1. The People's Emergency Briefing

A Discussion Guide for Facilitators

This guide and the accompanying guide "What if? A PEB facilitator's guide to handling difficult moments" have been designed to support you in facilitating successful film screening and discussion sessions. If you wish to attend a free CPA workshop to explore the ideas with other PEB facilitators, please see dates here.

1. The People's Emergency Briefing

A Discussion Guide for Facilitators

Introduction

In Spring 2026, the National Emergency Briefing - held in Westminster in November 2025 - will be released as a 50-minute documentary - "The People's Emergency Briefing" - for screenings across the UK. The aim is to bring the same evidence of the climate and nature emergency presented to MPs and decision-makers to community, faith, and business leaders and citizens everywhere, and to open conversations about what an emergency response could look like.

This discussion guide aims to support you in running these gatherings, with a particular focus on creating the psychological conditions people need to absorb difficult information and leave with a genuine sense that they are part of something larger: the beginning of a more connected, resilient, community-led response to the climate and nature emergency.

Engagement

Ask any local organiser about their biggest challenge and they'll probably say "*engagement*" - and that it's harder when the topic is climate change, harder still when framed as a crisis or emergency. Typically, climate related events focus on information and calls to action; whilst both matter, they tend to miss something crucial: *people always have psychological and emotional responses to the climate and nature emergency, and without care, those responses can lead to disengagement, denial, or distress.*

Psychology is almost always missing from climate meetings. Yet the goal isn't just to inform people - it's to create spaces that are safe enough for them to stay present, feel less alone, begin to process what they're hearing, and connect with others who are grappling with the same thing. That's where active hope and agency grow – individually and collectively. And that's how we can best meet this emergency together.

However you don't need to be a psychologist, therapist, or professional facilitator to create these conditions (although we'd encourage you to have them in your core or wider team); you need care, compassion, imagination and a willingness to think more deeply about creating the right conditions. From selecting the venue - whether a village or town hall or a city conference centre and everything in between - through considering the different needs of different sections of the community, shaping the whole atmosphere, encouraging them to stay after the film for the discussion, facilitating that discussion and offering pathways to follow after the event, at every stage your choices and approach can make a difference.

We hope that this guide will help you to do that. You will get the best from this guide if you use it as a discussion document when planning your community briefing - hopefully it will give you some new ideas as well as build upon the current skills and experiences of the team. You may find it useful for follow-up gatherings too.

The Psychological Context

People are likely to arrive at any public gathering carrying vastly different emotional loads - stressed from a busy day, concerns about relationships, health or money, lived experiences of privilege, oppression, discrimination and inequality. Each person has their own unique nervous system and life challenges, and their own perspective to the subject under discussion.

In the case of the climate and nature emergency, some are and will be most vulnerable to the impacts but have done the least to cause it, including younger people who may feel the stakes most acutely yet lack fully mature coping strategies. As climate and environment news arrives faster and with greater significance, more people are struggling - both with their own feelings and the range of responses they see in others. Denial, disavowal, apathy, anxiety, anger, grief, despair, forced optimism, paralysis, conspiracy thinking, overwhelm. Some are unconscious psychological defence processes - normal defensive strategies, designed to protect us from difficult or painful feelings - others are raw, often unvoiced, and unprocessed emotion.

Now add the wider context - geopolitical tension, political polarisation, global inequality, the rapid advance of AI - and it's no surprise that climate and nature meetings can feel different from other gatherings. The issues are existential. Emotions run heavier, people may be more fragile, or argumentative. Questions of power, injustice, and moral injury surface quickly. Some will feel too implicated in the problem to engage with it; people care, but caring can be painful so they can shut down. Others may have been carrying eco-distress for years, often alone.

When any situation feels threatening, our nervous system responds automatically, before we've had a chance to think, activating stress responses like fight, flight, freeze, faint, fawn. Each involves different patterns of hormones, nervous system activation, and behaviour.

All these factors can present challenges for PEB facilitators. Stress can mean that some people cannot absorb the message enough to act on it. *Engagement is just not possible* and stress responses can also tip into conflict or emotional overwhelm - which is just the opposite of what we want in hosting these meetings. However, there is a little-known sixth stress response: *tend and befriend*. This seeks connection, offers care and compassion, and can be nurtured, provided it's done authentically. So rather than asking how we can *inform or engage* people, it may be more useful to ask:

How do we care for the people in the room as much as we care about the content?

What would it feel like if every choice - from planning through to delivery - showed that each person matters, and helped them feel safe enough to take in what they're hearing? What if the event was a demonstration of *"this is what a well-informed, caring community looks and feels like"?* What if it helped people to want to stay connected, build the capacity to face it, and support each other through whatever lies ahead? **How can you build something strong enough to survive when people leave the room and get pulled back into daily life?**

The Role of the Facilitator

Being clear about your role is key and shapes how you manage yourself, how you hold the group, and how you respond when the unexpected happens. A facilitator is responsible for how a group works together rather than what it decides, to keep the conversation safe and inclusive enough for honesty, structured enough for progress, and open enough for genuine participation - especially when feelings run high.

Unlike a chair or a presenter, the facilitator does not lead from the front or advocate for a particular outcome. They are not a group member, instead they stand slightly apart to see the whole room clearly, mainly using non- or low-directive techniques - listening, reflecting, clarifying and summarising rather than directing or deciding. They establish group agreements, initiate activity and hold structure, motivating people to share thoughts, move toward practical outcomes, and work to generate an atmosphere of trust, safety and genuine empowerment.

Establishing some shared agreements at the start, even before the screening, creates a framework that supports productive discussion, helps people take in difficult information, and fosters a sense of community. It also gives facilitators - and the group - permission to gently refer back to those agreements if things go off track. Facilitators may need to navigate a range of reactions, including distress, denial, debate, disengagement, or attempts to redirect the discussion, and some participants may want to focus on technical solutions or advocate for a particular cause. So having clear agreements around listening, respect, and shared purpose help manage these moments constructively.

The facilitator role can be a demanding position to occupy, but very rewarding. It requires the facilitator to manage their own reactions, opinions, anxieties, responses to conflict, while remaining present to what is happening in the room. That inner steadiness is the foundation on which everything else rests. Their role can be understood as having three key aspects:

Container - to create and hold psychological safety, so that people feel secure enough to speak honestly, disagree constructively, and stay in the room when things get difficult. Without the container and its boundaries, the other two aspects cannot function.

Translator - to help people process what they are hearing and experiencing, and to make meaning from it, bridging between different perspectives, reflecting back to check, validating or opening new perspectives, and helping the group move toward understanding.

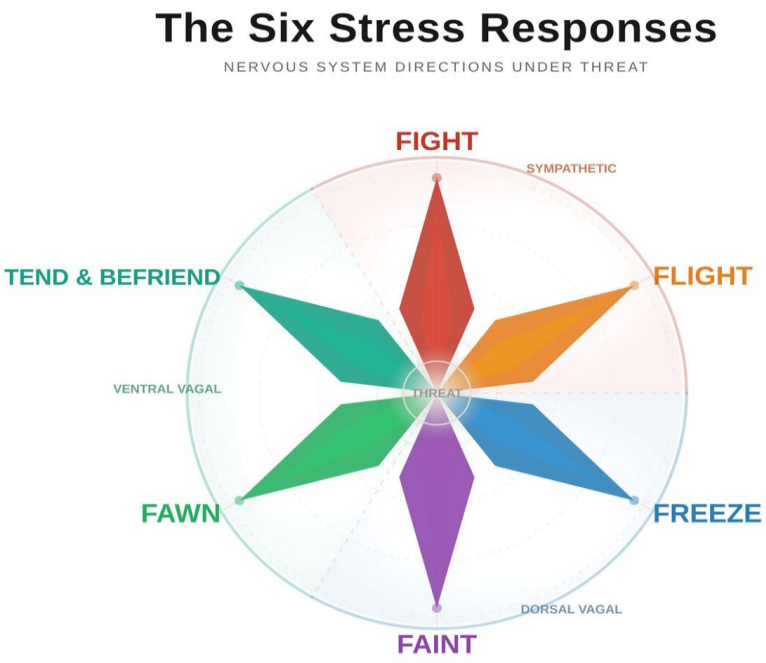
Connector - to link people to each other and to pathways for action, ensuring that what emerges in the room has somewhere to go - that energy and insight become intention, and intention becomes movement.

These three aspects are rarely sequential - a skilled facilitator moves between reading the room, adjusting, and keeping sight of the purpose and outcomes. So understanding the conditions in which a group can work well together and the ways in which stress can pull both you and your group off course is hugely helpful; the next two frameworks address both.

Stress Responses

When any situation feels threatening, our nervous system responds automatically, before we've had a chance to think, activating at least one of the stress responses, which have been shaped by millions of years of evolution and involve different patterns of hormones, nervous system activation, and behaviour.

When working with groups you are likely to encounter these responses regularly: in the participant who challenges constantly, the once-talkative one who withdraws, or the group that falls into an uncomfortably long silence. Understanding which response *you* default to builds your own awareness and resilience, and recognising them in others can transform how you work, building greater compassion, adaptability and skill.



Fight	Challenging, arguing, dominating
Flight	Leaving, avoiding, disengaging
Freeze	Silence, going blank, withdrawal
Faint	Overwhelm, shutting down completely
Fawn	Over-agreeing, people-pleasing
Tend & Befriend	Seeking connection, offering care

For more detail on Stress Responses see the accompanying guide: "What If? A Facilitator's Guide to Difficult Moments in Climate Gatherings – from CPA".

Seven Elements for Facilitating Supportive Meetings

Given that people will arrive at a People's Emergency Briefing carrying a range of emotions and difficult truths - some acknowledged, some not, these events also offer something many climate gatherings don't: **the chance of an experience built upon care,** which is more likely to help the event's purpose and impacts sustain way beyond the day.

This simple **Seven Elements** framework - Safety, Comfort, Clarity, Emotions, Connection, Meaning, and Agency - offers a thought-provoking, practical lens for consideration at each stage of the planning and delivery process, helping you to create conditions that can increase openness, connection, and a sense of community coming together.

Each person is likely to have needs for every element although some may be more important to one than to another. Each element builds an interactive system so paying equal attention to them is key, as is holding in mind the *wider context* of the climate and nature crisis. It is rather like preparing soil for planting - when the right conditions are in place, plants will thrive. Carl Rogers' seminal work on "core conditions" for therapeutic change was built on this idea and was instrumental in bringing awareness and care back to the *person,* and not their problems. This has since been widely adopted across education, management, social care, and more - settings where a safe supportive environment is essential, as it is here.

This Seven Elements framework is based upon ideas and practices from climate psychology, neurobiology, systems work, adult learning principles, facilitation experience, and more. It's intended as an optional foundational guide to which you can add your own ideas and techniques if you wish. At the end you will find links to other resources for deeper reading.

The Seven Elements

Safety — Safety is a basic survival need. When our *social, psychological, and sensory safety* needs are met we can listen better, think more clearly, and process information more effectively.

Comfort — Closely related to safety, comfort helps us to focus on thinking, listening, taking in, being easeful enough to stay present.

Clarity — Closely linked to meaning-making, clarity is key to people beginning to process complex, potentially unfamiliar information, particularly where it is emotionally charged.

Emotions — Emotions are rapid, complex responses to internal or external factors, impacting our thinking, physiology and behaviour. In the context of this briefing, they are integral to whether or not we can stay present long enough to begin to process information.

Connection — Humans are deeply relational beings, hard wired for connection. It is the relational thread that allows people to learn, reflect, and act together and includes interpersonal, community, and ecological connections.

Meaning — Meaning shapes what we care about, how we make sense and how we respond; our receptivity and resolve are strengthened when we connect to personal and shared meaning through a process of meaning-making.

Agency — Our capacity to act intentionally, make choices, and respond to the world in ways that align with our values, needs, and understanding.

Safety

Safety is a basic survival need. When our *social, psychological, and sensory safety* needs are met we can listen better, think more clearly, and process information more effectively.

- **Social safety** is a sense that you are protected from harm, abuse, exclusion, or social rejection in a group or society. You belong, feel accepted by people and aren't afraid of being bullied, ostracised or harassed.
- **Psychological safety** means people perceive that they can speak up, take risks, share ideas or make mistakes without fear of punishment, ridicule, humiliation or other negative consequences.
- **Sensory safety** means that people do not feel overwhelmed by noise, light, crowding, or unpredictability, so they are more able to attune and open to being and staying present.

Whilst Safety is one of the elements, it's also foundational. Without it, people's (often already stressed) nervous systems can quickly move into protective positions, shutting down receptivity, learning and connection. Unconscious defences and stress responses may be mobilised and emotional vulnerability heightened. However, the response of *tend and befriend* can be nurtured, demonstrating to people that this is or *can be* a group or community that cares, welcomes and works together. Other important factors in safety are *autonomy* - where people can think, speak, decide and act for themselves - and *others like me* - for example, seeing other young or ethnically diverse people in the room, which increases safety.

Questions

- What might the range of social, physiological and sensory safety needs be in the people coming to your event? You may not be able to meet them all, but you can meet many.
- What can you say at the start to motivate people to stay for the post-film discussion?
- What agreements (for example, listening, being respectful) can you seek for the discussion segment to make it as inviting and safe as possible for everyone?
- What can you do to help people land - an invitation to connect in pairs, *"What brings you here?",* a 1-minute invitation to breathe, a nature image to look at on the screen?

Suggestions

- Outline the session agenda up front to reduce uncertainty
- Make it clear that everyone is welcome - a diverse community is a stronger one
- Normalise possible emotional responses by naming some of them
- Signpost exit points and quiet spaces for those who want to step out for a while
- Offer a range of next step choices at the end to honour autonomy.

Comfort

Comfort, closely related to safety, helps us to focus on thinking, listening, taking in, being easeful enough to stay present. Inaccessibility, physical discomfort, sensory overload, feeling trapped, out of place or losing dignity can quickly pull our attention away from the content towards restoring our own ease and equilibrium.

Removing as many barriers to comfort as possible is helpful and crucially, it conveys care. Event organisers are likely to be the ones to decide where to host the screenings – however as the facilitator you can hopefully play a part in influencing the choice, and if you can't, you have a big part in making the best of whatever has been secured.

Comfort matters more than people often realise. If someone has previously visited a venue and found the seating too hard, the noise too loud, or the chairs too closely packed, they may refuse to come back. Some of these objections might reflect deeper psychological barriers, but removing as many obstacles to comfort as you can is always worthwhile, and crucially, it signals care. Comfort doesn't mean luxury; it means doing your best to create conditions that work for as many people as possible, within whatever constraints you face.

Questions

- How might the venue work for people who have different access needs or disabilities (visible and invisible)? What might they experience that you might not?
- Is the venue accessible and welcoming to people of different ages, faiths, backgrounds, neurodivergences, cultures, including those from racialised and marginalised communities? If it falls short in any of these respects - whatever the reason for choosing it - how might you acknowledge this openly, so that those affected know they have not been overlooked?

Suggestions

- Where possible, have flexible seating during the post screening discussion so people aren't crammed together and can move around
- Keep an eye on room temperature, acoustics, screen visibility, background noise – and take steps to rectify anything that isn't working for people
- Where possible, arrange a break between the film and the discussion - give time both for loo visits and refreshments.
- Allocate a team member to keep an eye out and offer care for anyone showing marked discomfort.

Clarity

Clarity - closely linked to meaning-making - is key to people beginning to process complex, potentially unfamiliar information, particularly where it is emotionally charged. Lack of clarity can trigger adverse stress responses, perhaps appearing as impatience, frustration or confusion.

Clarity shapes how participants might process complex, emotionally charged information and still stay engaged. The potentially unfamiliar climate content and intense imagery often involved can overwhelm people's cognitive capacities, lowering their capacity for curiosity and understanding. People get clarity in different ways, from asking questions to talking with others, to reflecting alone; cognitive capacities and life experiences can also impact how people achieve clarity. And the road to clarity is rarely straight.

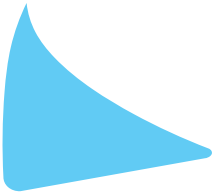
Some organisers may be planning a very short break after the screening, and then a panel discussion with Q&A. Others may wish to make extra time for people to eat a meal together and discuss informally, before going into groups. Others may be inviting people into small groups to share feelings and explore their responses. It's helpful to consider what will work best for this particular group, and to clearly explain the session flow up front.

Questions

- How can you lay out the "roadmap" for the whole event at the start so people get a sense of where the event is going, and what the next stages are?
- How can you frame discussions with questions that can help people to link and get clarity on how abstract, global or national climate issues may affect them at local level?
- If you're using any additional information, is it in manageable sections with visuals and notes? Are there any jargon or acronyms that could alienate or confuse?

Suggestions

- Avoid oversimplification - clarity is more about creating channels and time for comprehension than about making things too simple
- Confusion may not signal a need for more information but for a different way of conveying, or more time to process
- Offer times and places for people to have other questions answered and find out more; clarity is a journey.



Emotions

Emotions - complex responses to internal or external factors - often influenced by earlier life experiences; they impact our thinking, physiology and behaviour. They are integral to whether or not we can stay present long enough to process information.

People will arrive with a range of emotions from their natural states, day to day lives, from their anticipation of the event and will **always** have psychological & emotional responses to climate & nature crisis information.

Emotions are often displaced or unacknowledged in a society that labels many feelings as "negative," implying they should be silenced, fixed, or avoided. Yet they deserve attention - when ignored or rushed past, participants may not feel cared for, and feelings can surface in other ways. The chance to express them, even if only lightly, can bring relief, openness, deeper connection, and mutual care. Welcoming emotions also signals that this is a community willing to face difficulties together. *This is as important to building community resilience as is building infrastructure like flood defences.*

Some participants may disagree with or actively oppose the ideas being shared and may come to disrupt the meeting. That can disrupt not only participants' emotions, but yours too.

Questions

- What might you do or say - explicitly - at the start to acknowledge that people will have a range of feelings which are all normal and equally valid?
- Who in your team could be on hand to support anyone experiencing distress today?
- How can you build in enough time for reflection and processing before rushing people to commitment or action?

Suggestions

- Acknowledge that some feelings around climate may also be related to lived experience, age group, being marginalized, other injustices
- Remember that people express their emotions very differently (including apparently no emotions at all) and forcing people to share can lead them to resist or withdraw
- Use small groups or pairs to allow people to share feelings safely
- Offer a separate discussion and support space if young people (16-25) would like one
- Remember it is not your role to manage everyone's emotions, but how you acknowledge and respond is key
- Consider your own emotions; make time to debrief.

Connection

Humans are deeply relational beings, hard wired for connection. It is the relational thread that allows people to learn, reflect, and act together and it includes interpersonal, community, and ecological connections.

Connection deepens when participants feel seen, heard, welcome, and part of a community. When experience is shared and people realise "I am not the only one", it can reduce the isolation that so often accompanies climate distress. Creating space for diverse identities, perspectives, and experiences to coexist will help people to meet differences and to connect with curiosity, respect, and care.

Connection is also a key source of resilience: resilience is built more in relationships, shared meaning, and mutual support than in individual coping. Connection reminds participants that we are shaped by one another, by the world around us, and by the stories and people on screen - and that together, we can face the climate and nature crisis as part of our shared humanity. Making time and space for people to talk together, and not just listen in the big group, is a key element of connection.

Questions

- How can you build connection before the event starts in how you communicate it? Which words and phrases could send an alarm that people turn away from, and which could invite them to come and build connections?
- How can you encourage connection - without forcing people – by inviting them to share something of themselves?
- Considering the different individuals, identities and groups in the room – how might they want to connect today and beyond? What are some of the channels and places that might appeal to some more than others but that could help them to connect?

Suggestions

- Remind people that adversity can bring people together - it's not always easy but we thrive when we work together
- Offer the opportunity for those with shared interests to connect now and afterwards, and offer the same to those who don't yet know much about each other to widen their web of connections
- Remind participants that strength and resilience come through relationships and mutual support and strong communities rather than individual coping.

Meaning

Meaning lies covertly beneath much of our lives. It shapes what we notice, pay attention to, care for, give significance to, and what we are willing to act upon. Without meaning, information can feel distant or weightless, and agency unsustainable - with it, we resonate with our values, culture, identity, places, emotions, needs, and sense of responsibility.

There is a difference between meaning and meaning-making: meaning can feel solid - a purpose, a conviction, a reason to get up in the morning - while meaning-making is more fluid. It is the ongoing work of interpretation, weaving what happens into the story of who we are. Humans are natural meaning-makers - through reflection, dialogue, art, ritual, storytelling, embodied experiences and encountering others' perspectives.

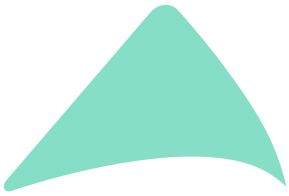
Circumstances can shift meaning: the taken for granted tap runs dry and water becomes precious; a flood arrives and the once safe home means danger. Meaning can change quickly, but it is usually an emergent process that needs time - it cannot be forced. So no matter how much urgent information we receive about climate change, it must pass through this process. Otherwise it is like heavy rain on hardened ground, running off without a trace. Meaning-making softens that ground, allowing information to connect with our emotions, experiences and values - moving us towards acceptance and a sense of responsibility. Motivation follows naturally: when people feel their actions connect to something that matters, engagement tends to sustain itself even through difficulty and uncertainty.

Questions

- What questions can you offer that invite people to connect the bigger climate and nature issues to their own lives and values, without being alarmist?
- How can you create space for uncertainty to be voiced, so that the group can make meaning together rather than feeling they need to have all the answers individually?
- Might it be useful to foster dialogue in both wide and hyper-local groups (streets, villages, blocks of flats, etc) for close neighbours to make meaning together?

Suggestions

- Offer resources for those who wish to go deeper into what this all means
- Recognise that people make meaning in different ways - some need time to write, others to reflect, others to ask more questions
- Remember that meaning-making is a journey; more may emerge when back in their daily lives.



Agency

Agency is our capacity to act intentionally, make choices, and respond to the world in ways that align with our values, needs and understanding. It emerges through context, relationships and the stages of a life, shaped, and sometimes significantly constrained, by early experience, internalised social norms, and systemic oppression.

When external forces have long constrained people's choices, learned helplessness can take hold. Some organisations exploit this by encouraging small individual actions, implying that the larger problem is theirs to solve, while people sense, on some level, that this changes little. That real power lies elsewhere. The fossil fuel industry is a clear example: responsibility for the climate crisis is shifted onto us while structural power remains intact. In this context, earning trust is essential. It is the necessary ground from which a sense of agency in a group can grow.

When people ask, "But what can I do?" it reflects both an immediate concern for impact and deeper questions about efficacy, responsibility and meaning. The facilitator's task is to help people move from that individual question toward a collective one - through reflection, dialogue and practical tools like local mapping exercises that surface what already exists, what the community needs, and what role each person might play within a larger whole. The link between agency and community needs to be made explicit, so that no one is left feeling it is all up to them, that they can be part of the collective effort to meet the crisis together.

Questions

- How might you respond with understanding and without dismissing people who say there is no point, it's too late, we're powerless, too small to make a difference?
- How can you discover what skills and life experiences people already have, reassuring them that they don't need to be experts – that we can all be crew?
- What can you prepare to visibly show the different pathways to action now? At the end of the event people may feel too overloaded with words to reclaim agency.

Suggestions

- Make time to share or showcase success stories from existing groups or organisations
- Welcome whatever time people can put in – it's OK to do just a little. Fear of committing then letting others down often stops people from stepping forward at all
- Suggest concrete next steps - speak to your MP, come to this next event, join one of these working parties, share your contact details - to maintain connection and build momentum. Remember that some may need time away to process before committing.

Preparing for Your Community Briefing

A Quick Start Discussion Prompter for Facilitators

General Preparation

- Think of events you have been to where something went wrong - what can you learn?
- Similarly, think of events that worked well, from beginning to end. What helped?
- What risks have you identified and how will you mitigate or handle them?
- How might the film particularly impact on young or marginalised people?
- How ready are you, really, for this significant event? What training could help you?

Before the screening and on arrival

- Is the venue accessible for a wide range of people and will it present any barriers?
- If not, how can you as facilitator acknowledge this to the participants at the start?
- What will participants see, hear, or experience on arrival - including their transition from daily life into the event - that helps them to feel oriented and ready for the session?
- How can you signal that a wide range of responses to the film is normal and valid?

During the screening

- What signs might show that someone is uncomfortable or overwhelmed and who in your team or community has been identified as being able to support if needed?
- What options are available for those who need to step out, move, or take a break?

During the discussion

- What ground rules, questions, group sizes could help everyone to contribute to the discussion?
- If tension, exclusion, or strong views arise, including views that might offend, how might you respond while maintaining respect and safety?
- What emotional or stress responses might appear, and how can they be acknowledged without trying to fix them?
- What spaces can you create for people who don't want to join in the post-film discussion, perhaps preferring a quiet room, or a separate space for younger members 16+?

Ending and follow-up

- What next steps can you offer on the day so that people with a range of interests, capacities, and circumstances can get involved?
- Which success stories can you share or showcase from groups or organisations already running?
- What can you offer to stay connected e.g. date for next event, support resources, online groups etc to help to maintain momentum? What's one step you could ask of everyone?

Debriefing and Reflection

As we have explored, facilitating gatherings that explore climate and nature crises can be emotionally intense, cognitively demanding, and relationally complex, and it's essential for organisers, facilitators, and speakers to take time to reflect, process, and recharge. However, often they rush off, neglecting their own psychological and emotional needs, so perhaps this is a chance for them to do things differently too!

A structured debrief, with enough time to share, listen and reconnect to the event experience will help you all to make sense of what happened, identify what worked well, and notice where improvements can be made for future events. Debriefing is also a form of self-care. Whilst you are not responsible for managing participants' emotions or solving climate problems during the event, you will inevitably absorb some of the energy, distress, and hope present in the room. Taking time to reflect helps you to replenish your own resources, preventing burnout and supporting ongoing capacity to host safely, meaningfully, and effectively.

Questions to Explore Post-Event

- How well did team coordination, communication, and role-sharing function?
- How did your own assumptions, emotions, or biases influence your facilitation, communication, or decision-making?
- What moments in the event felt most effective in supporting participants' safety, comfort, clarity, connection, meaning, and agency?
- Were there times when people seemed distressed, bored, disengaged, or overwhelmed, curious, energized and how did you notice and respond?
- How did young people or those from racially marginalised, minority groups or people made more vulnerable by climate change respond?
- Were there any tricky moments? How did you handle them, and what can you learn from them for future development?
- How effectively were people able to express feelings, reflect on meaning, or explore agency, and what could support this further?
- What feedback, explicit or implicit, did you receive from participants, and what does it suggest about adjustments for future events? Do you need more feedback?
- How do you feel after the event and what self-care practices will help you recover and integrate the experience?
- How might this framework or others help the community in other meetings and events as you take further actions together?
- Were you as prepared and ready as you thought you were?
- What else would you do differently next time?

Conclusion

Facilitating events on climate and nature is an opportunity to create spaces where people can feel safe, supported and seen, while engaging with complex, often overwhelming realities. Understanding normal stress responses will help you to identify, contain and move through difficulty calmly.

The seven elements - Safety, Comfort, Clarity, Emotions, Connection, Meaning, and Agency - are interwoven and mutually reinforcing. Attending to them thoughtfully allows participants to process information, connect with one another, make meaning, and discover their own capacity to act in ways that feel authentic and sustainable. A welcoming entrance, a carefully framed question, an acknowledgement of emotion, the way a disruption is handled - each of these can ripple outward in ways you may never fully see. They are not just good facilitation practice but acts of community-building.

Facilitation is also a relational and reflective practice. Your presence, choices and attention shape what participants experience and what they carry away. Reflection, debriefing and self-care are vital for maintaining your own capacity to keep holding these spaces well.

The deeper purpose of this work is not the event itself. It is what the event makes possible - a community with the relationships, the shared understanding, and the collective resilience to face climate shocks, natural disasters, wildlife decline, potential food shortages and social disruption together. Not as isolated individuals pulling through daily life as best they can, but as people who know each other, trust each other, and have already practised staying present through difficulty. The emergency we face is not only ecological but relational. How we gather is part of the response.

That is what you are building. And each time you run events for the communities that emerge from this one you will learn something new, and the outcomes will never be entirely predictable. But showing up with care has the potential to ripple further than you may ever imagine or know.

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These resources are offered as a practical tool to draw on, whatever your experience level, to facilitate meaningful, constructive dialogue. Responsibility for how they are applied and the outcomes that arise remains with the users! We hope these materials serve you and the communities you work with well, and we welcome feedback as we continue to develop and improve them.

Resources

The Climate Psychology Alliance

Climate Café Listening Circles from the Climate Psychology Alliance:

The role of a facilitator from Mindtools

Liberating Structures - simple discussion tools for facilitators

Community Toolbox Guides

- Conducting Effective Meetings
- Developing Facilitation Skills
- Capturing What People Say: Tips for Recording a Meeting
- Techniques for Leading Group Discussions

Anti Oppression Toolkit Facilitator's Guide from Ulex Project

Anti-Oppression Facilitation Skills: Removing Barriers to Participation and Disagreement - a free online video training session from the University of Vermont Larner College of Education

Checking the accessibility of a venue from SCOPE

Intriguing Group Dynamics – 3 blogs from Linda Aspey

- Part 1
- Part 2
- Part 3

Resources on Climate and Mental Health

Counselling Directory – a searchable database of UK counsellors, including climate-aware ones.

ThriveLDN – online tools, resources, and information

Climate Mental Health Network (US based - guides for parents, young people and educators)

2. What If?

A Facilitator's Guide to Difficult Moments in Climate Gatherings

Introduction

People are likely to arrive at climate-and nature related gatherings carrying vastly different emotional loads - stressed from a busy day, concerns about family or health, neurodivergence, different histories and lived experiences including of joining groups, and complex climate feelings like denial, grief, anger, despair, overwhelm - all compounded by world events.

This guide aims to help you to understand more deeply some of the stress responses that people can have when faced with really difficult information, particularly when in groups, and how you can both prepare yourself in the moment by “putting your own oxygen mask on first” and also manage any difficult situations that arise.

This is important because when any situation feels threatening, our nervous system responds automatically, before we've had a chance to think, activating one of at least six distinct stress responses shaped by millions of years of evolution: fight, flight, freeze, faint, fawn, and, more recently identified, tend-and-befriend. Each involves different patterns of hormones, nervous system activation, and behaviour.

As a facilitator, you are likely to encounter any or all of these stress responses regularly, particularly in groups which haven't established their own "norms" and in groups talking about existential threat. They can show up in the participant who challenges constantly, the once-talkative one who withdraws, or the group that falls into uncomfortable silence. When you can recognise not only the responses but recognise them as normal, you can build your own self-awareness and resilience, slow down your own automatic responses and handle them calmly in others - all with much greater compassion and skill.

The Six Stress Responses Explained

Fight:	The body mobilises for confrontation, surfacing as anger, aggression, or the urge to argue and overpower.
Flight:	The impulse to escape - physically leaving, withdrawing emotionally, or simply shutting down engagement.
Freeze:	A kind of paralysis where the body and mind lock up, making it hard to think, speak, or act.
Faint:	An involuntary collapse response, where the system becomes so overwhelmed it shuts down altogether.
Fawn:	The urge to appease, agree, or placate to reduce perceived threat and restore safety.
Tend & befriend:	A socially-oriented response (typically towards offspring but can become wider) offering care, seeking connection, or rallying others as a way of managing threat together.

Which Stress Response Do We Use and When?

Several factors shape which stress responses we default to. **Early attachment patterns** and childhood experience lay down deep templates - a child who learned that anger got results may default to fight; one who learned that disappearing was safer may default to flight or freeze.

Trauma history also plays a significant role, particularly in wiring freeze and faint responses, which are associated with experiences where fight or flight wasn't possible. Beyond personal history, **nervous system baseline** matters - people have different thresholds and different widths of "window of tolerance" (a term coined by Dr Dan Siegel) before tipping into a stress response.

Gender socialisation shapes defaults too: tend-and-befriend (a term coined by Dr Shelley Taylor) is more common in women, partly biological and partly because fawning and caretaking are socially reinforced; fight responses are often more socially permitted in men. **Culture** adds another layer, influencing which responses are practiced, permitted, or suppressed.

Finally, **context and current state matter.** The same person may fight in one situation and freeze in another. And tiredness, hunger, or prior stress all narrow the window of tolerance, making stronger responses more likely, and more quickly triggered.

How Stress Can Spread

Humans and other animals are wired for survival through social connection and unconscious imitation; this is known as social or emotional contagion - our responses quickly ripple out to those around us. When one person is calm, others are more likely to be too. When one person is agitated and dysregulated, the threat response escalates. When one person withdraws, others might do the same – or they might try to bring them out, only to meet more resistance.

Facilitators see this all the time and are not exempt themselves. You may become angry when someone else is angry or refuses to comply, or feel under pressure to resolve things quickly, or want to rescue those in distress. Participants may also offload or “project” emotions they can't easily hold themselves, and you can find yourself absorbing more than you expected.

And as discussed, where climate and nature crises is the subject, given the existential nature of the threats - responses can be heightened. So understanding and working on your own stress responses can be a lifesaver in how you handle these moments, and how you respond and communicate from there.

Responding in the Moment

Good self-preparation, such as deep breathing and grounding practices along with clear contracting up front (establishing shared agreements around listening, sharing time, mutual respect) can help to avoid or minimise difficult moments. However, agreements can be forgotten when feelings run high, so you need to de-escalate or contain them when they arise. Thinking of **SOS is** useful – a call on your own system to **Stop, Orient, Steer.**

Start With *You* Before You Address a Situation

Here are some simple in-the-moment steps to help you to settle your own nervous system and restore equilibrium before you respond.

1. **Ground yourself physically first:**
   Before speaking, plant both feet flat on the floor, feeling the ground beneath you. This interrupts the stress response, reminding your nervous system that you are safe.

2. **Take one slow breath in for four seconds. Exhale for six or eight seconds:**
   This activates your parasympathetic nervous system almost immediately. One breath is enough to create a pause without the room noticing.

3. **Soften your jaw and hands where tension goes first:**
   This sends a signal to your brain that the situation is not a physical threat. It takes less than two seconds and is invisible to the room.

4. **Lower your gaze briefly:**
   Looking slightly downward reduces visual stimulation and helps interrupt the stress response. It also appears to the audience as thoughtful consideration rather than anxiety.

5. **Name it silently to yourself:**
   Internally name what you're feeling – it activates the prefrontal cortex and dampens the amygdala's alarm signal. This "affect labelling" reduces emotional intensity quickly.

6. **Touch something solid:**
   If you're near a table, podium, or chair, resting your hand briefly uses proprioception to orient you in space, signalling physical stability to your nervous system.

7. **Slow your movement:**
   When we're activated, we tend to move faster. Deliberately slowing any movement - how you turn, how you lift your notes - cues your nervous system to downregulate.

Each of these creates a tiny gap between the disruption and your response. Even two or three seconds of intentional self-regulation can be the difference between a reactive response that escalates the situation and a grounded one that holds the container for the whole room. From this **Stop** you can **Orient** yourself and **Steer** towards where you need to be.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

If stress closes your participants down or escalates tensions in the post-screening discussion and reflection section, you may be thinking *"What can I do?"* Once you have taken care of your own nervous system you might like to draw on the principles of a helpful framework called Nonviolent Communication. This was developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s to do exactly what stress makes hardest - to keep people genuinely present to each other, even when everything in them wants to shut down or fight back.

Rosenberg suggested that most conflict arises from habits of communication that obscure what people actually feel and need. NVC helps us to raise our consciousness and become more aware of our thoughts, language, communication and use of power. When translated into practice, NVC has four core components which apply to both in how you speak and how you listen:

Observations

Describe what you actually see or hear, stripped of interpretation or judgment. *"You've spoken four times"* rather than *"You're dominating this meeting."* It's akin to what a camera would record rather than what story you would tell about it.

Feelings

Name your genuine emotional response, taking care to distinguish real feelings (*frustrated, confused*) from thoughts disguised as feelings (*"I feel like you're not listening"* is not a feeling, it's an accusation). Owning your feelings rather than giving them to someone else changes the entire dynamic of an exchange.

Needs

Identify the underlying human need driving the feeling. Rosenberg argued that all feelings point to needs - for safety, respect, connection, autonomy, meaning - and that these needs are universal. Finding the need beneath the position is where genuine understanding becomes possible.

Requests

Make a specific, actionable, and genuinely open request rather than a demand. The difference is that a request accepts no as a legitimate answer. *"Would you be willing to let others speak first?"* rather than *"Stop talking so much."*

NB: Listening is not explicitly named as a step here however these four components only work **inside a prior commitment to genuine listening.** Without that commitment – especially from you as a facilitator – this can easily become seen and received as controlling. Listening is the ground condition that makes the other four possible.

When Difficult Moments Arise

Here are some scenarios that can happen in any gathering – some are more likely or more complex when the climate and nature emergency is being discussed. Naturally every situation is different so here are some suggestions for how you might respond. *Remember to self-regulate first, to listen, and consider the NVC techniques.*

Acute Distress

What if someone becomes visibly distressed, tearful or overwhelmed?

In the moment

- Slow down. Pause the wider conversation if needed -the group can wait.
- Acknowledge what you see, calmly. A simple *"I can see this is hitting you hard - take whatever time you need"* is enough. Slow, kind presence matters more than words.
- Don't rush them past it. Allowing the emotion to be there without panic or embarrassment is itself an act of care.
- You can ask if they need a hug or a hand to hold -but always ask first, and someone in the group may naturally step forward.
- Offer an anchor if helpful -a glass of water, a suggestion to step outside, ask if they came with someone, or simply sitting quietly nearby.

With the group

- Normalise what is happening. A quiet *"These are real and reasonable responses to what we're facing -perhaps some of you feel the same"* reassures everyone and reduces the person's sense of exposure.
- Don't make the distressed person the centre of prolonged attention unless they want to be. Follow their lead.
- Ask if the group would like a few moments of deep breathing to settle.

After the moment

- Check in privately before the session ends -a brief *"I just wanted to see how you're doing"* signals they haven't been forgotten.
- If someone remains in significant distress, suggest gently that they speak with someone they trust. You are not a therapist -you are expected to be human, calm and steady, ensuring the person feels neither alone nor ashamed.

Distress in a climate gathering is often a sign that something important is being surfaced and that others may be feeling it too, but unable to express their painful feelings. Holding it well is part of the facilitator's role.

Acute Distress (continued)

What if someone storms out mid-meeting?

If you have a colleague who can check in on them, ask them to do so - not to persuade them back, but to check in: *"I noticed you left and just wanted to see how you're doing."* If they don't return, acknowledge the walkout briefly to the group: *"What we're exploring can be difficult to stay with. We will ensure we follow up with them."* This conveys care.

… you ask a question but no one wants to start?

People may just be deciding whether it is safe to go first or still processing something from before. You could wait a little while longer. Or try a different question, perhaps a go-around: *"What's one word for what you're thinking or feeling right now?"* Or invite them to talk in pairs for a few minutes - that often feels safer. Or you could summarise and invite others in: "*Would anyone like to add or summarise it differently"?* If silence persists, you could ask "*Is there anything we need to name that's underneath this silence?"* or simply normalise it, *"Perhaps the silence shows there's been a lot to take in today"* and ask if they would like to take a short break.

Interruptions and Domination

What if people keep interrupting or talking over each other and the room descends into noise?

Pause for a moment and name what you observe without blame: *"I notice that as things have become more animated, listening has stopped. Could we return to our agreement to not interrupt each other?"* Or "*Several conversations are happening at once and I don't think anyone is being heard right now."* Remind people of your earlier agreements to listen, share time, and ask if we can have one speaking at a time.

...one person is dominating the floor and others are visibly shutting down?

Name it by noticing it structurally, not personally: *"I want to make sure we hear from people who haven't had a chance yet."* Then ask, *"If you haven't yet spoken, whilst there is no pressure to, if you do have thoughts, we'd welcome them."* This avoids humiliating the dominant speaker while signalling that all voices have value.

An Attack

What if someone criticizes or attacks you, the ideas you may be seen as supporting by being a facilitator, or the organisation you represent?

Remember SOS. Take a "mental step" backwards, and ground yourself because if you become defensive, you risk escalating the situation or losing the group's respect and trust. Listen to their criticism and don't argue, instead, redirecting firmly and kindly: *"I'm here as your facilitator and not here to argue or defend but to support this group in having a productive conversation. Can we return to the issue that brought us here?" (*Unless the attack is offensive, as described on the next page).

… someone makes a personal but more general attack on another group member?

Redirect firmly and kindly: *"I'm going to remind people of our agreements to be respectful, and ask us to step back from the person and return to the issue - what specifically about this concerns you most?"* You are not defending the person so much as protecting the quality of the conversation for everyone. Check if the person who was attacked is OK, and if appropriate, offer time to speak with them afterwards.

… the language consistently excludes or alienates part of the room - through jargon, acronyms, or cultural assumptions?

Rather than correcting anyone, open it up as a shared responsibility: *"I want to make sure everyone in this room can follow what we're discussing - can we agree to flag it when something isn't clear?"* This creates permission for people to ask without embarrassment and nudges everyone toward language that connects.

… someone doesn't make a clear attack but conveys a microaggression

A microaggression is an indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group - typically they can show up in a group as excluding a particular person from a conversation, interrupting just that person and not others, or dismissing them yet welcoming others' comments. In this context it's key to remind people about agreements to be respectful. A look at the target lets them know you have seen it, and a look at the aggressor can signal that you have noticed. Keep an eye on this and keep reminding the group that the aim here is to listen to all voices. You can check in with the person who was the target of the microaggression afterwards and see how they are. See the next page for what to do if it escalates or an attack is more serious.

A More Serious Attack

What if someone makes a comment that is racist, sexist, ableist, gender phobic, or otherwise discriminatory and harmful, whether intentional or not?

This is a genuinely difficult facilitation challenge, with a real tension at the heart of it: the targeted person's safety has to come first, but publicly shaming or shutting down the commenter can harden defensiveness, damage the group dynamic, and close off the possibility of genuine learning. The targeted person's safety comes first - but how you respond will depend on the nature of the comment. A clumsy or ambiguous remark calls for curiosity; an unambiguous slur calls for clarity and decisiveness. Here are some steps that can help:

1. **Pause and name what happened, without drama.** Don't rush past it, but don't catastrophise it. *"I want to just stop here for a moment"* signals that you are present and that the moment will be handled.
2. **Describe what happened, not the intention.** For an ambiguous remark: *"that comment landed in a way I want to make space around."* For an unambiguous slur, be plain and brief: *"That word isn't acceptable here, and I'm going to stop us."* Calm, not angry or apologetic.
3. **Acknowledge the person targeted - without putting them on the spot.** Don't ask them to speak. A direct look and *"I want to make sure you know that's not something we pass over"* is enough. Ask nothing of them.
4. **Decide whether to invite the commenter to respond.** For an ambiguous remark, invite them with curiosity: *"Could you say a little more about what you meant?"* For a clear slur, do not offer this platform in front of the group - intent is not the issue. Say simply: *"I'd like to speak with you separately."*
5. **If the commenter clarifies and the intent was not harmful**, name that briefly. The group needs to see the process worked.
6. **If the commenter doubles down**, ask them to leave – the target and the group need to see that enforced. *"I think it's best if we pause your participation. I'd like to speak with you outside."* If they refuse, call a short break and handle it away from the group, ideally consulting with one of your team first. Once they have left, close the loop with the room: *"I want to acknowledge what just happened and that it was handled."*
7. **Follow up privately** with the person targeted as soon as possible, and separately with the commenter. The targeted person needs to know they were seen. The commenter needs to understand the impact - and in serious cases, whether they can return at all.

The underlying principle is not to adjudicate who is right, but to manage the situation, with care so that the space is kept safe for everyone.

Deliberate Disruption or Misinformation

What if members of a political or campaigning group have come specifically to disrupt?

If you suspect an individual or group has arrived to disrupt rather than engage, name what you observe without accusation: *"It feels like we're being pulled away from our purpose -I'd like to bring us back to it."* If it escalates, pause, speak quietly with those involved, and lean on co-facilitators. Your primary responsibility is to those who came in good faith -and safety always takes precedence over completing the agenda. Again, you can ask them to leave if needed.

...misinformation or a factual falsehood is stated confidently in the room?

Resist the urge to publicly correct and humiliate - it rarely changes minds and usually hardens them. Instead, introduce a counter-perspective gently: *"I've come across different figures on that - would it be useful if we found a source we could all explore?"* You are not agreeing with the falsehood, just showing that there may be other ways of looking at the data.

Cycling, Stalling or Deadlock

What if the conversation keeps cycling back to the same argument without moving forward?

Name the loop without frustration: *"I notice we keep returning to the same point - I wonder if that means there's something underneath it that hasn't quite been said yet."* Often a repeated argument is a sign that someone doesn't yet feel sufficiently understood. Naming the cycle - rather than pushing through it - is frequently what breaks it.

...nothing seems to be working and the whole meeting feels like it's beyond repair?

Sometimes the most powerful thing a facilitator can say is: *"I think we've reached the limit of what we can do here today - we have achieved a lot, and naturally there is more to do. Let's get a next date in to meet."* Naming an impasse honestly and ending calmly, and constructively rather than forcing a false resolution, preserves enough trust to make a next attempt possible.

...the meeting ends in deadlock with no agreed next steps?

Before closing, try a simple needs round: ask each person to complete just one sentence - *"What I most need going forward is…"* You are not looking for consensus on the issue, only on what people need to keep engaging. From that, even a small and modest next step - another meeting, a working group, an invitation to stay on and chat - can be enough to keep the process alive and signal that the conversation is not over.

Conclusion

Group dynamics and conversations are often messy and you won't be able to anticipate every moment. However, if you prepare well, with your team, you can reduce the likelihood of tricky moments or of handling them badly if they do arise.

If you are new to facilitation or out of practice, it's hugely useful to practice handling these tricky moments - this will widen your stress tolerance levels, teach your nervous system that you can handle it, and build greater capacity and skill to manage real life situations.

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Resources

NVC: Center for Nonviolent Communication and Positive Psychology

Tend and Befriend: Wikipedia and Dr Shelley Taylor's 2011 paper

Window of Tolerance: A short YouTube video on Dan Siegel's theory here

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These resources are offered as a practical tool to draw on, whatever your experience level, to help you to facilitate meaningful, constructive dialogue. Responsibility for how they are applied and the outcomes that arise remains with the users! We hope these materials serve you and the communities you work with well, and we welcome feedback as we continue to develop and improve them.

 If you spot any omissions or errors, please email Linda at linda@aspey.com

This guide and the accompanying guide "The People's Emergency Briefing: A discussion guide for facilitators - from CPA" have been designed to support you in facilitating successful film screening and discussion sessions. If you wish to attend a free CPA workshop to explore the ideas with other PEB facilitators, please see dates here

(Last updated 14/4/26 – L Aspey)

3. The People's Emergency Briefing:

Guidance for Parents and Guardians on Bringing Children and Teenagers

The Film Classification

The People's Emergency Briefing was developed for an adult audience; the film makers considered it appropriate for ages 16 and upwards. However, it received a 12A rating from the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). The BBFC defines cinema content classified 12A as containing material that is not generally suitable for children aged under 12, and no one younger than 12 may be permitted to attend a 12A cinema screening unless an adult accompanies them.

The classification of 12A by the BBFC is voluntary and the BBFC's age certificates have limited legal significance. However, local Councils typically enforce their ratings as part of cinema operating licenses, making it illegal to admit underage individuals to age-restricted films. If a cinema does so, it risks losing its licence.

The decision to bring a child of any age to a screening rest with the accompanying adult; the NEB and CPA are unable to take responsibility for any distress that may arise as a result. Some hosts have made the decision to restrict attendance to adolescents of 15 or 16 and over.

The Climate Psychology Alliance's perspective

Although the BBFC gave the film a 12A rating, the Climate Psychology Alliance strongly suggests that public screenings should not be open to children under 16, and that special consideration is given to the impact and potential support needs of older teenagers and young adults attending the film, or indeed any similar events.

Should I bring my under 16 years old child?

Whilst circumstances will vary across children and families, we caution against bringing children under 16 for several reasons:

- The film naturally discusses emergencies and depicts some extreme weather events, which younger children without mature coping strategies may find overwhelming. This may have adverse impacts on them both at the event and beyond.
- The adults accompanying children to the screening could also struggle with the emotional impact of the content and may understandably find it hard to provide emotional containment to their children during and after the screening. Children and young people commonly speak about having their feelings and worries dismissed by adults in their lives, which can occur when adults have not begun to process their own feelings around the climate crisis.

- Even if the parent / guardian has seen the film or the YouTube videos of the Westminster briefing, they cannot know or control what might arise during the group or panel discussions around the PEB screening. There is potential that adults' comments and questions could cause distress to young people.
- Whilst young people will live more of their lives impacted by the effects of climate and ecological breakdown, they commonly encounter messages that their generation will 'fix' the crisis; messages that risk unfair feelings of responsibility. This often unwittingly arises when adults talk about it.
- Children will have varying levels of awareness of the climate crisis ahead of the screening. Many young people have been given messages about the importance of low-impact actions such as recycling, and suddenly learning about the extent of the emergency could lead to feelings that teachers and other adults in their lives have lied or deceived them.
- The film was not developed with children in mind. Whilst the film features different people discussing their reactions to the film's content, children's views and experiences are not considered.

We do regard it as essential that children and young people are educated on the impacts of climate and ecological collapse. However, this needs to be done in age-appropriate ways that are genuinely empowering, sensitive to children' s developmental needs, and that provide space for children's thoughts and feelings to be heard and validated.

So, whilst we advise against children under 16 years attending, we hope that all adults who care for or work with children will keep the needs of children and young people in mind during and after the screening, considering how we can take meaningful action to support the younger generation. Some guidance on talking with and supporting the needs of children is included in an Appendix, with links to further resources.

What about children over 16 and young adults?

The PEB film was made with adult and older teenage (16+) audiences in mind; 16-year-olds will have the vote from next election so are in a position to influence our political leadership.

Many young people will want to attend screenings and this right should be respected. However, it is important parents/carers/guardians/educators do not put pressure on young people to attend screenings if they do not want to. The climate crisis is an intergenerational social justice crisis: young people have contributed far less to global emissions than elders but will live more of their lives acutely impacted by climate breakdown.

3. The People's Emergency Briefing:

Guidance for Parents and Guardians on Bringing Children and Teenagers

It is unsurprising that many young people feel a sense of betrayal and dismissal by older generations that can lead some to wanting to disengage. Some feel overwhelmed by understandable feelings of distress in relation to the climate crisis and may prefer to avoid a film that centres on a crisis they might be very aware of, but feel powerless and disenfranchised in relation to it.

However, older teenagers and young adults are likely to attend screenings, and it is important that discussion facilitators are sensitive to their needs and experiences. Facilitators will need to ensure young people have opportunity to share their experiences, and to gently observe or challenge tendencies from older adults to expect younger people to address the climate crisis when they are also less likely to be listened to, compared to adults with higher social status.

If you are considering a screening specifically for those of 16+ the Climate Psychology Alliance would be pleased to help you to consider how best to do this. Also, elders supporting older teenagers and young adults should also give consideration to how they might check in with and offer support following the screening. Again, you will find our contact details and other resources in the Appendix).

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This guide was written by Linda Aspey and Gareth Morgan of the Climate Psychology Alliance - you can freely copy, share and use, without amendments and with attribution. If you spot any omissions or errors, please email linda@aspey.com

(Last updated 2/5/26 – L Aspey)

Appendix to Guide 3: Talking with Children About Climate and Nature Crisis

Research suggests that around two thirds of children aged 11 to 16 are experiencing distress around the climate and ecological crisis[1]. Their feelings vary widely: worry, anger, grief, a sense of loss, or a kind of numbness that can be hard to name. Many are carrying these feelings silently, often not because they don't want to talk, but because they aren't sure the adults around them can bear to hear it, or that their worries will be dismissed.

Parents, guardians and educators are faced with this as a challenge on an almost daily basis and come to us with lots of questions about what to say, when, how much, how truthful should they be, how can they avoid distressing children, and many more.

There are three key questions that can be useful for you to explore on this:

1. Have you been able to process some of your feelings in relation to what it means to parent or care for children during a time of climate breakdown?
2. What conversations (if any) are you already having with your child about climate change and ecological crisis?
3. How able and prepared are you to support your child if they become distressed?

1. Have you faced your own feelings about climate change yet?

Before you can help your child with their feelings about climate change and ecological crisis, it helps to have acknowledged and begun to process your own responses. The issues can bring up very painful emotions in us all - for example, shock, numbness, powerlessness, grief, anger, terror, despair, and even being ashamed of the part we have (often unknowingly) played in the state of our planet. Many people avoid thinking or feeling about it because it's all too much.

These are normal and understandable responses, and often we unconsciously set these feelings aside so we can carry on with daily life. We may pretend it's not happening, or it's "not that bad", so we don't talk or even think about it. Whole segments of society are doing the same. Unacknowledged and unprocessed feelings can lead us to further avoid reality - yet sooner or later we will be facing more of the impacts.

Finding ways to come to terms with it ourselves is the first step towards moving through, towards a more helpful response. The more supported you feel, the more you can offer your child because you need to have faced it enough yourself to be present and supportive when they bring it to you. **But if you haven't yet taken in the reality of the climate and ecological crisis, we strongly advise caution in raising it with children.** Find ways to take it in, discuss it with other adults, take time to process it. You may also have painful feelings in relation to being a parent at this time, and it can sometimes be more painful to process feelings relating to the impact of climate breakdown on children we care for.

So you might consider who else you can talk to, and if not your friends and family, perhaps people in climate and nature action groups, or by going to a confidential Climate Cafe Listening Circle or Parenting Circle such as those run by the Climate Psychology Alliance.

2. What conversations (if any) are you already having with your child about the climate and nature crisis?

Some people have faced their own feelings but avoid the subject with their children (or brush over their children's worries) out of a wish to protect them or because they don't know what to say or how to say it. That's completely understandable.

Children are perceptive. They often know something is wrong and sense when an adult is not quite ready to go there, and so they don't bring it up unless invited. They protect us. Yet if we leave our children to face this alone, we are abandoning them at exactly the moment they need us most.

Age-appropriate sharing of climate crisis information involves tailoring the conversation to a child's developmental stage, focusing on empowerment, fostering a connection with nature, and balancing honesty with hope. It involves listening to their thoughts and feelings, validating all their emotional responses, and not jumping straight into discussing action or giving false hope. It is important to emphasise that children are not responsible for the climate crisis and show ways that you and powerful adults around the child are trying to take steps to protect their future. Experts generally recommend starting conversations about positive nature connection early in life, moving to simple, concrete facts in primary school, and discussing systemic solutions with teenagers. You don't need to have all the answers or know all the science - indeed, tolerance of uncertainty is important for all of us when it comes to the climate crisis - but it is important to listen and think about issues they bring to you, whatever their age.

3) How able and prepared are you to support your child if they become distressed about climate?

There are many sources of information about what it is like being a child during these times. Firstly it is important to consider what children might be feeling. Naturally each child is unique and may be at a different development stage than other children of similar ages, so these are just considerations.

Appendix to Guide 3: Talking with Children About Climate and Nature Crisis

Teenagers

Teenagers often have some understanding of the science and the scale of the crisis, which can make their feelings more intense than those of younger children. In teenagers you might notice:

- Them expressing worry or fear about the future, including questioning the point of education or qualifications
- Anger at governments, corporations or the adults around them for not doing enough
- Grief and sadness about what's already being lost - species, habitats, landscapes, ecosystems, their vision of the future
- Moral injury, a deep sense of injustice about the world they are inheriting
- Helplessness and the feeling that nothing they do will make any difference
- Numbness or withdrawal, which can be a way of coping when feelings become overwhelming.

All of these are normal responses to an abnormal situation. Your role is not to make those feelings disappear but to help your teenager know they are not alone with them. You don't need a script, and you don't need to be a scientist, or have all the answers. Choosing low-pressure moments to talk often works better than a formal sit-down conversation - a walk, a car journey, cooking together - can all open the door.

- Ask open, gentle questions. "What do you think about what's happening with the climate? How do you feel about it?"
- Let them lead. Find out what they know and feel before you offer anything of your own.
- Give them your full attention, so they can say whatever they need to.
- Resist the urge to soothe or fix straight away. Let them feel heard first. Validate and normalise their emotions and avoid jumping straight into answering or giving advice.
- Share some of your own feelings honestly when it feels right, without unduly burdening them. Knowing that you find it hard sometimes too can be a real relief to them.
- If they ask difficult questions, like whether it's too late or what the point is, try to be honest rather than simply reassuring. Acknowledge what's hard and then offer some balance. For every difficult thing, there are also real examples of action, change and reasons for hope. "Yes, and" is more supportive than "Yes, but". For example, "Yes, it can feel scary. I understand. And there are lots of people doing impactful things such as … ". This doesn't dismiss what they are saying or feeling - it acknowledges whilst adding something. "Yes but" can feel dismissive.
- It's fine to say you don't know. You can look things up together afterwards and find ways to discover what solutions are being worked on.

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Young people between 12 and 16 may or may not be ready to engage with the reality of climate change - it depends on their development as an individual and how well supported they are in their life. It can also be harder to engage with the realities of the climate crisis if they are struggling with other threats such as bullying or challenges fitting in with peer group demands. If they are ready the goal is not to shield them from difficult information, but to make sure they encounter it in a way that is balanced, contextualised, and accompanied by space to process their feelings. This can include documentaries about science, activism or community solutions, climate-themed fiction, a limited amount of news and current affairs, involvement in local or school campaigning, visiting rewilding projects and more. Time in nature makes a genuine difference; many children now spend as little as eight and a half minutes outdoors each day, well below the recommended hour. Finding ways to build more of that into their week, and yours, is worth doing.

Research consistently shows that doing something, even something small, helps. Ask your teenager what feels most important to them. There are things you can suggest too but do let your child lead in their decisions. It is also important to remember that they are not responsible for this situation, it is the adults (of this and previous generations) who are. Neither are they responsible for "tackling" it or coming up with solutions - they need to see those with power acting around them in meaningful ways, and that includes parents, guardians and educators.

The key difference from younger children is that teenagers benefit from honest engagement with space to feel heard and their feelings validated, rather than protection from material that can invoke strong emotions. They don't necessarily need more information, but they need others around them to hear and validate their experiences. They need to see others taking action and feel empowered to make changes as part of a collective.

Younger children

A recent survey found that - nearly four in five primary-aged children (under 12s) were worried about climate change, while teachers say they face challenges in supporting children distressed by the climate emergency.[2.]

Younger children have different needs from teenagers – those under 12 are still developing more basic cognitive and emotional tools needed to process frightening content. In younger children you might notice:

- Expressing worry or fear about the future – perhaps in a vague way
- Asking questions about safety, sometimes quite stark ones like "are we going to die?"
- Grief and sadness about animals and lost species
- Difficulty sleeping, or having bad dreams
- Fearful feelings coming out in their art or play, behaviour or mood including withdrawal, which can be a way of coping when feelings become overwhelming.

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Many younger children engage in "magical thinking" where they make their own interpretations, for example, imagining that events on screen are happening nearby or are about to happen to them. They typically lack the emotional regulation skills to contextualise such imagery, and distressing content can lead to persistent fear, nightmares, or difficulty sleeping. For this age group, gentler, age-appropriate introductions to environmental themes are far more likely to build awareness and resilience without causing lasting harm than watching films about extreme weather or listening to climate science talks.

For most young children and teenagers, these feelings can be worked through with good support at home where their parents / guardians have fully considered how they can listen, support and what resources the child might need. If their distress seems to be affecting daily life or they appear really low, we encourage you to find out what expertise and support is available at their school (if any - some schools and educators are not yet equipped or skilled in this), talk to your GP (again, please note not all are equipped or skilled, and some may even pathologize climate distress), or contact any number of organisations that are focused on supporting children, young people and families. Here are just a few.

Resources

Parent/Carer Circles from the Climate Psychology Alliance – support for you

One to One support (free) from the Climate Psychology Alliance

Support for Young People from the Climate Psychology Alliance

How to Talk to Children About Climate Change from Save the Children

How to Talk to Children About Climate Change from the BBC

How to Talk to Your Kids About the Climate Crisis from Greenpeace (particularly good for younger children)

References

- Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey
- https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/majority-of-under-12s-worried-about-climate-change-survey-shows/

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