wide range of issues and symptoms related to an individual's developmental history, age and relationships.** Nevertheless, it is important that environmental feelings are not explained away or turned into another problem but are rather given their own space to be dealt with.
- **Suicidal or psychotic behaviour**, i.e., a serious loss of a sense of reality, requires immediate access to further help. Similarly, additional help is needed if the young person is difficult to contact for a long period of time or if their everyday functioning is seriously threatened.
- **The busy, individualistic and success-driven lifestyle of our society** is intertwined with both the mental health crisis of young people and environmental problems. The solution cannot be treatment of the individual alone, but the courage to talk about social change.
- **Young people usually hope that adults will be able to bear their feelings** and their conflicting experiences, and not pass them on to someone else.
- **Courageously encounter young people's anxiety** and even the most difficult feelings, working within your own resources and skills, while seeking community support for yourself.
- **Remember your role as an important, secure adult** offering a genuine encounter in the life of a young person.



For consideration by the youth work community: How do we experience environmental anxiety among young people? What can be the benefits, and what are the drawbacks? Which anxiety-related reactions are more difficult to cope with for us as adults, and which are easier? What factors strengthen our capacity as adults to cope with the emotions of young people? How can we build compassionate communities that protect mental health when working with young people?



Working with your own emotions

Identifying your innermost feelings and needs is often not easy, but it is the key to genuine, honest interaction with others. It is also an essential basis for looking after your own wellbeing. It is a process with which we are never finished, but always incomplete.

The following exercises will help you to develop your emotional skills as a professional.



Dealing with your own emotions as a professional

You can reflect on the questions in this exercise through your job role or your private self. Take notes for yourself and share the ideas generated by the exercise with others, if you wish.

- How am I used to expressing my feelings?
- How have my feelings been dealt with at different stages of my life?
- How does it feel to have someone interested in hearing about my particular experience?
- What would happen if I just stopped to listen to my feelings, without the need to judge, criticise, change or resolve them?
- What feelings about the environment and the future do I recognise in myself? Which environmental feelings are easier to deal with, which ones are more difficult?
- Have my feelings about the environment changed over the course of my life? If so, how?
- Try adopting a curious, questioning and non-authoritative attitude towards feelings. It may be that asking and listening are actually more important than finding the right answers.



Do you need to reflect more deeply on different emotions? On our website, we have put together **reflection exercises** (in Finnish) to explore feelings of compassion, hope, sadness, guilt and anger.



The four-square of emotions

The aim of this exercise is to make visible both how the feelings of others affect us, and how our own feelings affect others. The exercise is suitable for a workplace community (e.g. in youth, social or educational work). It can be completed first as a self-reflection exercise and then in a joint discussion.

Emotions and states of mind are transmitted from one person to another, and avoided and unspoken emotions are particularly well transmitted. In our experience, there can be a tendency in many workplaces to avoid talking about environmental issues and feelings related to them. This exercise identifies your own and young people's feelings about the environment, and how adult workers' own reactions affect young people's feelings and vice versa.

- Draw a four-square on paper according to the picture below.
- In the upper left-hand square, write down your own feelings about the environment and in the upper right-hand square, write down the feelings of young people about the environment. If you don't know how young people feel, ask them or use the "Wall of environmental emotion words" exercise above, for example.
- Then consider how the young person you are dealing with may be affected by your environmental feelings (identified or unidentified), and how you are affected by the environmental feelings experienced by the young person.
- In the lower left-hand square, write how your own feelings can affect the young person's feelings, and in the lower right-hand square, how the young person's feelings can affect your own feelings and reactions.
- Discuss together whether the exercise was easy or difficult. What insights did you gain?

My own
environmental
emotions

Young people's
environmental
emotions

How can my own
environmental
emotions affect
young people?

How can
young people's
environmental
emotions affect me?

3. Emotional skills – tools for coping with the environmental crisis

Environmental emotions can sometimes get the better of us. The brain can become overloaded by the sheer volume of information coming in, and our thoughts can run through both the past and the future. It is, therefore, worth actively strengthening our sense of internal security. Emotional and interpersonal skills and other wellbeing reinforcement can help with this. Secure daily routines, genuinely supportive relationships, and regular nutrition, exercise and rest are particularly important in times of crisis.

Strengthening the connection with non-human Nature and spending time in pleasant natural environments relieves stress and boosts wellbeing. Paying attention to the present moment through sensory or bodily activation helps to regulate the nervous system from over- or under-activity to a more appropriate state. We should equip ourselves and each other with the useful skills and safety nets we need when difficult moments arise.

Emotional skills include the ability to

- Detect, recognise and name different emotions
- Express and understand different emotions
- Regulate emotions.

These are skills that you can develop throughout your life!



First aid for regulating your state

You can use the following regulation tools yourself or guide young people to use them, either alone or in a group. When facilitating these exercises for others, you can read the text directly out loud or apply it in your own words. It's a good idea to try out the exercises first, either on your own or with a colleague, for example.

Tip: After each exercise, it can be useful to take a moment to notice to verbalise how you felt about the exercise. Was the exercise easy or difficult? Did you gain any insights? It is a good idea to allow everyone in the group to share as much as they want about their own experiences.

Focusing on perceiving the reality around you through your senses

The aim of this exercise is to practise mindful presence and to calm the central nervous system. This exercise can be done together with a young person or can be facilitated for a group, either by reading it out loud or applying it in your own words.

- Take up a good, stable position, either sitting down or standing up.
- Look around calmly, let your eyes wander, and then let them focus on five different things. Say the names of those things calmly in your mind (people, plants, objects, pets...).
- Then turn your gaze downwards or even close your eyes. Now focus on your sense of hearing: What are you hearing right now? Pay attention to four different things your hearing brings to you. Say the names of those things in your mind (e.g., the sound of the wind, the song of a bird, the typing of a computer, the whir of a machine, the sound of your own breathing...)
- Now focus your attention on your sense of touch and your whole body. What do you feel? Identify three different things you feel right now and say their names in your mind (the sensation of your clothes, airflow, warmth, coolness, the sensation of breathing...).
- Concentrate on breathing through your nose and pay attention to your sense of smell. Notice one or two different smells, and say their names in your mind. Take a few calm breaths and then open your eyes.
- What do you notice? If you don't notice anything different, that's fine. The exercise is not a performance that you can do as correctly as possible; rather, it's OK to do it just the way you did this time.

Butterfly tapping

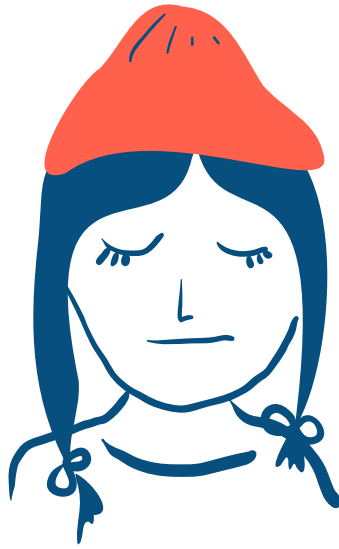
The aim of this exercise is to instil a sense of security, reduce overactivity and alleviate acute anxiety.

Cross your palms over your chest, left palm to the right and right palm to the left. Slowly tap the fingers of both hands on your chest and focus on the sensation. You can close your eyes or look downwards. At the same time, breathe in and out calmly at your own pace, slightly slowing down. There is no right or wrong way to do this exercise; all kinds of ways are appropriate. The sense of touch and movement of your limbs bring your attention to the moment and reduce overactivity. The crossed movement and touch activate both sides of the body and brain connections.

You can also take a secure, firm grip on one or both of your own shoulders and think of your touch as the support of a safe adult for a child: I won't leave you, you're not alone, I'll take care of you.

Take some time to recognise how this feels in your body. Take a few more slow, deep breaths.





A moment's worry

The aim of this exercise is to limit the time spent worrying and allow time for things that bring wellbeing.

Set aside a suitable moment, for example 5 to 30 minutes each day, to reflect on your worries and concerns. As worries come up during the day, write them down, and take them into active consideration during your moment's worry. At the moment's worry, allow yourself to react, reflect and grieve over big or small things alike. Allow yourself not to think about them at other times.

Don't be hard on yourself if worries keep coming up. Gently remind yourself again and again that you don't have to be aware of everything all the time. This is not to underplay the scale of global problems, but rather to increase an individual's inner peace and capacity to act in a challenging situation.

Getting closer to Nature

These exercises are preferably done outdoors in a pleasant natural environment. The exercises can be done alone or in a group. The aim is to raise awareness of the importance of environmental issues and our natural connection with the non-human Nature.

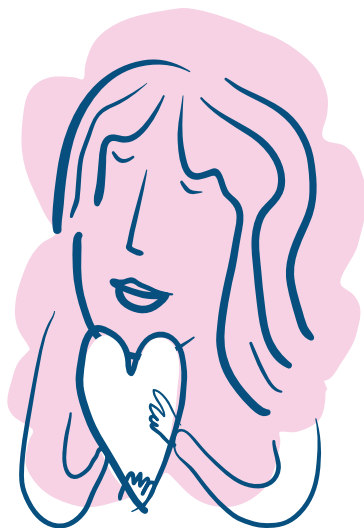
- Walk around the area for a while and find natural elements that appeal to you and speak to you. Each person can choose between 1 and 5 elements that relate in some way to them personally, to their own thoughts and feelings. Think to yourself why you chose these things and what they say about you. Finally, everyone takes turns to share as much as they want about their findings.
- Stop at a natural feature that interests you, such as a fully grown tree or a seedling. Stop and think what it would wish for if it could speak. What could it ask of you, or of humanity as a whole? How do you react?
- As a group, look for natural elements that symbolise gratitude for different things. What do you want to thank non-human Nature for? Gather your findings and tell each other what you feel grateful for. For each element, focus for a moment on the feeling of gratitude and show it through movement, for example by placing your hand over your heart, or show it with words.



The following exercise is suitable for self-reflection and writing.



Choose a tree that you like and sit near it for a while. You can touch it and study its shape. Imagine that this tree could understand you and treat you with kindness. It could get to know you for who you really are. What would the tree say about you?



A meditation of loving compassion towards ourselves and the environment

The aim of this exercise is to strengthen your compassionate attitude and your own wellbeing. Try doing the exercise by yourself or with a colleague, for example, and then you can facilitate it for a young person alone or in a group.

Sit in a comfortable, relaxed position. You can start the exercise by breathing calmly for a while. Gaze downwards or close your eyes if it feels comfortable to do so. You can also hold one hand on your chest at your heart to show compassion for yourself.

Now bring to mind someone close and dear to you, a family member or a friend. Think about how this loved one, like all other people on the planet, wants to live a happy, good and meaningful life. Tell them quietly in your mind: "I wish you a happy and meaningful life. I wish wellbeing and safety for you. I hope you will be kind to yourself. I wish you peace of mind."

Next, focus on yourself. You, like your loved ones and all other people, want to live a happy, good and meaningful life. Tell yourself the same things you just wished for your loved one: "I wish myself a happy and meaningful life. I wish wellbeing and safety for myself. I hope I can be kind to myself. I wish myself peace of mind."

Repeat the sentences one more time.

Then think about the whole planet. Think about how resilient and vibrant Nature is and how amazing its different environments are – forests, steppes, glaciers, seas, rivers, mountains, cities, villages. Think about how you and your loved ones are a small part of this planet.



The planet is now struggling with many problems, the effects of which you are also experiencing. Remind yourself that you wish well for yourself and for the whole planet as you live with and try to fix these problems.

Wish well for the whole world, including for people far away and for non-human Nature. Tell the world and its inhabitants: "I wish us all a happy and meaningful life. I wish us increasing wellbeing and safety, even if we live in the midst of huge problems. I hope we can work together to solve these problems. I hope we can all be kind to ourselves. I hope we can all be kind to each other. I wish us peace of mind."

Finally, turn your attention back to your breathing. Take a few calm breaths at your own natural pace. Then open your eyes and return to the space around you. Thank yourself for this exercise.

4. In search of relevance and values

We live in a turbulent world, where information and different opinions are endlessly available. The decisions and actions of society at large are far from always conducive to the wellbeing of people and Nature. It can help if we pause to reflect on the things that are important and meaningful to us. Clarifying your values and what matters most helps you to direct your actions and energy in a way that supports your wellbeing.

Exploring values and acting in accordance with them in an informed way can help young people to understand the world and is, of course, beneficial for people of all ages. Our values change throughout our lives, and these reflections are never completed in one go. Young people also challenge us grown-ups with their own views. We should, therefore, be prepared to explore values honestly and critically, both by ourselves and together with young people.

When considering environmental issues and values, you may be confronted with a variety of contradictions. You may find that...

- Your own values are not being realised in your life as you had imagined. For example, protecting Nature is an important value for most people, but we are not always ready to give up a consumerist lifestyle.
- You encounter conflicts between different values. For example, human living standards versus the wellbeing of non-human Nature.
- You encounter conflicts between generations. For example, young people may be more willing to give up materialistic values than older generations.



Tips for working with values

Thinking about values can feel challenging. Values can be anything big or small that we consider to be important and meaningful. This is why it is particularly important to find a quiet space and enough time to pause and reflect on values. The following exercises can stimulate your awareness of what is important to you and help you to pursue a lifestyle that reflects your values.

Virtues as a compass

The aim of this exercise is to clarify what good things you want to strive for, and which virtues guide your actions. The exercise can be done alone, together with young people or in a community.

- Look at the words related to virtues and ideals on the next page. Which ones appeal to you? Choose 2 to 5 of the most important ones.
- How are these virtues reflected in your actions? How could they be reflected? What could you do to make them reflected even more – in particular, pay attention to what kind of community action could support this?
- Consider the above questions, first alone for a moment, then in pairs, for perhaps 15 minutes. Now share your ideas with your group.
- Reflection can be challenging and may have to be continued or repeated after some time.

Virtues as a compass





Things that matter to me

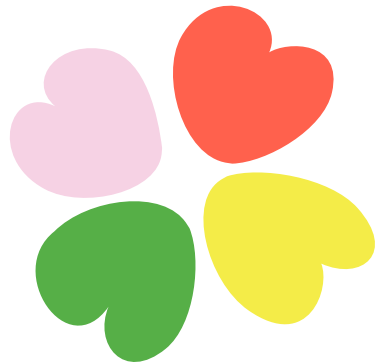
The aim of this exercise is to identify things and values that are important to you. The exercise can be performed alone or in a group, working individually. It can be used as a basis for discussion and, if desired, for sharing ideas in the group.

What are your values? What kind of thoughts and actions could they lead to? Continue the following sentences by writing them out. Listen to your heart and try to respond intuitively with the first idea that comes to mind. If you find a particular sentence difficult, you can skip over it and come back to it later.

- At my core, I am a person who...
- I would want more ... my life.
- If I had three wishes, I would wish...
- What brings meaning to my life is...
- I am inspired by...
- I would like to live a life where...
- I would like to develop in myself...
- I am grateful for ...
- In environmental matters, I consider it important to...
- Nature means to me...
- I dream that...
- I attach the utmost importance to the fact that...

What do the finished sentences tell you? Did you notice anything new or surprising? Did the answers reveal any contradictions?

On the leaves of the four-leaf clover on this/next page, pick out the four things that are the most important and meaningful to you. They don't have to be finished or fully thought through, but you can pick the things that are currently on your mind and seem to need your attention.





Your own wellbeing chart

The aim of this exercise is to draw attention to how different aspects of your wellbeing are currently honoured in your daily life. What kind of changes are needed to better reflect your values and needs? This chart is just one way of modelling the different aspects of wellbeing. Some aspects overlap, and you can make your own version of the chart if you wish.

The exercise can be done together with the young person, or it can be facilitated as an independent task in a group setting.

- Draw two pie charts according to the model on the next page. In the first chart, write how wellbeing is realised in your life today. You can colour in the sectors and write your comments and thoughts on them.
- Then write and colour in the second chart to show how you would ideally like each of these aspects to be weighted relative to each other. How important do you consider each aspect of wellbeing to be?
- Now compare the two different charts. What differences do you notice? Which areas are receiving enough attention? Was there something that surprised you?
- Which area would you most like to see strengthened? What small act could you do to strengthen it today?
- Could someone support you in these different areas?

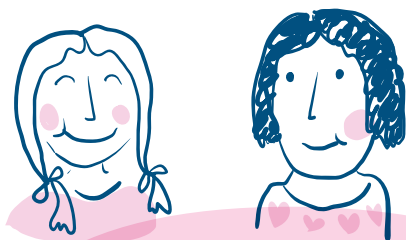




5. Encountering questions about the environment and the future together

The world is changed and improved through a sense of cooperation and community. Especially as the environmental crisis unfolds, communities and community life are essential for human survival and functioning. Hardly any of us are completely self-sufficient in either our daily food or physiological, psychological and spiritual needs. Many experts on the environmental crisis point out that in this age, people should seek out communities that suit them: ones that can offer understanding, security, meaning and hope.

How can you identify a community? Are we a community? Even a loose community or association of people can provide security and resilience in times of great change. Strengthening the community spirit in a place of study or in youth facilities offers young people the opportunity to experience a sense of community.



We can strengthen the spirit of our own community, for example, by making it a habit to greet everyone, to look them in the eye, to ask how they are, and to be aware of newcomers. These small but significant acts, when repeated, increase everyone's sense of security.

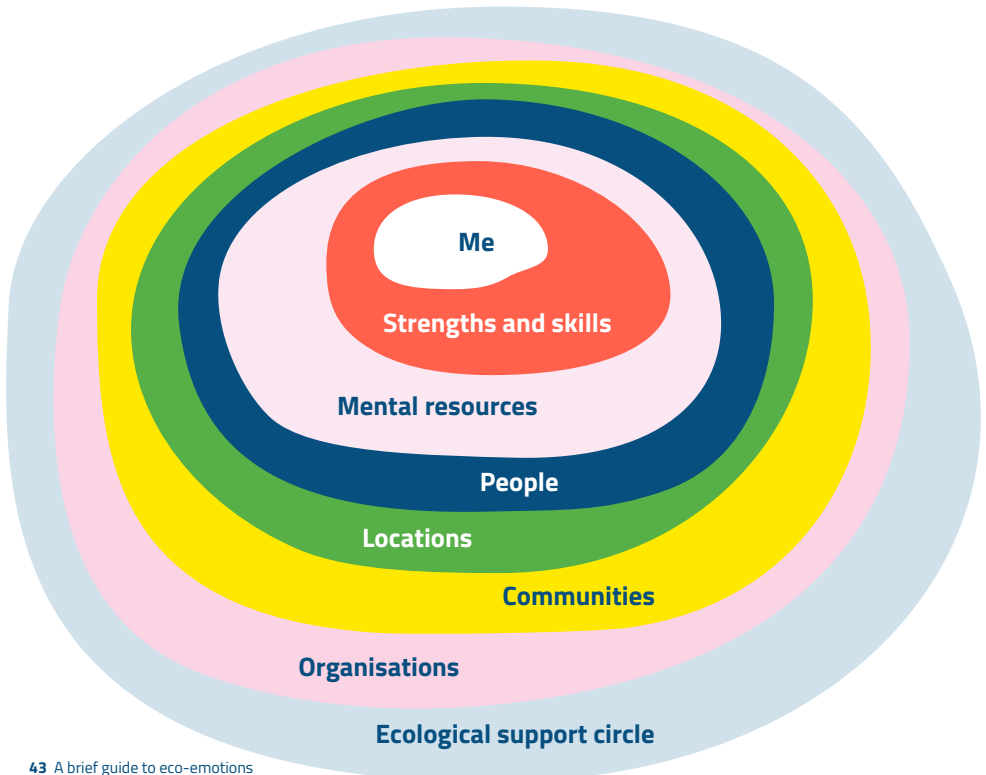
Facing and dealing with environmental issues can involve a wide range of tensions and conflicts. Some people are more aware of these issues, while others tend to avoid them and focus on other things. The fear of confrontation or escalation can make it difficult to broach the subject, but it is still worth taking the plunge. It may be necessary to say out loud that avoiding the difficult emotions associated with an environmental crisis is partly very understandable, and that community members are allowed to be at different stages of the environmental awareness process.

Strengthening community spirit

The scientific facts speak for the need to strengthen communities. The following exercises will help to highlight the importance of community support and provide practical stimuli for community involvement. They can help people from many different backgrounds to find common ground and strengthen their relationships.

Identifying our community's circles of support

This exercise helps to make visible the internal and external resources we have at our disposal which support a strong sense of community. This exercise should be performed jointly by young people and adults. First spend 20 to 30 minutes working on your own, and then set aside enough time (e.g., 15 to 20 minutes) for a collective debriefing.



Me

Write your name in a circle in the middle of the paper.

Strengths and skills

The second circle is where your inner strengths and personal skills come in, enabling you to overcome adversity. Think about your own abilities and characteristics.

E.g., courage, honesty, caring, fairness, good communication skills, creativity.

Mental resources

The third circle lists the mental resources that help you to calm down when you face adversity. These can be things like memories, images, values and beliefs that bring you peace and security.

For example, a picture of yourself stroking a pet, a memory of a good time with a loved one, a picture of a cosy activity, a memory of some affirming feedback you received, faith in the good in humanity.

People

At the next level, list the people who are important to you and who are genuinely supportive. They let you express your feelings freely and value you and your ideas.

If you find it hard to find people at this point, you can think about how to strengthen your own networks. Quantity is not the most important factor, as many people are happy with just one trusted relationship.

Locations

In the next circle, list concrete places that give you a sense of peace and security, as well as resources to deal with environmental crises and other stressful situations.

For example, a place you love in Nature, your own room, the library, community house.

Communities

Write down your communities in the next circle. Groups like this will increase your resources and sense of security. You can also expect to get help from them in difficult times.

For example, face-to-face or online communities, associations and hobbies that you belong to or could join, study or work communities, non-profit organisations.

Organisations

In the next circle, you can add the wider organisations that you or your community are connected to.

For example, public services available to you, contacts with decision-makers and national or international organisations. These organisations have social, political or economic power and can be expected to help and support.

Ecological support circle

Add your ecological support circle to the last circle. This includes biodiversity, the air you breathe, rain, soil and food, and other parts of Nature that support your existence. You can also add non-material things like beauty, calmness and spirituality to this circle.

Once you've completed the chart, you can look at it and think about how you could strengthen your skills and support networks.

Discuss the exercise with the group. What did you find? Which support circles were easy to identify, and which were difficult? Why? How could you work together to strengthen your support networks?

A board of encouraging and inspiring words

The aim of this exercise is to make compassion, kindness and goodwill visible, and to increase a sense of community and security within your group. The exercise can be done together with young people or a work team. If you wish, you can also perform the exercise by addressing the words to yourself.

- What encouraging and inspiring message would you like to give to your community members in the midst of the environmental crisis?
- What words or phrases could you use to express kindness and compassion towards others?
- What words would you use to show caring, concern and kindness?
- Put together your own board of phrases and words. There's no requirement to avoid cliché here.
- Try saying the words and phrases out loud to each other in turn. How does it feel?

Recognising and reinforcing what is good in the workplace

The aim of the reflection questions is to prepare us to face young people's environmental emotions and anxiety, and to support discussion of the topic among the work community.

- Which of our skills and strengths are particularly useful in times of the environmental crisis and its cumulative effects?
- What good and supportive qualities do we have? Where do we do good?
- What are the benefits of sharing environmental emotions? Or of sharing emotions in general?
- What are the pros and cons of eco-anxiety? For young people, or for employees?
- How can we strengthen our capacity to cope with and deal with anxiety among young people?



6. Looking to the future

Do we have other possible futures than the often dystopian images that we see in the news and on social media? The answer is yes. The future is very much shaped by how we imagine it and how we talk about it. That's why it's really important for us to see desirable futures and to dare to talk about them.

Young people's visions of the future reflect how previous generations – today's adults – act and make decisions. Young people's faith in the future has been dented by the slow response of policymakers to the climate and sustainability crisis. Young people are demanding effective action from adults and are often more willing to give up a consumerist lifestyle. In addition, they want opportunities to influence things that matter to them, and it is up to adults to support them in this.

For future generations, it is important that we dare to look at the situation as it is now, and to face up to change: to give up something of the present and embrace the new. We want to encourage

everyone working with young people to discover their own strengths and skills in building a shared, hopeful future.

How do we influence the future?

- 1) **At the level of individual choices**, in our own lives, in our families or communities: for example, how we eat, move, live, consume.
- 2) **By influencing the structures of society**: for example, in the workplace, working in organisations or politics and calling for change.
- 3) **At the level of mindsets and worldviews**: for example, by reinforcing compassion, fairness, responsibility and solidarity.

We all influence the future, either consciously or unconsciously.

It is, however, useful to note that an individual's lifestyle choices have a limited impact. Reducing your own environmental impact or carbon footprint to the limit can lead to exhaustion and cynicism. On the other hand, everyday choices made according to one's values are important for wellbeing. As knowledge about good choices spreads, it changes our perception of what is normal and desirable in society.

In addition to individual choices, attention should be paid to community and societal forms of influence. Talking about the environment and your feelings and aspirations is also an active and effective way of taking action.



Experimenting with futures thinking and active hope

A future within the planet Earth's carrying capacity can open up opportunities for the better. So, let's take action and think together about the future, talk about our aspirations and join forces to make a difference together.



Let's ask: What if?

This exercise can be done alone, with young people or in a work community. The aim is to broaden our perspectives on the future.

Take a pen and paper or use another note-taking tool. Think about the future 2, 10 or even 30 years from now – whichever feels most natural to imagine now. Free yourself from the shackles of the present day and feel free to imagine a different reality. Think of as many things as possible that could be the way you want them to be. Start your sentences with the words “what if”.

For example: What if the solutions to the climate crisis were well underway? What if all the big decision-makers thought about the wellbeing of young people first and the economy second? What if it were common to cry over felled trees?

For about 10 minutes, write as many desirable images of the future as you can think of. If you did the exercise in a group, share what you came up with and comment on how you feel about these visions of the future.





Envisioning stepping stones for action

To prepare the ground for this exercise, it may be worth going back to the “Things that matter to me” exercise with the group.

The aim is to create stepping stones for action on issues and values that matter. The purpose is to explore the possibilities of influencing environmental and climate issues in particular. This exercise is done in a group, discussing together and taking notes.

- What environmental issues do these young people consider to be most relevant? What do they want to work towards?
- What are the strengths, skills and attributes of this group/ community?
- What opportunities for action do you see? What information do you need, and where can you get it?
- Which partners could you work with in order to implement climate and environmental activities? How do you get in touch with them? (environmental protection associations, as well as, Scouts, Red Cross and many other organisations that promote eco-social values in their activities, as well as local or national political actors and decisionmakers)
- Choose one specific area for action and agree on measures to take it forward. Agree on specifics: concrete steps of action, responsibilities and a target timetable. Remember to reward yourself for organising the activities!



- Examples of climate and environmental activities: [UN Youth in Action website](#) [Toivoa ja toimintaa website](#) and [Youth Academy's Ilmastoajatuksia – opas nuorisotyön ilmastokasvatukseen](#) (in Finnish)



Vision board

The aim of this exercise is to make positive, desirable images of the future visible. It can be done alone, together with young people or in a work community.

First, find and cut out words, phrases and pictures from old magazines related to your hopes and dreams for the future. Spend some time alone to reflect on your dreams, hopes and thoughts. The next step is to think about what dreams and aspirations you have in common in your group. Everyone is allowed to share their dreams as much as they want, or not to share them at all.

- How do the different hopes and dreams of the participants form a common picture?
- Which steps lead to your dreams?
- What strengths do you have now, and how can they help you on your way to the future you want?
- Cut and paste your vision board together.

Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

(V. Havel)

7. More information on environmental emotions

Interviews with 10, 000 young people (16 to 25 years old) from 10 countries reveal young people's environmental concerns, sadness and fears, and frustration with slow decisionmaking on climate and environmental issues. **Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey** (Hickman et al) included 1, 000 Finnish young people.

A survey of university students in 25 countries (2021) showed that negative emotions about climate change cause young adults to experience insomnia and lower perceived mental health.

The first interim report of 2022 by the International Panel on Climate Change, IPCC takes a stand on protecting mental health as part of climate action. The report addresses the mental health impacts of the climate crisis in a broad way, covering both sudden and long-term changes.

The World Health Organization (WHO) Policy Paper 2022 calls for taking climate change into account in mental health work, linking mental health protection with climate action, as well as developing actions to protect the most vulnerable communities.

Basic information on climate change: the Finnish Ministry of the Environment's Climate Guide

COP2, Care of People x Planet is a global network of organisations for bolstering the 'social climate' and emotional resilience that are needed to care for a sustainable earth.

Psychologist and economist Per Espen Stoknes' TED-X talk [How to transform apocalypse fatigue into action on global warming](#) sets out a new way of talking about climate change.

The Finnish Innovation Fund [Sitra's Futuremaker's Toolbox](#) provides additional information and methods for thinking about the future.

Sitra's extensive survey on climate emotions published in 2019 mapped the feelings of Finns of different ages related to climate change and their connection to sustainable lifestyles. Around a quarter of respondents said they experienced climate anxiety. Practising sustainable lifestyles was seen as the most important way to manage anxiety and other difficult emotions.

The Youth Barometer 2021 shows that young people experience a lot of sadness and grief about the environment, but are often optimistic about the future. They are very willing to make lifestyle changes, such as lowering their own standard of living, to ensure sustainable living conditions on our planet in the future.

"Young people and climate change" (Nuoret ja ilmastonmuutos, in Finnish), comparison of the Youth Barometer results shows that most young people have long been aware of and concerned about climate change, and that the proportion has increased during the 2010s.

ymparistoahdistus.fi

We are living in the midst of an environmental crisis that is taking its toll on our mental health. What does environmental anxiety tell us? How can we live with the emotions evoked by the environmental crisis?

This guide offers tips for understanding environmental anxiety and promoting mental wellbeing in the era of environmental crisis.

This thought-provoking and practical guide is aimed at professionals and volunteers working with young people and young adults, for example, in youth work, secondary schools or higher education.

The guide is part of the publications of the Finnish exoanxiety project "Ympäristöahdistuksen mieli".

mieli

