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Foreword by Arizona Muse

Turn the Tide on Climate Anxiety

**Sustainable Action for Your Mental Health
and the Planet**

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Foreword

BY ARIZONA MUSE

Climate change is a relatively new phrase, especially when one considers that until only about 20 years ago it was called global warming. It's something my grandparents did not grow up with, and my parents didn't notice it until they were well into adulthood. One result of this newness is that we are unprepared. Not only unprepared for climate change itself but equally unprepared to handle its effect on our mental health.

In this book, the authors (my dear friends I might add), who are psychologists observing mental health in relationship to the climate crisis, address this pressing issue of our time: how does living on a planet whose climate is changing make us feel?

I am writing this foreword as an example of someone – a concerned citizen, a parent, an activist – who has experienced climate-related mental ill-health and climate-related mental well-health. Several times, I have felt awful because of the things I have learned about climate change, about the plight that our planet is experiencing right now.

I will tell you a story of the first time I cried because of climate change. It was when Australia burned in the fires in its summer of 2019. I had watched videos that day of wild animals roasting, or running away, clearly in a lot of distress, their homeland behind them going up in flames. I watched the accounts of Australian people, often crying themselves, telling the world that the koalas were desperately thirsty, showing families of bats sweating together in the meagre shade of a leaf,

until the babies got so hot they died on their mothers' chests of heatstroke and fell to the ground. The distraught scientist who showed this tragic video of the bats pleaded, 'We have to change, we have to do something.' I went to bed that night and cried uncontrollably into my pillow.

That is my first story of grief from climate change. I was sad, I was empty, and I felt powerless because I was so far away. I felt angry as well, angry that the generation before me didn't do anything to stop this. I wanted to blame them; I even wanted them to suffer. They deserved it, after all; how stupid had they been, collectively, to be warned with scientific climate modelling, that if they continued to prioritize the generation of money, the earth would degenerate? I have since felt those feelings rise up regularly, but I have learned that they can help me. They fuelled my desire to push through my innate shyness and become a public speaker on this issue, for example.

These negative feelings also helped me because I wanted to make sure I was right, so I learned. I make sure I learn different things; I choose my education deliberately, and I cross-reference. I must know who commissioned the research, and the most important thing, when learning, is to keep an open mind. I never assume I know more than someone else, because the moment that assumption arises, my own mind shuts off to learning, and I might miss the most incredible surprises. I find the best knowledge I have comes from farmers and indigenous wisdom. Sometimes those two sources overlap, and that's where the golden nuggets rest.

There have been many other times when I feel, and you will feel, overwhelmed. It will seem as if it is simply impossible for us to clean up the earth and change social norms so that they actually serve people rather than the system. Mostly, though, I hang in this delightful zone of action. This is because I know about all the brilliant solutions that are available to us; I see and listen to and read all the brilliant minds who are bravely and courageously moving us into a brighter future, many of whom are women.

Painting it as we go, we all collectively realize that our actions are what will bring it forth. It is up to me how the future develops. It is up to you, too; every thought you have leads you in a direction, so pay attention to your thoughts and your actions and you will see you can use yourself to create the future. This is the deep power in the earth and our human relationship to it.

Ultimately, I will remark on something interesting and unexpected that has come to me from this learning journey, this deep dive into the climate narrative and climate current affairs. In spite of already being a mother, and already having a classifiably 'successful' career, I feel better now than I did before I took up this passion for sustainability and regeneration. I feel happier, more positive, purposeful, driven, dedicated and loving since I started learning about climate change and became an activist. I have overwhelmingly experienced mental well-health.

If someone asked me to choose one single favourite quotation from the book, it's this one: 'Science will save us but not without the stories that engage us.' And the strongest message I can possibly give anyone is this: you are in relationship with the earth. Think about it. On a daily basis, ask yourself: how am I doing with my relationship to the earth?

Arizona Muse is an activist, sustainability consultant and model. She serves as Greenpeace's Oceans Ambassador, Aveda's Global Advocate for Sustainability, and Advisory Board Member for the Sustainable Angle. She is also founder and trustee of Dirt - Foundation for the Regeneration of Earth.

Chapter 1

Turn the Tide on Climate Anxiety

If you've reached for this book, it is likely that at some point, there has been an 'Aha!' or, perhaps more probably, an 'Oh no!' moment.

It's hard to watch the news, scroll through Instagram or listen to the radio without hearing or seeing something disturbing about the climate emergency - especially if it is already on your radar. We might walk down the street and see some litterbug dropping the remains of his single-use packaged lunch on the ground. We might notice someone chatting away on the phone while parked up with the heat on high and the windows down, the car engine pumping away. Over lunch with a relative, they might take the opportunity to inform us that we are under the spell of a conspiracy theory. If global warming is so real, then, 'For heaven's sake how do you explain all that snow in Texas this year?' After all, they saw it on Facebook.

Feeling a bit irked? We witness the impact of climate change on the earth creeping into our lives, sometimes subtly, sometimes catastrophically. A day in January taunts us with its rather delightful picnic weather. Rivers swell into our back gardens. Some of us can't leave our homes because the air is thick with wildfire smoke and a 24-hour news cycle reports that

another intense hurricane threatens an imminent arrival. Are we noticing that little (or perhaps massive) undercurrent of anxiety, anger or despair rising? We, of course, acknowledge and are becoming increasingly aware of the physical effects of global warming, but we're also seeing its impact on our mental health.

At the risk of committing a huge cliché of the psychology profession, can we just ask, when you read that last paragraph, 'How did that make you feel?' Were you thinking, 'Wait, I thought this book was going to rid me of my climate-worry, not antagonize it'? Again, you'll need to forgive us. Mental health is an element of the climate conversation that is often overlooked. As psychologists, we want people to understand that when we are exposed to climate information, we inherently have a psychological response. We are meant to. What makes the work in this book different is that we not only want to ask, 'How did that make you feel?' but essentially, 'What are you going to do about it?' We don't want you to avoid difficult feelings. Instead, we want you to harness them.

We won't pathologize your psychological defences or cognitive biases (don't worry, we'll familiarize you with these terms later in the book), but instead encourage you to turn your attention towards them with curiosity, perhaps even (dare we say it?) 'thank' them, not only for the psychological protection they have afforded you over the years, and indeed will continue to afford you in the years to come, but also for the emotional connection they allow you to have with this beautiful planet. We do this not only because it is good for your psychological health, but also because it can help you to create the necessary power and resilience that will enable you to act against climate change.

Accepting the realities of the climate crisis goes hand in hand with accepting the strong emotions it generates. How we learn to manage these emotions and evoke them to strengthen our wellbeing can also positively impact the planet. This book is not meant to make you feel 'better'. It's meant to make you feel 'stronger' (in a sneaky way, this will likely help you feel better). We want you to feel more able. We want you to feel self-efficacious. We are not here to tell you, 'Oh, don't worry, it'll all

work out.’ We are here to tell you that you do make a difference, you do have an impact, your emotional wellbeing matters and that the planet needs you to tap into your mental strength. Cultivating awareness is the first step.

Our wonderful human brain – its prerogative is to always be working to protect us, to avoid pain, suffering and unpleasantness. It is inherently pleasure-seeking and risk-averse. We can learn from our pain. It can signal when something feels wrong. We can become appreciative of this, but also kindly challenge it when it is trying to override what serves us. Imagine our favourite dessert: it’s right there in front of us – we have a fork in hand. Part of our brain is messaging, ‘Eat that now. It’s going to be delicious! You deserve it.’ Meanwhile, there is another, more complex part of our brain saying, ‘Hold, please... You just ate. Remember the diet? You are meant to go for a run this afternoon, and if you are full of German chocolate cake, you probably won’t, and then you’ll be annoyed with yourself...’ Our brains are in constant conflict between short-term gain and long-term reward. Eat the cake now or experience the pride of training for and completing a 10K? One more tequila shot or not regret table dancing in front of your boss in the morning? Avoid the unpleasant feelings that come when thinking about the climate emergency or help the planet today? Override. Don’t put it off.

The psychology of engaging with climate change is multifaceted. It requires a high level of self-awareness and openness to stand up to adversity, as well as a willingness to make mistakes, put ourselves out there and, at times, push back against the norm. Ironically, our survival now pits us against many of the psychological mechanisms that, as a species, have kept us safe for a long time. We have this new/old and fast/slow brain telling us how to engage with something really, really big. When we become aware of this conflict and learn to manage it, we recognize our responsibility and the power we have over our own lives. We owe it to ourselves and the planet. It’s very much about emotional maturity. It’s time to ‘adult’ and we will

actually feel better and more contained for doing so. Mark Manson writes:

This is what's so admirable... The overcoming adversity stuff, the willingness to be different, an outcast, a pariah, all for the sake of one's own values. The willingness to stare failure in the face and shove your middle finger back at it.¹

When we can stare our emotions back in the face, we can answer them with, 'I feel scared because I care about this. I can deal with feeling scared because I am willing to fight for this.'

There is so much that we can do to help – that is, if we are tackling climate change from this psychologically open place. We can feel honest, empowered and resilient with a commitment to protect what we value. We can open ourselves up and deal with feeling vulnerable. Just as we do when we see children suffering, when we see them raging or regressing or retreating, we don't want to say, 'It's fine. You're being silly. Just stop it!' We want to ask, or better yet to understand, 'Why?' We want to connect with them and validate their emotional experience. As adults, we respond to the same thing. Our needs seldom change that much. We need to feel empathy. Many of us were raised to push against our negative emotions, and although our parents probably had the best intentions, we are going to encourage you to unlearn this. We can retain our emotional maturity while honouring the emotional child within us that just wants to be seen and contained in their struggle to figure it out. Especially since the monster under the bed – in this case, global warming – is actually real.

As more and more people are accepting the science, and as this information garners more attention, the accompanying emotions are obviously becoming salient, and thus increasingly evident in the popular lexicon. As psychologists, we see new terminology and so, too, new ideas. This new language (our eco-emotional taxonomy) includes 'climate anxiety/eco-anxiety', 'eco-rage', 'eco-grief' and more. Their behavioural manifestations have necessarily also generated new definitions. For example, we now understand what it means to 'doomscroll',

to 'greenwash'. We know what a 'digital diet' is, and why it is important. These modern incarnations of ancient psychological mechanisms can leave us feeling overwhelmed, detached, hopeless, grief-stricken, angry and despondent, emotions which, if left unmanaged or poorly channelled, may inhibit us from taking necessary, sustainable action to mobilize against the climate crisis.

But wait; we also experience other emotions. We may at times feel excited, invigorated, connected and motivated to support the planet. So how can we turn the tide on climate anxiety? There is good news for you and for the planet: climate anxiety can be alleviated through sustainable climate action – that is to say, action that is sustainable for both ourselves and our environment. Such action, by necessity, involves self-care, self-awareness and balance.

We encourage you to take a moment now to thank yourself for showing up. It is important to acknowledge that you are here, reading this, showing that you are committed enough to be part of the solution. You are making the effort to be present and curious and open. Stay with this for a moment and understand why it deserves your acknowledgment: it means you pushed against many difficult psychological defences in order to have even opened to the first page.

Your impact can reverberate outwards. You can inspire others. Right now, you are 'showing up' for yourself so that you can 'show up' for the planet. Allow yourself those elusive moments of pride for your efforts, protect them and anchor to them when you feel a wobble. You are protecting what you are grateful for, your strength and the planet on which you live.

Incoming waves: the support takes shape

A few years ago, a new client walked through the door of our general psychology practice in Oxford, England, eager for support to manage the stress and anxiety relating to his postgraduate studies. He identified that he was experiencing

rumination and debilitating anxiety, which was impacting his mental wellbeing and his ability to work effectively. This person was (and still is) a climate researcher. He was becoming aware that his constant exposure to the harsh realities of climate change was disrupting his life. This was our Client Zero (if he will forgive us the term) – our first client to bring to therapy their struggle in finding that balance between care for the planet and care for the self. He described very eloquently his experience with climate anxiety, and so we include as fully as possible and in his own words, his journey.

VOICES

I would have described myself as a high-functioning sufferer of pervasive climate anxiety. For example, if it was unseasonably hot outside (I can remember a day, for example, in the mid-20s Celsius, or mid-70s in Fahrenheit, in New York in January), I might decide to move my workout to the next day so that I could spend the day inside working and minimize commute time that forced me to go outside and be reminded of how unusually hot it was. Or if it was a weekend, I might postpone plans with friends so that instead of meeting for lunch, we'd meet for drinks after dinner, when the sun had set and the temperatures cooled to closer to normal ranges. When I wasn't able to work my schedule around things that I knew would upset me, I'd still go and do them, but I would struggle throughout with feelings of unease that kept me from being present and engaged.

For me, climate anxiety manifests in one of two ways. There's an initial phase that encompasses and immediately follows the triggering event, and then a second, lower-grade phase that can persist for hours, days or even weeks after the first ends. The best word I can find to describe the initial phase is despair – the feeling of being trapped by something horrific, knowing I have little to no personal agency to resolve the problem and, failing

that, that there's not even a viable way to run from it. It feels claustrophobic, like being buried alive. You have no choice but to deal with it.

There are three things that helped me overcome my climate anxiety:

(A) Talking openly about it. Talking about how I was feeling with those close to me was enormously reaffirming, because at no point did I have anyone tell me what I was feeling was stupid or unreasonable. Getting recognition that what I was worried about worried other people, too, that my worries were justified, and that I wasn't alone helped strip away some of the contributing factors (feeling like I had to face climate change alone, worrying about what other negative consequences I might face if I shared how I feel) that made managing that anxiety difficult.

(B) Recognizing that I cannot solve climate change myself, and that I can't stop myself from feeling anxious about it. Climate change is happening. It is a real threat to your wellbeing. It is going to cause you to feel scared; it is rational for you to feel scared, and there's nothing you can do about that. What you can do is stop trying to fight that anxiety when it arrives. Instead of feeling anxious about feeling anxious, you can accept that from time to time you're going to feel badly because you're living through a long, drawn-out, traumatic event that is unprecedented in magnitude across human history. No wonder you feel upset! If you just sit with the anxiety and let it run its course, it becomes a much more shoulder-able load, compared to if you're constantly trying to fight to make yourself feel okay.

(C) Forcing myself to go where the pain is. I started making a point of going outside on the most unusually warm days of the year even if I have no reason to – for example, just to go for a walk. I also started subscribing to regular updates on papers related to the intellectual topics that bothered me the most (e.g. those that study past mass extinction events driven by past climate changes).

The more I expose myself to the things that trigger anxiety, the more manageable I find the symptoms become. This is just classic exposure therapy, but it works. Make your anxiety a challenge to run towards instead of something to run from.

Former client (C)

This person is no longer a client, but we still work together on a number of projects, mainly around bridging the gap between the science and the emotional dimension of climate research. He has become a great professional success and is making a real impact. He did so by harnessing the power of his emotions to drive his action.

In many respects, his experience was fairly typical of anxiety. However, in other ways, it presented distinct challenges, because it was related specifically to climate change. The climate crisis seems to require a different kind of approach from many other issues that people generally experience when it comes to mental health, not least the question of whether there is anything pathological about the emotional responses that result from global warming. The more we invited conversations about the emotional impact of climate change, the more people would offer their own experiences of the challenges they faced:

- ‘I wake up at night thinking about it.’
- ‘I feel so guilty.’
- ‘It is so frustrating.’
- ‘How do I talk to my kids about climate change?’
- ‘Our house is in a high-risk fire zone.’
- ‘I am doing everything I can and it’s not enough.’
- ‘There wasn’t any snow this year.’
- ‘I don’t think I should have children.’

They were looking for answers, and although we couldn't tell them, 'Don't worry, it will all be okay,' we also couldn't collude with the idea that the game is up and all is lost. That hopelessness serves no purpose.

Evidence also supported our anecdotal experience. According to a landmark report by the American Psychological Association (APA):²

The psychological responses to climate change, such as conflict avoidance, fatalism, fear, helplessness, and resignation are growing. These responses are keeping us...from properly addressing the core causes of and solutions for our changing climate, and from building and supporting psychological resiliency.³

Studies and reports such as this demonstrated that climate change was affecting people psychologically on an increasingly wider scale. This resonated as a huge problem for us because we understand that when we can't process our negative emotions effectively, they can fester and debilitate the actions the planet so desperately needs. We have to keep people working in sustainability, sustained.

And all this before we even begin to acknowledge those who are directly impacted by climate change. The communities facing the reality, rather than the threat, of a warming planet, shifting and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and climate events. This represents a fundamental issue with (and at times criticism of) the collective conversation about climate anxiety, the disparity in focus on ecological-mental health on the Most Affected People and Areas (MAPA), traditionally referred to as the 'global south', when compared with those areas less directly affected. The 'whiteness' of the problem and of (our perception of) the solution. It also showed us the myopic view we risk holding about the therapies and ideas we offer. A year after writing her own guide to managing climate anxiety,⁴ Sarah Jaquette Ray offers a powerful reflection:

Climate anxiety can operate like white fragility, sucking up all the oxygen in the room and devoting resources toward appeasing the

dominant group... Today's progressives espouse climate change as the 'greatest existential threat of our time', a claim that ignores people who have been experiencing existential threats for much longer.⁵

We became conscious to ensure, as best we can, that the focus on climate anxiety did not (and does not) pull attention and resources away from supporting communities already knee-deep in the problem; that privilege does not come at the expense of connectedness and a compassionate, global response; and that the presence of climate anxiety in the climate change conversation doesn't perpetuate an 'otherness' of race or culture, nor does it serve in any way to reinforce white saviourism.⁶

Environmentalism, we increasingly began to appreciate, is truly intersectional. We cannot presume to fully understand the powerful cultural forces at play, nor claim any insight into the 'blindspots' of white privilege. We take special care in the stories we tell and the language we use. For example, when we talk later in the book about the vulnerability of certain communities to the effects of climate change, we do this not to perpetuate an idea that indigenous peoples and communities are inherently 'vulnerable' as a trait *characteristic*, but suggest instead that they share a greater connectedness to the land and water, and that creates a *situation* of vulnerability in terms of livelihood, health and wellbeing. Nor should we assume that the ideas of modern Western individualism (including our psychology) apply universally. For example, there is such power, beauty and connectedness in Native American Ancient Wisdom and other forms of indigenous teaching, much of which can serve as a blueprint for a greater oneness with the natural world. A oneness that perhaps has always been there but has become decoupled by the trajectory of modern societies. However, at the same time, through the conversations we have had in developing this book, we have heard similarities from people around the world (from communities that are more or less directly affected by climate change). Although the psychological language differs,

certain tools and ideas felt almost universal: the power of community, of connecting with nature; the importance of activism, but also of self-care and routine.

So, then, we need to remain humble, to listen and to do what we can from the paradoxical position we inhabit in the Western world. We care deeply and yet our carbon footprints are enormous. By our own design, a disproportionate amount of responsibility does fall on the shoulders of those in countries and societies with higher CO2 lifestyles. This does, however, give us the ability to make a real difference.

Setting sail: our journey into climate psychology

After Patrick's training, he worked for a number of years as a clinical psychologist in a large acute hospital. Much of his work during that time was helping patients and their families to confront challenging realities (chronic or life-limiting illness, or an upcoming surgery). As part of this, they would need to develop real resilience and undergo massive life change, and quickly too, often in the face of situations in which they had little control. The way he came to understand the emotional experience of patients was as being ordinary families facing extraordinary stressors.⁷ They would often need to have difficult conversations or make important, life-changing decisions. These were often conversations that families, very understandably, would avoid having, to protect each other. So too the big emotions they entailed. This avoidance would ultimately make the problem feel bigger, and undermine the patient's sense that they could do anything about it, or indeed that they could cope. This overwhelm, in many ways, translates to the psychological experience of climate change. Resilience was also required for doctors and nurses – those on the frontline. The role of the psychologist in a hospital should be, and indeed is, to offer support for these groups too. How to stay well in the face of defeat, having to deliver bad news, experiencing vicariously the traumas of others. Likewise, how to connect with, and allow

space for celebrating, those incredible achievements that happen every day in hospitals. Again, this seemed to translate seamlessly to supporting those on the climate frontline, or indeed anyone engaged in the climate emergency.

Megan was working as a coaching psychologist, helping people anchor to their values and set meaningful goals to effect positive change in their lives. She noticed themes and understood that things like procrastination, self-sabotage, inaction, self-doubt, overcompensation, burnout and other barriers would often deter people from achieving their objectives and leading well-balanced lives. Megan saw that motivation and commitment from her clients came from deeply believing that they have the ability to make a difference and the fundamental acceptance that they were 'good enough'. This is what perpetuated their drives to meet targets and achieve more long-term goals as well as overcome setbacks. As Megan began to coach clients about their climate work, she saw that these coaching themes were effective in supporting those with emotions and goals related to climate change. Individuals wanted to be a productive part of the solution. Climate workers wanted to stay active and resilient. Parents wanted to know how to help their children. She recognized early that, drawing from her traditional coaching practice, she couldn't help but kick into the 'notice the feeling, now let's make a good plan' gear, which was beneficial for those suffering from difficult emotions.

We are in this for the same reason as many of you. We are emotionally invested in what we do. We want the people who are working on fixing this climate mess to feel able to carry on (which, we are guessing, in some form or another, will include you). We aren't climate scientists, we aren't sustainability experts, we aren't politicians. But we are people who care. This is a time when we all need to tap into our strengths and lean into what we excel at. We saw that our contribution lies not in the development of carbon-capture solutions or in becoming arrestables for Extinction Rebellion (though a moment away from the kids while schools remained closed under lockdown was nonetheless tempting...). Yet we looked around and saw what

was happening and we knew we had to do something. The more people we speak with, the more tell us they feel the same: that they have to do something.

We realized early on that climate conversations needed to be normalized, focused, positive and goal-orientated. We'd notice that people would often become entrenched or fixated on a smaller piece of the puzzle, or perhaps that a setback in their objectives could really knock them off course. They might feel a sense of overwhelm or find themselves distracted, procrastinating or having many projects on the go at once, none of them being as effective as they hoped. This would often feel demoralizing and lead to burnout and doom fatigue. This could lead to the awful spiral of 'I need to do more. What I do is failing. I am not doing enough. I am not enough.' This mentality tends to flatline our goals pretty quickly. While we saw that people could experience this, we also watched as groups would struggle to set achievable, structured, time-limited goals and fail to recognize or reward themselves when they did experience a win. We particularly noted that, within groups, there could be a lot of back and forth, nit-picking, drama and arguing. We saw that these tangents were often the demise of the well-intended outcomes. On the other hand, we also saw how helpful and grounding climate groups could be for people. It was important to champion groups to cultivate tools to stay on topic with clear facts, reveal and allow for emotions, keep values in mind and work together towards measurable, identified goals. These we identified as the logistical antidotes to the paralyzing traps that are easy to fall into.

So we asked ourselves (as we will ask you throughout this book), 'Where are we going to be most useful? How are we best suited to contribute? How can we maximize our climate support?' For us, the answer was that we understand how people think, and, importantly, what gets them moving. So in order to hold space for our own climate emotions, we began to structure a method that would promote mental wellbeing for others on the subject. It felt like our way to help. This felt like our 'Oh no!' moment evolving into our 'Aha!' moment.