'Solastalgia': how environmental change affects us

Photo of Wansted Flats fire: Helen Mathias / EyeContact Photography - Credit: Archant

Solastalgia is a relatively new term, coined by Glenn Albecht as a portmanteau of 'solace' and 'algia' (a Greek word meaning 'pain') (Albrecht *et al.*, 2007). It refers to the distress we feel when our home environment is altered: When places where we once felt solace, have become more hostile; leaving us with a sense of desolation and loss of belonging. (It is seen as the opposite of nostalgia.) Albrecht comments on how people's identity and wellbeing can be so tied up in their home environment that damage to it can feel like a personal threat. Our stress is heightened when we believe these changes to our beloved environment are outside of our control (Watts *et al.*, 2015; Albrecht *et al.*, 2007). Solastalgia is something many of us may feel as we try to comprehend habitat loss and destruction in our local area. It has also come to be used more widely of distress over global environmental destruction.

Solastalgia has links with Kevorkain's 'environmental grief' – the grief felt over damage to the environment; and 'ecological grief' – that felt over a loss of personal connection to the natural world (Louv, 2005; Kevorkain, 2019; Cunsolo and Ellis 2019). Where we used to access nature for our wellbeing, we now feel distress at its destruction. Climate change only exasperates an 'eco-anxiety', as individuals see their global home in danger but can feel powerless to effect meaningful change.

While this is difficult for adults to confront emotionally, children and adolescents can find it even more challenging. Levels of concern over the environment are highest amongst younger people (Phillips *et al.*, 2018). They may also have less developed emotional intelligence to process and move through their emotions. However, attempting to protect young people by avoiding the 'big conversations' is unhelpful. They are already aware of these issues and need our support in dealing with them, rather than brooding in isolation (Caroline Hickman, University of Bath). This is a global challenge and one in which their futures have greatest stake, so they have a right to be involved in the solution.

Thankfully, Solactalgia, environmental and eco-grief have a positive side. These emotional responses and the *personal* distress felt at an assault on nature, indicate a critical value shift from human-centric thinking to eco-centric: seeing oneself as part of a global ecosystem. We need this 'culture change' to counter climate change and other ecological crises. Strong emotions and values can be powerful drivers to positive behaviour and action (Kervorkain, 2009; Johnson and Maloni, 2010). Young people have demonstrated their unbridled passion for the natural world in recent years, and they have an energy that can be channelled for much good. Solastalgia can also be combatted by feelings of empowerment.

The role of adults is to treat young people as co-creators of our future. Depending on their ages we can adjust our approach, but these are general good practices:

- Discuss ecological issues, listen to and value their opinions, ideas, and emotions
- Make time and space for emotions and help them develop the tools to process these
- Demonstrate respect for what they have to bring to the world
- Support and empower them to make positive changes (starting at home, school, or community level)
- Remember: Wherever possible leave them with something realistic that they can do – balancing the issues with solutions
- Learn from them and grow with them on a shared journey

At Suntrap we've been developing many ways that we can support children and young people, parents and teachers to face the climate and ecological crisis together. So far, we have reviewed our educational programme and further integrated climate and sustainability issues in age-appropriate ways (starting with developing awe, wonder and respect in pre-schoolers). We also have a growing bank of resources on our website (see Our Commitment to the Environment pages), including simple ways to help the environment wherever you live. Look out for updates as we continue to investigate initiatives to actively support the community.

References

Caroline Hickman, of the University of Bath gave a presentation as part of a recent LEEF Webinar: 'Roots and Rebellion', on 2 March 2021. She is a member of the Climate Psychology Alliance.

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