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Climate grief hits the self-care generation
by Avichai Scher

Deep in the New Mexico desert, in Cibola national forest, I stood in a circle of 100 people around a fire. Surrounded by mountains and cacti, the ritual leader, Louise Bennally, directed us to approach the fire one by one, take some dirt in our hands and release it slowly, then sprinkle water from a paper cup onto the fire.

“Send your healing energy,” said Bennally, a seasoned climate activist.

This was the opening ceremony of Uplift Climate, a conference for people under 30 focused on the effects of climate change in the Southwest. Over 120 attendees throughout the weekend camped out, ate communal meals of grain medleys and pork or bean stews and heard from climate activists from indigenous communities and non-profits.

They also enjoyed a self-care station with poems and crafts, and other programming focused on healing from environment-induced emotional trauma.

I was there to meet Aimee Reau, 30, and LaUra (intentional uppercase U) Schmidt, 32, creators of The Good Grief Network. They’ve developed a new program—10 Steps to Psychosocial Resilience in a Chaotic Climate, or Good Grief. It deals with collective grief—trauma that affects everyone, such as mass shootings, racism and, the program’s original inspiration and most popular variety, climate grief.

Climate alarm bells have been ringing for years, but have mostly been met with an emotional shrug, apart from maybe a stray tear shed for polar bears. But as the effects of a changing climate become more visible, when whole communities burn to the ground or wash away, the collective anxiety level in the U.S. is rising.

In the popular Netflix movie “Ibiza,” starlet Gillian Jacobs’s character, Harper, mocks a one-night stand partner who is hopeful their paths will cross someday in the distant future. “Please,” she said, “with climate change, we have ten years, tops.” Earlier this year, an episode of RuPaul’s Drag Race was titled “The last ball on earth.” The ladies dressed for a fabulous winter soiree in future Alaska—a swimsuit.

The notion that the world will not continue as we’ve known it is starting to gain street cred.

The mental anguish is no longer limited to frontline communities, such as the Native Americans, who have been repeatedly kicked off their land or seen it poisoned with toxic chemicals. When a young, rich, American, Netflix character is upset, that’s a sign of deep crisis in America.

We may be ready to laugh at casual, nervous jokes about the future of the climate, but that's a long way from confronting depression and grief over the future. Expressions of serious anguish often provoke mockery.

Last spring, Jennifer Atkinson, a professor of environmental humanities at University of Washington, offered a course on climate grief in response to the depression she noticed in students studying the environment.

"They need strategies to navigate the devastating emotional impact," she said. "They're coming of age at the end of the world."

The Seattle Times ran a story on the course and the school was quickly flooded with derisive messages.

"Do the students roll out nap mats and curl up in the fetal position with their blankies and pacifiers while listening to her lectures?" read one such message.

Reau and Schmidt aren't strangers to this reaction: Schmidt's online detractors call her "Queen of the snowflakes." A 10-step program to mourn rising sea levels and species extinction still reeks of touchy-feely millennial whining.

That might be because we aren't ready to grapple with a looming problem that's still out of sight for many in the U.S.

The latest United Nations climate report said catastrophe— mass migrations, drought, famine, floods and more—would arrive by 2040 unless immediate, drastic action is taken. That report assumes a warming of 2 degrees Celsius, the target almost all countries agreed to in the 2015 Paris climate accord. But current emissions are on track to go as high as 5 degrees Celsius, leading to a scale of destruction most people don't have a framework for understanding.

At the same time, rates of anxiety, depression and suicide have sharply risen on college campuses. One in five college students seeks treatment for depression. For teens, the suicide rate has gone up 70 percent since 2006. Experts can't identify a definitive reason but many of the factors they cite relate to grim future prospects, such as rising student debt and substance abuse. But experts may be overlooking the ultimate sign of a grim future: climate change.

Climate grief may be the next big mental health crisis, or already fueling millennial malaise, but the hippie scene at Uplift didn't have me convinced (Picture lots of ungroomed hair: head, body and face.) But I knew I'd hear honesty about the issue. These were young people who came to a conference to deal with the climate, not drag queens in a swimsuit glamorizing a nebulous, futuristic Alaskan winter.

As I stood around the fire, I put on my best healing vibes face. I didn't want to be seen as a skeptic about the transformative powers of dust-scattering. I wondered if the 10-step session

the next day would require similar posturing or if my doubts would melt as fast as the ice caps. Either way, I'd see for myself if a climate grief support group could help the environmentally depressed.

Reau and Schmidt titled their Uplift session, "Self-care in a chaotic climate." The underlying theory of their program is that self-care is key to surviving a slow-burning crisis. This is in line with the mindset of millennials, who are largely fueling the \$11 billion self-care industry. Those privileged enough to spend money on self-care can choose everything from meditation apps to yoga where goats walk on your back, and even smash rooms stress is released by breaking desks and old computers.

The concept of self-care was not created by millennials. For centuries, thought leaders have discussed the need to take of oneself. The French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote in his 1976 book *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, how the theme of self-care was an underpinning of classics for centuries, dating back to *The Alcibiades Dialogues*, where Socrates cautions an aspiring political leader to take care of himself before leading others.

But the term took on a different meaning among oppressed classes in the United States post-civil rights. Audre Lorde, the black, lesbian feminist activist, wrote in her 1988 book, "Burst of Light," that caring for herself was "an act of political warfare." Her words pushed back against the idea that people of color and queer people were not worthy of care and against perceptions that they lacked basic ability for hygiene. Activists also promoted taking time for self-care as a means to avoid burnout.

The 2016 election was a triggering event for many in the country, and it was around then that self-care took hold in millennial culture. The week after the election, searches for "self-care" on Google spiked to their highest levels ever. Since then, the numbers have ebbed and flowed, but progressed to a considerably higher average. There were 1 million #selfcare posts on Instagram at the time of the 2016 election, today, two years later, there are 10 million

Many of the posts are people displaying their latest juice cleanse (charcoal-based, of course). Posts from by "influencers," who have large followings, are usually sponsored. Other posts are direct from businesses, each vying to rebrand their everyday products to fit under the self-care halo: nail polish, sneakers, jewelry and more.

The posts demonstrate that the self-care movement is not being driven by frontline activists looking for ways to keep fighting for justice, but rather by quests for the best flavor facial to ease stress. So, while millennials did not invent self-care, they have ushered in its commercial era and redefined its cultural place.

Last year, the American Psychological Association issued a report on climate change's impact on mental health. The report primarily dealt with trauma from extreme weather disasters but also

recognized that, “Gradual, long-term changes in climate can also surface a number of different emotions, including fear, anger, feelings of powerlessness, or exhaustion.” It doesn’t sound like an acai berry face mask will help here, for more than an hour anyway.

I was born in in 1984 so I’m technically a millennial, but still just old enough to remember when it seemed like the apocalyptic effects of climate change were a distant problem our great-grandchildren would deal with. Now, the conversation among millennials across the age spectrum has shifted to one of subtle anxiety, the kind that’s too horrible to talk about without drag queens in swimsuits to ease the pain.

Enter Good Grief.

Schmidt and Reau met at Central Michigan University and became best friends. Ten years later, they realized it was more. They married days before the Uplift conference in New Mexico, right after Reau completed a vision fast consisting of three days of fasting alone in the desert with occasional guidance from a shaman. She’s also a yoga teacher and DJ known as eXis10shAL (existential) and a social justice activist. Schmidt is more narrowly focused on the climate, earning a BA and MA in environmental studies, and volunteering with Al Gore’s Climate Reality Leadership Corps.

The Good Grief program grew out of the women’s’ own sadness over the environment and broader collective issues society faces. Rather than focus on policy or grass-roots activism, they decided to pool their complementary backgrounds and develop a program to help on an emotional level. “If the people aren’t ok, the planet is not ok,” Reau said.

The idea to structure the program as 10-steps came from Schmidt’s experience in Adult Children of Alcoholics. Schmidt credits this program and its 12 steps, adapted from the original AA program, for helping her rebuild her life after her, “Mental health was severely affected by shitty parents.”

She didn’t want to say much more about her upbringing but stressed that it left her feeling alone and uncared for. The ritual of the 12 steps and the community it formed made her feel like there was more she could do with her life. “I wasn’t on a path for much, but seeing I wasn’t alone in that made me fight through it,” she said.

She posited that those experiencing existential grief could also find healing from community support and ritual.

She and Reau ran the first cycle of the 10-steps shortly after the 2016 election in Salt Lake City. “It was amazing,” said Schmidt. “We had a small group, about 12 people, but we could tell we really tapped into something.” They ran a second cycle eight months later.

A few months ago, they left Salt Lake City for Scott’s Bluff, Nebraska. A donor offered them free housing there so they could quit their day jobs and work on developing Good Grief full time.

They now run free, weekly sessions online and recently released the 10-step session guidelines on their website so others could start groups in their own communities.

“The dream is we have an RV, we get calls from around the country for help starting local sessions, and we show up and get them going,” said Reau. “We want this to expand everywhere, so it has to be bigger than us if we’re going to help people deal with what’s happening.”

They’ve written the 10-steps for processing all forms of collective grief. The Good Grief Facebook group lists several examples, including: racism, refugees, homophobia, domestic violence, corporate scandals, and climate-related issues like fossil fuels and record heat.

Step one: accept the problem and its severity.

Step two: acknowledge that I’m part of the problem as well as the solution.

Step three: practice sitting with uncertainty.

Step four: confront my own mortality and the mortality of all.

Step five: feel my feelings.

Step six: do inner work.

Step seven: take breaks and rest as needed.

Step eight develop awareness of brain patterns and perception.

Step nine: show up

Step ten: reinvest into problem solving efforts.

There’s no step about a juice cleanse, but the program has self-care written all over it. “We like that label, self-care,” said Reau. “But it’s probably more accurate to say self-care through self-work. This is brutal stuff.”

The morning after the fire ritual, I headed to the patch of grass where the climate grief session was getting started.

“Is this the climate change depression session?” asked Kelton Manzanores, 27, a tall, skinny guy, with long locks who looked like a California surfer wandering the New Mexico desert. “Or am I lost?”

“You’re in the right place,” said Schmidt.

The young activists sat in a circle sprawled across the grass under the glaring desert sun, ready for Reau and Schmidt’s self-care advice. Participants introduced themselves and said what they wanted to get out of the session.

“Hope,” said one woman.

“Empowerment,” said another.

“It’s ok to feel sadness, grief and despair,” replied Schmidt in a heavy, pastoral voice while her tiny dogs, Romeo and Gus, wrapped their leashes around her legs as they ran in circles. “We’ll aim to normalize those hard feelings.” Romeo settled on her feet.

Reau and Schmidt discussed their 10-steps and plugged the idea that participants could use them for local support groups. But since this session was a two-hour one-off, they focused on self-care in the moment.

Reau read the poem “Wild Geese,” by Mary Oliver.

“...Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers...”

After a few more readings, Reau and Schmidt gave the participants time to write in journals with prompts such as, “What makes you feel alive and inspired?” and “What emotions arise when you’re crying?”

I wondered how poems and journaling about despair and tears would save us from the climate apocalypse. Surely there had to be better uses of time.

Bill McKibben, the legendary climate activist and founder of 350.org, thinks this type of work is part of the solution.

“Grief over the sense that things are very bad is appropriate,” he told me after Uplift. “If you didn’t feel some of that, something would be wrong with you. People have to do what they have to do to preserve their mental health.”

Atkinson, the professor who taught a course on climate grief, also approaches the issue from a literary perspective. She said that her goal with the course is to keep the students in the environmental studies program. Many tell her it’s too depressing.

“I give them space to write poems and read history, so they don’t go off and design video games instead of deal with the horror that’s coming,” she said.

Reau and Schmidt were more than comfortable being emotionally vulnerable but didn’t spend any time discussing the climate.

Reau made one mention of the climate when she asked participants to close their eyes and think of something they’re grateful for.

“If you’re having trouble thinking of something, think about how we are all sitting here in the grass together, processing our grief over climate change,” she said.

It was off script. “I said that? I didn’t even realize,” she told me afterward. The term climate grief was never used during the session.

Schmidt and Reau explained why, even at a climate conference, naming climate grief was not a good idea.

“It’s about being your authentic self and processing collective grief in a community,” said Schmidt. “There’s no need to label it as climate grief, or social justice grief, it’s just grief, collective grief, and we all feel it.”

“There’s way too many issues. If it’s marketed as a climate change grief group, you get people saying, ‘oh don’t they have better things to grieve about in their life?’” said Reau.

The self-care session ended with basic yoga.

As we moved from the pigeon pose to the boat pose, Reau instructed us to take deep breaths and focus on calming after all the emotions we shared.

I tried to deep breathe the existential weight of climate grief off my chest. Eyes closed, I moved into a position on my back, propped up on my elbows, chest opened up to the sky. I exhaled with all I had, but still felt the suffocating weight of the rising seas and species extinction. I opened my eyes and saw two little eyes staring back at me. Romeo the chihuahua was perched on my chest.

Climate change isn’t going to unleash a genocidal, colonial army on the world, but the resource and pollution cost of our innovations will force mass migrations and further toxification of land.

The Gold Rush of 1848 in California unleashed a flurry of toxic chemicals, gravel and silt onto Native land which ruined their ability to hunt and fish, leading to mass starvation and death.

From 1944 to 1986, mining companies extracted 4 million tons of uranium from Navajo land for the purpose of making atomic weapons. But when the Cold War ended, the mining companies abandoned about 500 mines, leaving behind pools of toxic chemicals. A recent study found that Navajo have about five times the amount of Uranium in their urine than the rest of the country.

In 1974, The Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act ordered about 15,000 Navajo off of their land. Presented by the government as a way to resolve land disputes between the Navajo and Hopi tribes, the law was later understood as a ploy for the U.S. government to access oil, coal and uranium on native land.

But about 15,000 Navajo would not budge. Rather than violently forcing them to move, the U.S. government got creative. It outlawed building of any kind, including home repairs, and ordered an almost 90 percent reduction in their livestock, a severe threat to their economy, and therefore, survival.

Among those 15,000 was Louise Bennally, the fire ritual leader at Uplift, who was 14 at the time. She's a member of the Navajo Nation, who prefer to be called Diné, meaning "Children of the holy people" in their language Diné Bizaad. She grew up in Big Mountain, on the Black Mesa reservation in Arizona, where she still lives.

In 1977, her family stood firm against moving to the land the government set aside for their relocation. It was the Puerco River basin, the site of a 1979 uranium spill, which released 94 million gallons of radioactive water and 1,100 tons of toxic solids into the river.

The forced mass migrations and environmental pollution Native Americans suffered at the hands of the U.S. government has health consequences. Cancer rates in the Navajo have doubled since the 1970s. Mental health is also affected. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, Native Americans are almost twice as likely as non-Hispanic Whites to experience overall "serious psychological distress," including higher rates of suicide, depression and anxiety.

Contrary to popular belief, a 2016 study found that Natives don't have higher rates of alcoholism than the rest of the U.S.—their higher rates of liver disease are attributable to lack of health care and safe housing conditions.

One of the HHS measurements of Native health is hopelessness, which they experience at 1.5 times the rate of non-Hispanic Whites.

Part of what sustains Bennally mentally is connection to the land and living off the grid as much as possible. Her roof is outfitted with a solar panel and she hauls water to her home from her local Chapter House, a Native American community center. She also gathers much of her food and medicine in the woods.

Living off the land is getting harder for Bennally's community, which is now dealing with the effects of climate change. Prolonged drought has left them with depleted supplies of water, hay and cattle feed. Bouts of heavy rain bring some relief but also cause flood damage to crops and homes. Heat-resistant plants struggle to withstand high temperatures. "The heat burns everything now, even tolerant plants. That's new," she said.

She keeps pushing because living off the grid and feeling connection to the land is her self-care.

Bennally explained after the fire ceremony that it was part of a long tradition of respect for the earth, a ritual of opening communication with the natural world.

“When coming to a new place, we have to honor the elements, so the land welcomes us. Then we can go about connecting with each other,” Bennally said.

Bennally wasn't at Uplift to talk about climate grief. She was there to report on efforts to stop the federal government from degrading Native land by opening it up for development and oil and gas exploration. Most of the speakers at the conference were Native American, as were more than half the participants. The Good Grief session was the only one that did not focus at least in part on Native American issues. But the term “self-care,” used in the Good Grief session billing, doesn't translate to most in the Audre Lorde vein of resistance but rather privileged commercialism. Only one Native person came to the session, but she left early on.

As climate change intensifies, oppressed communities will be disproportionately affected, as they've already been by land erosion and toxic spills. The quest to turn natural resources into money forced Native Americans off of their land and poisoned their mental and physical health. Now, we're all facing the same fate.

Kiera Bitter, 31 grew up in the suburbs of Salt Lake City. Her family is politically conservative and does not talk about the environment. A couple years ago, a friend asked for help bringing her old mattress to a landfill for disposal. When they arrived, Bitter saw an area roughly half the size of a football field filled with trash. She and her friend dumped the mattress and then watched as car after car pulled up and piled more trash in.

“It was disgusting. I teared up,” Bitter said. “That was the first time I realized what we were doing to the earth.”

She started doing her research and learned for the first time how bad the state of the environment was. “I was just sick, overwhelmed,” she said. “I felt so small in the face of it.”

A month later, toward the end of 2016, she saw an ad in a local paper: “If you're grieving about the state of the environment, come grieve with us at Allie's house.”

It was the first meeting of what would become Good Grief. The meeting was exactly what she hoped—a roomful of people sharing their grief over the climate. She finally could be open about what she was feeling without being judged. “I cried the whole first session,” she said.

Back at Uplift, I clamored to talk with the Good Grief participants about climate grief after the session. Most of the session participants said they were not familiar with the term but hearing the words “climate grief” brought a look of excitement to their faces. A look that expressed validation of feelings even they, as climate activists struggled, to define.

“I’m glad someone is finally working on how to process climate grief, because it’s so real,” said Marcella Mulholland, 21, from Florida. She paused briefly as her expression sunk. “I’m definitely not having kids.”

Manzanores, the surfer-looking dude from southern Utah, was on board with it. “I never heard that, but it’s pretty intuitive,” he said.

Drought has hit his community hard. Springs that were once flowing are now dry. Hungry and thirsty cattle are ruining once pristine land by scrounging for nourishment wherever they can find it. “I feel like I’m in a state of mourning or grieving when I think about it,” he said.

Reau and Schmidt kept things theoretical during the session, which kept it becoming too depressing. But talking with the participants after showed the sadness they were all carrying. I wondered if the session was anything more than a band-aid.

Over the course of several weeks of meetings, Bitter came to terms with what was happening to the earth. She learned what she could do to make things better and how to educate others. Now she recycles, cuts down how much red-meat she eats and on her driving. Little things like this make her feel hopeful, and it’s all she feels comfortable doing.

“I wish I had it in me to be an activist,” she said. “But I don’t have the confidence and I’ve got my 8-5, Monday to Friday job.”

The meetings didn’t heal her grief, but they did help by giving her a framework to process what she was feeling. She said finding Good Grief was “huge” for her because she’ll be better prepared for what’s coming than people who are not yet paying attention. “I guess it doesn’t change anything, but at least I’m aware.” Just like the people at Uplift.

At the end of the conference, a group of participants planned to head to downtown Albuquerque to stage a protest at city hall on climate policy. After the weekend of camping out and hearing about people crumbling under the weight of the slow death of the earth, I decided to head up to Santa Fe, to Ten Thousand Waves Spa, for a night of hot tubs and cold plunge pools. I needed some self-care.