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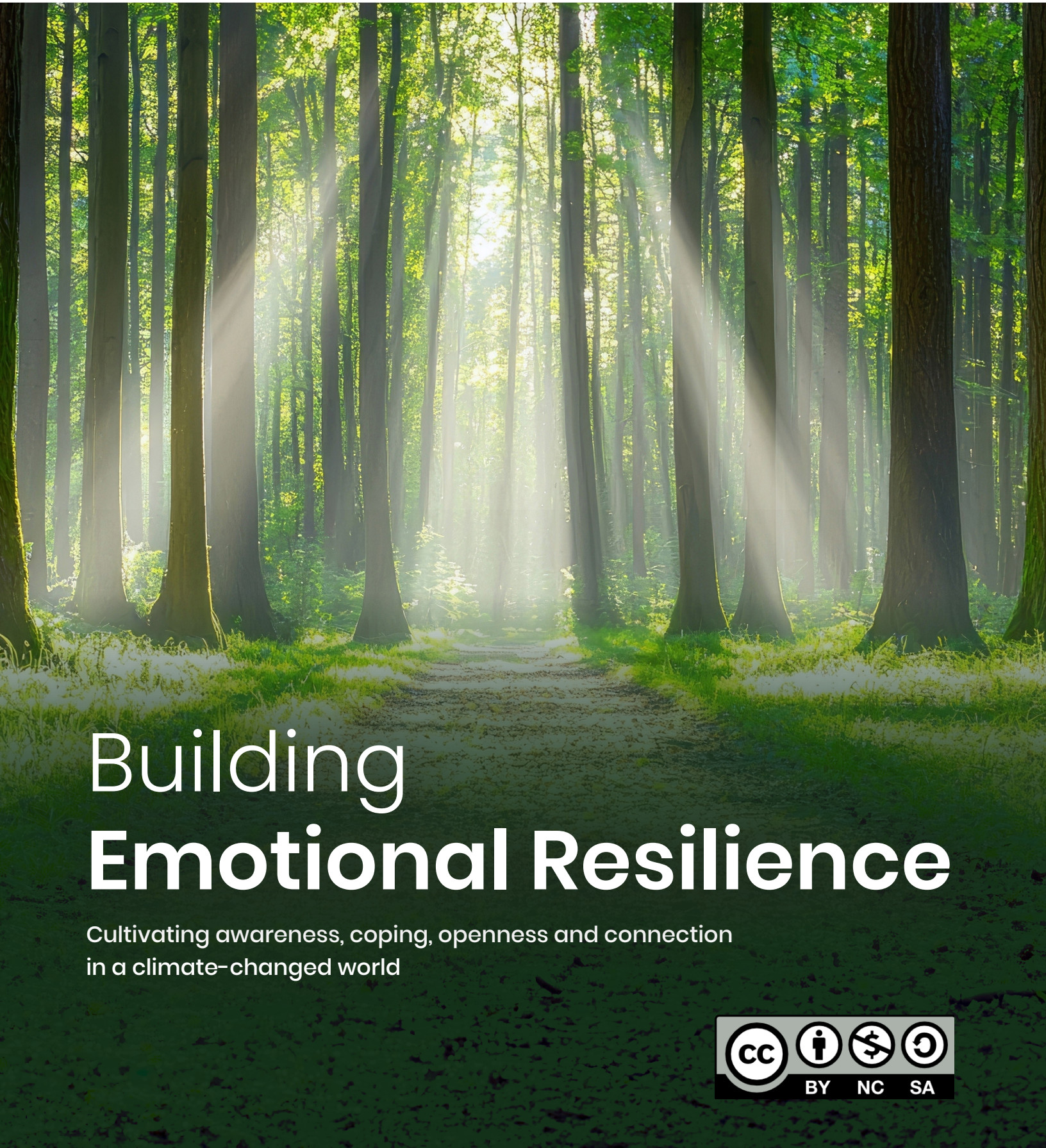

Building
Emotional Resilience

Cultivating awareness, coping, openness and connection
in a climate-changed world

Acknowledgments

This guide was written by Larissa Dooley, PhD, Director of Research and Evaluation at the Climate Mental Health Network.

Sarah Newman, Bonita Ford and Anya Kamenetz provided feedback.
Erin Bigley led the design.

The concepts and strategies in this resource are based on psychological research in resilience, positive psychology, general psychological concepts, and research at the intersection of mental health and climate change. The organizing framework of this resource - "let be, let flow, let in" - is based on the thinking and writing of Dr. Rick Hanson, the eminent neuropsychologist and author. We have adapted the framework, with Dr. Hanson's permission, to apply to the context of climate change. As Rick Hanson himself acknowledges, his original framework (which is slightly different: "let be, let go, let in"), is itself a distillation of various spiritual traditions, clinical practices, and research.

Crisis & Mental Health Support

This resource does not replace professional mental health care. In the US, text or call 988 for a 24/7 crisis hotline. For emergency mental health in other countries, visit: **findahelpline.com**.

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INTRODUCTION:

Emotional Resilience in an Age of Uncertainty

by Larissa Dooley, PhD, Director of Research and Evaluation, Climate Mental Health Network

If I had to choose a single word to describe what life feels like right now, it would be uncertain.

The world feels less predictable and less stable than it did when I was growing up in the 1980s and 90s. Political divisions run deep. Technology is reshaping how we live, work, and relate to one another at a pace that can feel hard to keep up with.

And the climate is changing. Temperatures are rising. Storms are becoming more frequent and more severe. Wildfires are burning hotter and faster. This became especially real for me this past January (2025), when wildfires swept through my hometown of Los Angeles,

destroying homes, upending lives, displacing families, and leaving lasting uncertainty and anxiety in their wake.

For many people, the future now feels harder to imagine and harder to prepare for. Questions about safety, stability, and what lies ahead—for ourselves, for our communities, and for our children—can feel constant and overwhelming.

At the same time, there is something important to remember: the human capacity for resilience is real and well-documented. Across history and cultures, people have found ways to endure loss, adapt to change, and care for one another under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. This led psychologist Ann Masten to describe resilience as "ordinary magic"—because the human capacity for resilience is both astonishing and astonishingly common.

I've also been reflecting on the book *The Choice* by Edith Eva Eger, who survived Auschwitz and later became a psychologist. Her work does not minimize suffering. Instead, it points to a quieter truth: that even in circumstances we cannot control, we retain some agency in how we relate to what is happening and how we make meaning.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum offers a similar perspective, writing that "to be a good human is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control."

That openness—to uncertainty, to complexity, to what we cannot fully resolve—is at the heart of this guide.

We do not know exactly what the future holds. We cannot predict every outcome or protect ourselves from every loss. What we can do is ask different questions:

- How can we live with uncertainty, rather than being consumed by it?
- How can we face difficulty with steadiness and care, rather than collapse or withdrawal?
- How can we live meaningful, connected lives, even as the world around us changes?
- How can we remain present—to ourselves, to one another, and to what we value?

This guide is an invitation to explore these questions. It does not offer quick fixes or false reassurance. Instead, it offers a framework for building emotional resilience—individually and collectively—so that we can stay engaged with reality as it is, without losing ourselves in the process.

The goal is not to eliminate fear, grief, or uncertainty. Our goal is to learn how to embrace these emotions and still manage to live lives full of meaning, joy, wonder, and connection.

About this Guide

Emotional resilience is a set of skills that can be cultivated and developed. It's a muscle that can be strengthened with repeated, intentional practice. We can strengthen our capacity for emotional resilience at an individual level; additionally, we can work together with others to build collective emotional resilience – as couples, families, neighborhoods, schools, and communities.

But how can we begin to strengthen our emotional resilience, both individually and collectively? How can we "work out" our resilience muscles? This guide attempts to address those questions by providing a framework, tools, and reflective practices for building emotional resilience.

We'll explore:

- How to notice when you're in or out of your "resilient zone"
- How to calm your nervous system when you're overwhelmed

- How to stay present with grief, anger, and anxiety—without becoming consumed by them
- How to cultivate joy, humor, awe, and meaning even in dark times
- How to support others (and be supported) through collective resilience

The purpose of this guide is not to minimize the reality of climate change, but rather to help us live well within it, and engage with the problem in order to help make change. While the challenges ahead are great, so is our capacity for care, courage, and connection.

Who this guide is for

- **Educators and students:** To engage with climate realities without overwhelm and paralysis.
- **Parents:** To effectively support their kids and foster emotional wellbeing in their family and to prepare and take action.
- **Youth:** To mitigate, adapt and address physical and emotional resilience in the face of current and future changes.
- **Sustainability workers & activists**: To gain the emotional skills to be able to engage in environmental preservation, sustainability, and/or activism work over time.
- **General public**: To build emotional resilience skills to help face future challenges with grit and perseverance, and still live a life in the present full of meaning and joy.

What this guide supports

- **Climate action & mitigation:** Capacity for hope, perseverance, and cooperation with others in order to engage in sustained action.
- **Adaptation:** Flexibility, learning, and sustained engagement as climate conditions evolve.
- **Disaster response & recovery:** Clearer decision-making and coordination during disasters and recovery.

Emotional resilience doesn't replace policy, scientific, or technological solutions—it helps people stay engaged with the problems and solutions over time, avoiding burnout and paralysis.

Why Emotional Resilience is Essential

What is Emotional Resilience?

Emotional or psychological resilience is often defined as the capacity to cope with and recover from difficult experiences, and to adapt flexibly to the changing demands under stress.[1] Resilience is not an inborn trait, but rather a set of skills or capacities that can be developed and strengthened over time.

One of the most consistent findings in resilience research is that resilient people are not defined by the absence of distress; they still experience despair, grief, and anger in the face

1 Fredrickson, B. L., Tugade, M. M., Waugh, C. E., & Larkin, G. R. (2003). What good are positive emotions in crisis? A prospective study of resilience and emotions following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *84*(2), 365.

of loss and adversity. Rather, **resilient people are defined by their ability to also experience positive emotions**—such as connection, gratitude, or humor—alongside their negative emotions.[2]

Psychologists call this capacity **"affective complexity"**—the ability to experience a rich, layered emotional life rather than being dominated by a single emotional state. Affective complexity allows people to move through hardship with greater psychological flexibility, making it possible to feel sorrow and appreciation, fear and love, heaviness and meaning at the same time—without needing to resolve or rank those emotions.

In the context of climate change, climate psychology educator and therapist Leslie Davenport describes emotional resilience as cultivating the ability to stay present, open, and empathetic even as the world around us becomes more stressful and uncertain. This does not mean feeling okay about what is happening. It means expanding our capacity to be with more: more loss, more change, more complexity, without becoming overwhelmed or numb.

Emotional resilience is vital for climate resilience

Emotional resilience is not separate from other forms of climate resilience—it underpins them. Our ability to prepare for climate impacts, adapt to change, reduce emissions, and educate future generations all depend on psychological capacity. Without emotional resilience, people are more likely to disengage, shut down, or become overwhelmed. With it, they are better able to think clearly under stress, stay connected to others, sustain long-term effort, and respond flexibly as conditions change. In this way, emotional resilience supports physical resilience, climate adaptation, mitigation, and education—helping individuals, communities, and systems remain functional and responsive in a climate-changed world.

What's the goal?

Importantly, the goal of emotional resilience is not to eliminate our fear, grief, anger, or anxiety about climate change and environmental loss; these emotions are warranted,

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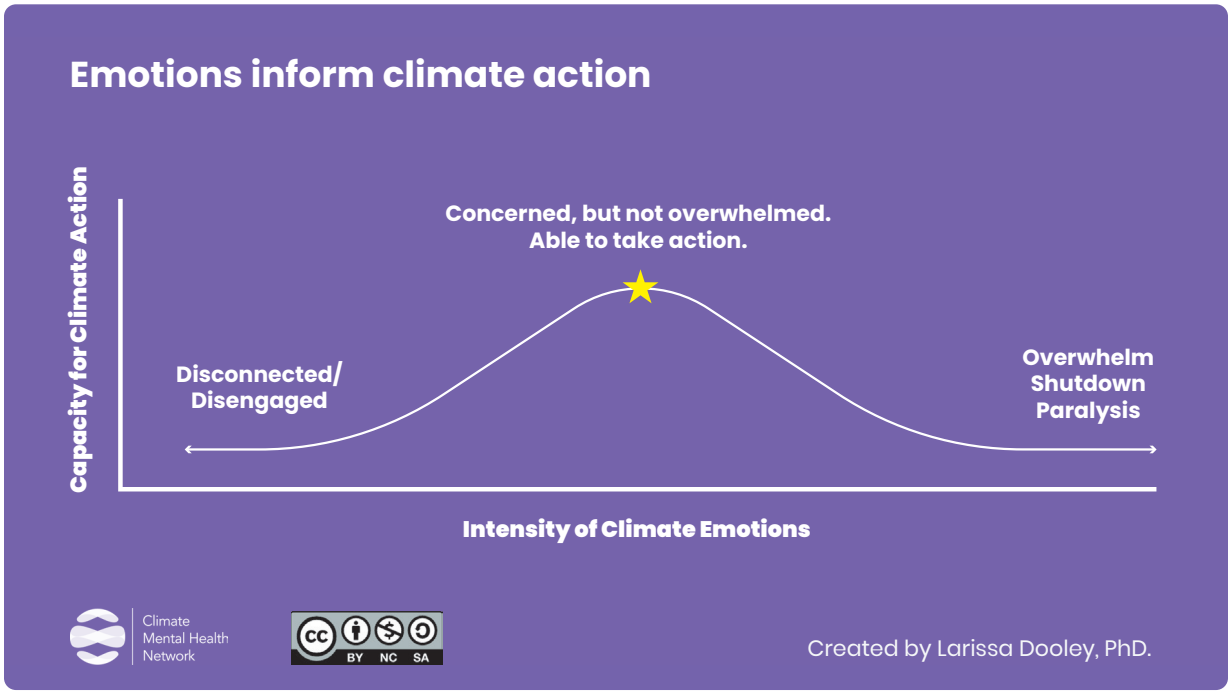
2 Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient individuals use positive emotions to bounce back from negative emotional experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *86*(2), 320–333. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.320

appropriate, and they can fuel action. Feeling distressed in the face of a profound and ongoing threat is not a failure of coping—it's a sign of engagement, understanding, and care for the planet and its creatures.

At the same time, climate emotions exist on a spectrum. When concern is very low, people may disengage. On the other end of the spectrum, when concern becomes overwhelming and unrelenting, people may shut down, numb out, or feel paralyzed. **The most sustainable engagement often happens in the middle, when we are appropriately concerned but not flooded with emotions (Figure 1)**. Emotional resilience helps us return to and stay within that zone.

People don't disengage from climate change only because they lack information or motivation. Often, they disengage because the issue evokes overwhelm, conflict, guilt, grief, or uncertainty—and those feelings don't have a place to go. Creating space for emotional processing, dialogue, and connection can reduce avoidance and support sustained engagement over time.

Figure 1: The Relationship between Climate Emotions and Climate Actions



*Climate emotions can either mobilize or immobilize us, depending on whether our nervous system feels resourced enough to stay present. When we're **under-activated**, we may disengage. When we're **over-activated**, we may feel flooded and stuck. Resilience is what helps us return to the **"concerned but not overwhelmed" zone**—where sustained action is most possible.*

This work is about strengthening our capacity to carry what's hard, without becoming consumed by it – so we can remain present and connected to what we value, to one another, and to the work of building a livable future. And so we can still live joyful, meaningful, connected lives, even in a climate-changed world.

The importance of positive emotions in resilience

Research shows that positive emotions play a distinct role in resilience. While difficult emotions tend to activate the body's **stress response**, experiences of connection, warmth, or humor can help calm the nervous system and restore a sense of balance. These moments do not cancel out grief or fear. They do not change the external conditions, but they can make things more tolerable. They help the body release some of the physiological strain of prolonged stress, allowing us to recover enough to continue.

Many people recognize this intuitively. You may have experienced it yourself, perhaps while talking with someone you trust, when laughter unexpectedly breaks through tears. The pain is still there, but something loosens. Breathing becomes easier. The nervous system settles, just a bit. This is not avoidance. It is regulation.

In a climate-changed world, emotional resilience does not mean staying positive or holding a pollyanna view. It means widening our capacity to hold what is real—fear alongside care, grief alongside connection, anger alongside love—without being consumed by any single emotion. Coming to terms with our difficult emotions about climate change can equip us to live lives of authentic happiness and joy.

Key Takeaways

- **Emotional resilience is not about eliminating distress**. Resilient people still experience fear, grief, anger, and anxiety; but they are also able to experience positive emotions such as connection, gratitude, and meaning alongside them.
- **Affective complexity—the ability to hold multiple emotions at once—is a core capacity of resilience**. It allows us to respond to hardship with greater flexibility, rather than being dominated by a single emotional state.
- **Emotional resilience underpins climate resilience**. Our ability to adapt, mitigate, educate, and recover from climate change depends on psychological capacity: to stay present, remain engaged with the problem, think clearly under stress, sustain effort, and remain connected to others.
- **Climate emotions exist on a spectrum**. When climate concern is too low, people may disengage; when it is overwhelming, people may shut down. The most sustainable engagement happens when we are appropriately concerned but not overwhelmed.
- **The goal of emotional resilience is not to "feel better," but to stay connected**. By strengthening our capacity to carry what is hard without becoming consumed by it, we remain engaged with what we value, with one another, and with the work of building a livable future.

Relevant Resources

- **Climate Emotions 101**: A worksheet that provides foundational information about climate emotions.
- **Take Action & Self Care Guide**: Exercises to help you identify ways to take action and take care of yourself.
- **Resilience tips and worksheets**: Various tips and worksheets focused on self care, mental health, and building foundational knowledge about climate emotions.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE:

Framework and Strategies

This section offers a framework—**"Let Be, Let Flow, Let In"**—alongside specific reflective practices designed to help develop and strengthen emotional resilience. The framework is based on the work of Dr. Rick Hanson; we have adapted it here to apply in the context of climate change, specifically.

In this section:

- **Let Be** is about noticing and naming what's here—your emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations—without judgment or urgency to fix them.
- **Let Flow** is about helping difficult emotions move through rather than get stuck. Sometimes this looks like expressing what you feel (through words, movement, or creativity); other times it looks like settling the nervous system and releasing stress.
- **Let In** is about making room for what sustains you—positive emotions and experiences like connection, meaning, gratitude, and hope through action.

These steps aren't linear. You may move between them many times, sometimes within a single day, as you practice staying present and resourced in a climate-changed world. Each of these steps will be discussed in more detail below, and are illustrated in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2: Climate Emotional Resilience Process

Emotional resilience is an ongoing process. By noticing what we feel (Let Be), allowing emotions to move through us (Let Flow), and making room for what sustains us (Let In), we support nervous system regulation, connection, and long-term engagement.

These practices are not linear. We move between them repeatedly—sometimes many times in a single day. Resilience grows not from doing this "right," but from engaging with your emotions with presence and self-kindness.

LET BE:

Notice and Name Your Feelings

Before we can change how we respond to difficult emotions, we need to begin by noticing them.

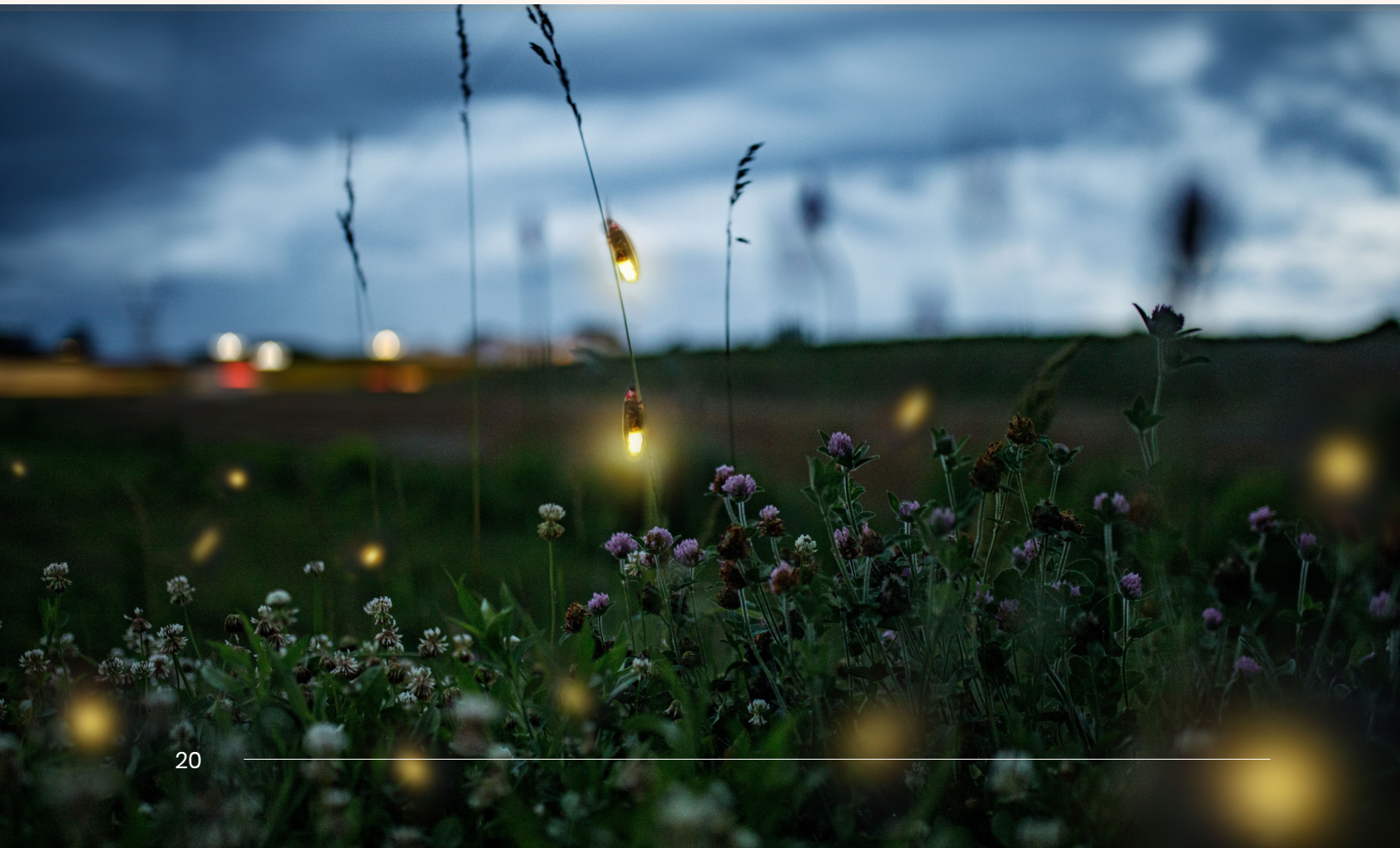
The first step in building emotional resilience is to **let be—to pause and become aware of what you're feeling, with openness and curiosity rather than judgment**. This step is not about fixing, reframing, or moving on. It is about acknowledging what is present.

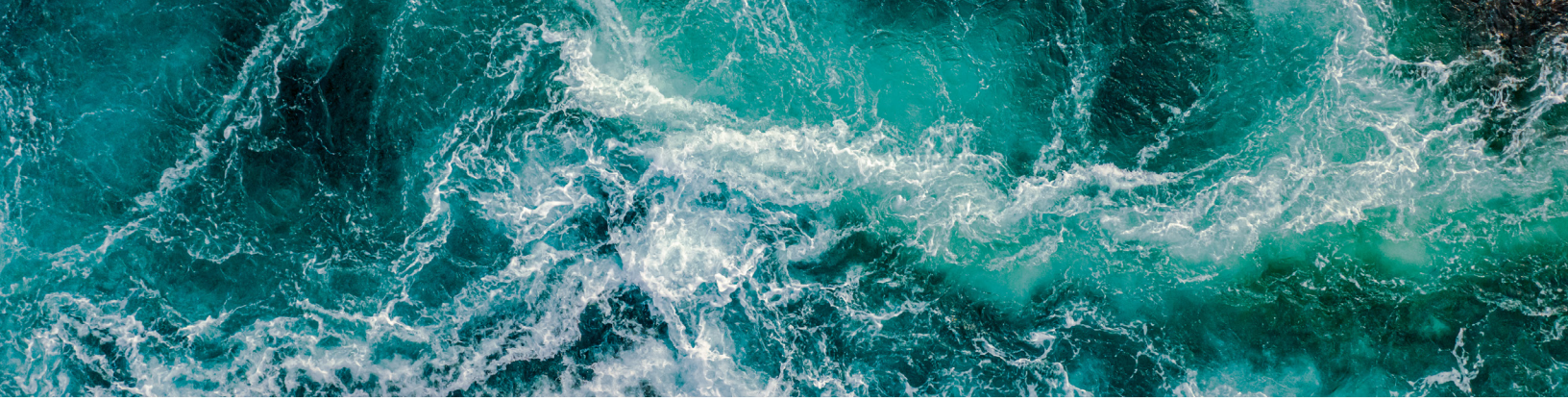
Many of us are practiced at pushing uncomfortable emotions away, distracting ourselves, or telling ourselves we "shouldn't" feel the way we do. But resisting emotions often intensifies them. Letting be invites a different approach: noticing our inner experience as it is, and allowing it to exist without immediately trying to change it.

This matters because what looks like “disengagement” is often a form of self-protection. Letting be helps us meet our own avoidance (and others’) with curiosity rather than judgment—creating the conditions for re-connection.

“It fills me with dread and powerlessness….Our children won’t marvel at swarms of insects around streetlights, see forests of ancient healthy trees, feel secure that their home is safe. Just writing this brings me to tears.”

– Anonymous workshop participant from Wisconsin





What am I feeling?

Begin by gently noticing what you're feeling in this moment. Try to name the emotion, or emotions, as best you can. You might identify anxiety, dread, grief, anger, sadness, or even a mix of concern and motivation.

This simple act of naming matters. Research shows that labeling our emotions can help regulate them, increasing activity in the brain's prefrontal cortex (which supports reflection and regulation) while calming activity in the amygdala, the brain's threat-detection system.[3] As psychiatrist Daniel Siegel puts it, ***Name it to tame it***.

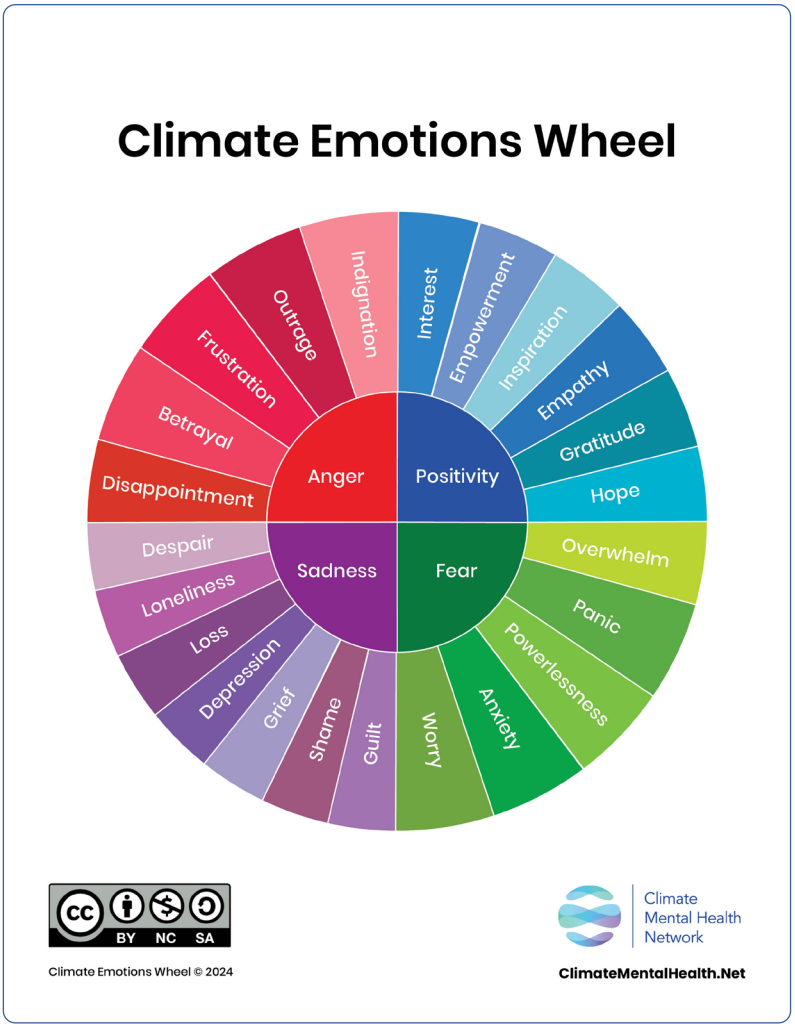
If you need help identifying what you're experiencing, the Climate Emotions Wheel (**Figure 3**) can help. Based on research by Panu Pikhala, this tool presents common emotions that people experience related to climate change and environmental loss.

"I am worried. I am a mom of three young children and I want the best for them and I am concerned as to what quality of life will even be available due to climate change and the crisis we are experiencing. I feel sad for the future generations."

– Britnee, a teacher and parent from North Carolina

3 Lieberman, M. D., Eisenberger, N. I., Crockett, M. J., Tom, S. M., Pfeifer, J. H., & Way, B. M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science, 18*(5), 421-428.

Figure 3: Climate Emotions Wheel



The Climate Emotions Wheel, created by Climate Mental Health Network and based on research by Panu Pikhala, presents common emotions that people experience related to climate change and environmental loss.

What does it feel like in my body?

Next, notice how this feeling shows up physically. **Emotions are not just thoughts; they are also patterns of sensation in the body**. You might notice tightness in your chest, tension in your jaw or shoulders, shallow breath, a fluttering in your stomach, heaviness, warmth, or restlessness. Simply observe what you notice, without trying to change it.

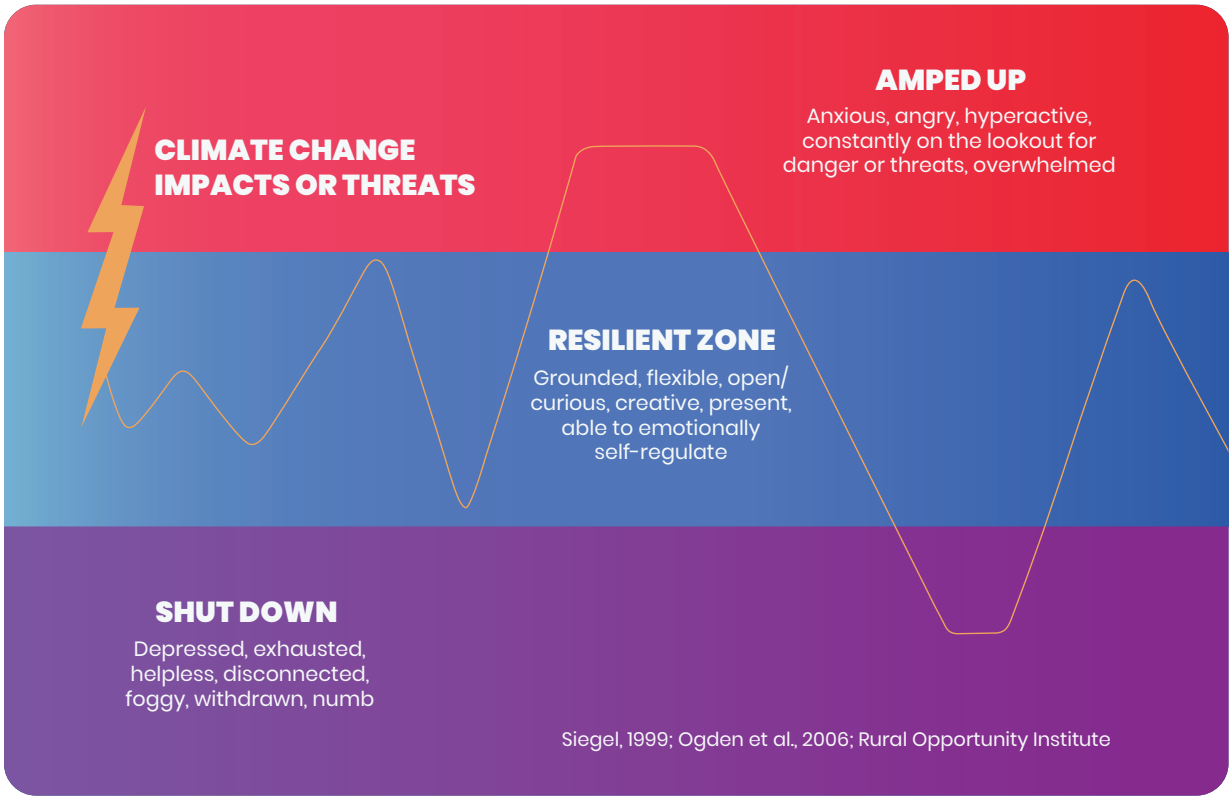
"A lot of the climate emotions I feel are similar to emotions others are feeling too, even if they are across the country from me."

– Natalie, Gen Z youth from California

These bodily sensations offer clues about what's happening in your nervous system. When we perceive threat or uncertainty—as many people do when thinking about climate change—the body can shift out of its **resilient zone** (**Figure 4**) (also called the window of tolerance), moving toward states of hyperarousal (feeling amped up, anxiety, agitation) or hypoarousal (feeling shut down, numbness, exhaustion). When we are within our resilient zone, we are better able to think clearly, stay emotionally present, connect with others, and respond with flexibility rather than reactivity. Our brains also have a built-in **negativity bias**, which makes it easier to focus on threats rather than on safety or support and send our nervous system out of the resilient zone.

Recognizing these patterns helps us understand that our reactions are not personal failures; they are our nervous systems doing their best to protect us.

Figure 4: Resilient Zone

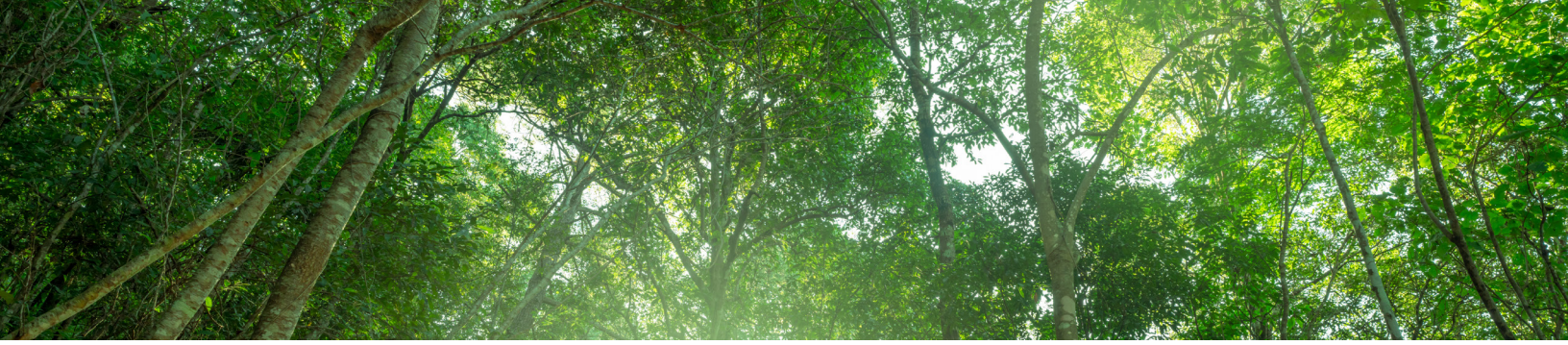


This figure illustrates how the nervous system can shift in response to stress, specifically climate change or disaster-related impacts or threats. When we are within our resilient zone, we are more able to think clearly, stay emotionally present, and remain connected to others. When we move into hyperarousal (amped up: anxiety, anger, hypervigilance) or hypoarousal (shut down: numbness, withdrawal, exhaustion), our capacity for connection and effective action decreases. Emotional resilience involves recognizing when we have moved out of this zone and using supportive practices to return.

What is this feeling trying to tell me?

What message does it have for me? Next you can try to understand what your feelings might be trying to tell you. We evolved to have emotions to help guide our behavior. For example, fear helps us mobilize a fight or flight response; if we didn't experience fear, we wouldn't step out of the way of a speeding car or run out of the house when there's a fire.

Feelings exist for a reason—they have a purpose and a message. For example, if you're feeling dread about climate change, it may be telling you that you're worried about the future, that you need to pay attention and do something to address the problem.



Listening to these messages, without being overtaken by them, can help clarify values and guide meaningful action.

Can I accept and embrace it?

Finally, see if it's possible to soften around the emotion, even slightly. Rather than liking it or agreeing with it, try allowing it to exist wihout pushing it away.

Some people find it helpful to think of this step as **"befriending what hurts."** When we understand that our emotions are signals, rather than threats, we can relate to them with more compassion.

Understand you're in good company

Understand that these feelings are normal, valid, and widely shared. We often hear people say, *I'm really worried about climate change, but nobody else seems to care*, or *So many people in this country deny that climate change is happening*. The truth is that the **majority of U.S. adults (65%) are worried about climate change**, and frequently report feelings of frustration, sadness, anger, and anxiety about the issue.[4] **Young people report especially high levels of concern, anxiety, sadness, and anger**. In a 2024 nationwide survey of nearly 16,000 youth (ages 16-25), 85% of respondents reported being worried about the impact of climate change on people and the planet, and more than 60% said that climate change makes them feel anxious, powerless, afraid, sad, and angry.[5] So if you are feeling grief, anxiety, or worry about climate change, know that you are in good company.

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4 Lieberman, M. D., Eisenberger, N. I., Crockett, M. J., Tom, S. M., Pfeifer, J. H., & Way, B. M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science, 18*(5), 421-428.

5 Lewandowski, R. E., Clayton, S. D., Olbrich, L., Sakshaug, J. W., Wray, B., & et al. (2024). Climate emotions, thoughts, and plans among US adolescents and young adults: A cross-sectional descriptive survey and analysis by political party identification and self-reported exposure to severe weather events. *The Lancet Planetary Health, 11*(8).

Yet even though the majority of US adults are concerned about climate change, many never talk about their concerns with family or friends.[6] Because climate emotions often go unspoken, it's easy to assume others don't care - when, in fact, they do. Psychologists call this **pluralistic ignorance**—a phenomenon in which people mistakenly believe their private concerns are not shared by others, even when they are. This misperception can deepen isolation and discourage connection or action.

Letting be includes recognizing this shared emotional landscape. If you are worried, grieving, or unsettled by climate change, your feelings are valid and warranted–you are responding in a deeply human way to a real and ongoing threat. These emotions are also an invitation: to reach out to a friend or family member and share your feelings, and perhaps discover that others feel the same. A simple conversation—with a friend, a colleague, a student, or a family member—can transform private distress into shared understanding and support.

"[I feel] a lot of guilt, a lot of sadness, anger. Kind of the whole gamut depending on the day. There are some days where I feel really inspired and hopeful. And other days where I'm almost in tears."

– Taryn, a parent from Oregon

6 Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Rosenthal, S., Kotcher, J., Goddard, E., Carman, J., Verner, M., Myers, T., Ettinger, J., Fine, J., Richards, E., Marlon, J., & Goldberg, M. (2025). Climate Change in the American Mind: Beliefs & Attitudes, Spring 2025. Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven, CT: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

Letting be as a foundation

Letting be does not solve the problem of climate change. But it creates the conditions for resilience. When we can notice and name our emotions, listen to what they're telling us, and allow them to be present without overwhelm, we build the foundation for the next steps: helping emotions move through us, and making room for connection, meaning, and care.

Key Takeaways

- **"Let Be, Let Flow, Let In"** is a framework, adapted from the work of Rick Hanson, to help build emotional resilience in the context of climate change.
- **The first step, "Let Be"**, is about cultivating awareness of your climate emotions. It invites you to notice what you're feeling—thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations —with openness and curiosity, rather than judgment or urgency to "fix" anything.
- **Naming emotions helps regulate them.** Putting feelings into words supports the brain's capacity for reflection and reduces emotional reactivity. In other words, name it to tame it.
- **Emotions live in the body as well as the mind.** Noticing how our emotions show up physically (e.g., rapid heart rate, shallow breathing) provides insight into our nervous system and helps us understand when we are becoming overwhelmed or shut down.
- **Emotions carry information.** Fear, grief, anger, and worry are not problems to eliminate; they are signals that show us what matters to us and can guide meaningful action.
- **You are not alone.** Climate emotions are widely shared. Recognizing this reduces isolation and helps transform private distress into connection and collective care.

Relevant Resources

- **Climate Emotions Wheel**: A wheel illustrating common emotions people experience related to climate change, which can be used to help name and identify emotions.
- **Climate Grief Resources**: A guide focused on honoring and processing ecological grief.
- **Intergenerational Guide**: A guide to foster intergenerational dialogues about climate change.

LET FLOW:

Process Painful Feelings

After noticing what we're feeling and understanding why it might be there, the next step is to ask a gentle question: **Do I want to hold onto this feeling, or can I let it flow?** Letting an emotion flow means acknowledging it and then letting it pass and move on rather than holding tight to the emotion. Sometimes, it means staying with the emotion long enough to feel it fully and express it—through words, movement, art, or sound. Other times, it means supporting the nervous system in settling and releasing the activation that emotion has created. Both are part of helping emotions complete their natural cycle. Letting flow is not about skipping over what you feel; it is about allowing what you feel to move, rather than become stuck.

Emotions are meant to be temporary. They arise in response to what we perceive, mobilize the body to respond, and then subside. But when stress, fear, or anxiety linger without release, they can begin to take a toll on both mental and physical health.

When difficult emotions remain activated for long periods of time, they can contribute to **allostatic load**: the cumulative wear and tear on the body and brain that results from chronic stress. Over time, this can affect mood, sleep, immune functioning, cardiovascular health, and overall wellbeing.

Letting emotions flow is not about pushing them away or pretending everything is fine. It is about giving the body opportunities to complete its stress response and return toward balance.

Letting flow is not giving up

It's important to be clear: releasing anxiety or worry about climate change does not mean forgetting about the problem, minimizing its seriousness, or disengaging from action.

It means releasing the physiological grip of stress before it becomes harmful.

In fact, **sustained climate engagement is more possible—not less—when people are rested, regulated, and supported**. Action taken from a place of chronic overwhelm often leads to burnout or withdrawal; action taken from a place of steadiness and care is more likely to be sustained over time.

Letting emotions flow is a way of protecting your capacity to stay engaged. This is especially important in climate work, where chronic overwhelm can lead to burnout or withdrawal. Supporting emotional processing isn't a detour from engagement—it's part of what makes engagement durable.

How to let emotions flow

But how can we let our painful feelings flow? What strategies can help us do that?

Practices that support release tend to be those that gently engage the nervous system, allowing activation to settle.

Here are some ways you can practice letting emotions flow. Some practices help emotions move by giving them expression, while others help by calming the body after activation. All support emotional flow.

Breath

Slow, intentional breathing can signal safety to the nervous system. Try lengthening your exhale slightly, allowing the body to soften as the breath leaves. You might imagine tension or heaviness flowing out with the breath.

Movement

Movement can serve both expression and release. Sometimes we move to embody what we feel—through stretching, dance, yoga, or other activities. Other times, movement helps the nervous system discharge stress and return toward balance.

Creative expression

Writing, drawing, music, or other creative practices can give emotions a form and a voice. Expression allows feelings to be felt, witnessed, and released without needing to analyze or explain them.

Rest and self-care

Sleep, time outdoors, nourishment, and moments of quiet all support recovery. These are not luxuries—they are essential to resilience.

Connection

Emotions often flow most easily in the presence of others. Talking with a trusted friend, sitting together in silence, or being in community can help regulate the nervous system. Co-regulation —our nervous systems calming in response to one another—is a powerful and underappreciated form of care.

There is no single "right" way to let emotions flow. What helps will differ from person to person and from moment to moment. The goal is not to eliminate emotion, but to help it move rather than get stuck.

Flow creates space

As difficult emotions soften or pass, even briefly, something else often becomes possible: more ease in the body, more clarity, more openness. This is not because external conditions have changed, but because the nervous system has.

This space makes room for the next step—**letting in** experiences that restore and sustain us, including connection, meaning, and moments of positive emotion. As research shows, bringing in positive emotions is not a distraction from hard realities; it is one of the most effective ways to recover from stress and build resilience over time.

We'll explore that next.

Key Takeaways

"Let Flow" is about helping difficult emotions move through your body rather than getting stuck. It focuses on regulation and release—supporting the nervous system so stress and activation can settle instead of accumulating.

Emotions are meant to be temporary. When allowed to move, difficult feelings can rise and pass; when held tightly or suppressed, they can contribute to chronic stress and burnout.

Letting emotions flow is not avoidance or disengagement. It is a way of protecting your capacity to stay present and engaged over time.

Regulation supports resilience. Practices such as breath, movement, creative expression, rest, and connection can help release the grip of negative emotions.

There is no single "right" way to release emotion. What helps will vary by person and moment; the goal is not to eliminate feeling, but to prevent it from becoming overwhelming or immobilizing.

Relevant Resources

- **Climate Grief Resources**: A guide focused on honoring and processing ecological grief.
- **Intergenerational Guide**: A guide to foster intergenerational dialogues about climate change.
- **Parents and Caregivers Guide**: Practical tips for parents and caregivers on preparing for extreme weather and taking climate action; and conversation guides for raising resilient kids in a fast changing world.
- **Creative Arts Therapies**: A resource offering supportive practices to help process climate emotions, including art therapy, bibliotherapy, dance, drama and movement therapies.
- **Mindfulness Practices**: Mindfulness meditations led by Bonita Ford, Sarah Jaquette Ray, Derrick Sebree and others, to help tune into and process emotions.

"[I have] become more patient with my climate emotions, by learning to let them flow and developing relationships with people who share some of my same anxieties."

- Zoharia, Gen Z youth from Illinois

LET IN:

Cultivate Positive Feelings

After noticing what we're feeling and allowing difficult emotions to move through us, the next step is to ask a different question: **What positive emotions or experiences can I let in?**

Letting in does not mean forcing positivity or trying to feel better. It means allowing space for experiences that restore, steady, and sustain us—experiences that help the nervous system recover and support our capacity to stay engaged with a difficult reality.

Positive emotions play an essential role in resilience. Research shows that while distressing emotions tend to activate the body's stress response, experiences such as connection, gratitude, meaning, and care can help calm the nervous system and restore balance. Positive emotions activate the **parasympathetic nervous system–the "rest and digest"** arm of the autonomic nervous system, which slows down the heart rate and promotes a relaxed, balanced state. By stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, positive emotions support recovery from stress and help undo some of the harmful physiological effects triggered by stress and negative emotions.

Gratitude: What's good right now?

One way to begin letting in is by noticing what is good or supportive in this moment.

Gratitude can be simple and immediate: clean air after rain, a nourishing meal, a kind interaction, a warm animal nearby, a moment of quiet. This does not require denying loss or minimizing the pain we experience. Rather, these small experiences can anchor the nervous system in something positive that is present and remind us that even amid disruption, there are still sources of care and comfort.

You might ask yourself:

- What am I grateful for right now?
- What feels supportive or steady in this moment?

Gratitude is not a demand, but rather an invitation to notice all the beauty and goodness that still remains and is worth fighting for.

Meaning and Growth

Another way people let in sustaining experiences is through meaning-making, which does not require finding a "silver lining" or framing suffering as necessary. Instead, we can reflect on how hardship has shaped values, priorities, relationships, or capacities.

Psychologist Maria Ojala describes this as **meaning-focused coping**—the process of identifying purpose, growth, or alignment with values even in the presence of ongoing threat. Meaning does not eliminate grief, but it can coexist with it.

For some people, climate change has clarified what matters most: relationships, community, care for future generations, or connection to place. For others, it has sparked new skills, roles, or forms of engagement—organizing locally, educating others, advocating for change, or supporting those affected by climate impacts.

You might reflect:

- Has climate change changed how I see what matters?
- Has it shaped how I show up for others, for my community, or for the future?

There is no requirement to find meaning. But for many, meaning emerges over time.

Hope and Action

Hope, in the context of climate change, is often misunderstood. Hope doesn't require confidence that everything will turn out well. Instead, many people experience **hope as a thing that arises through action**.

Research suggests that taking action—especially with others—can be protective for mental health and support resilience over time.[7] Acting in alignment with values can restore a sense of agency, reduce feelings of helplessness, and strengthen connection.
This is one reason collective action can feel so protective: it combines meaning, connection, and efficacy. It helps transform climate concern from an isolating internal burden into a shared, relational experience—one of the strongest supports for resilience and sustained engagement.

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7 Schwartz, S. E., Benoit, L., Clayton, S., Parnes, M. F., Swenson, L., & Lowe, S. R. (2022). Climate change anxiety and mental health: Environmental activism as buffer. *Current Psychology*, *42*(20), 16708-16721.

Hope can come from several places:

- Recognizing the human capacity for resilience and recovery
- Witnessing care, creativity, and solidarity in the face of crisis
- Focusing on what is within our control, rather than carrying responsibility for everything
- Participating in collective efforts, rather than acting alone

Action does not need to be constant or large-scale. Sustainable engagement requires balance—between effort and rest, commitment and care. Letting in includes knowing when to pause.

Social connection

Connection is one of the most powerful sources of resilience. Human nervous systems are shaped for co-regulation; we settle and steady in response to one another.

Social connection can take many forms: talking openly about climate emotions, working alongside others, sharing grief, celebrating small wins, or simply being present together. Feeling part of a shared effort helps counter isolation and supports endurance.

Connection also shapes social norms. When people see others expressing care, concern, and commitment, it becomes easier to do the same. Letting in connection helps transform private worry into shared responsibility.

"Climate change can definitely overwhelm and frustrate me, but I am pretty intentional about being part of a local and global community valuing climate action and sustainable development, which helps so much in keeping me feeling hopeful and empowered."

- Sheree, a teacher from California

Letting in as an ongoing practice

Letting in does not mean staying positive or hopeful at all times. It means making room, again and again, for experiences that help you recover, reconnect, and continue.

In a climate-changed world, resilience is not sustained by grit alone. It is sustained by care, meaning, connection, and the quiet decision to allow what nourishes us to matter, even now.

Key Takeaways

"Let In" is about intentionally allowing in experiences that restore and sustain you. It focuses on cultivating positive emotions—such as connection, gratitude, meaning, and care—that help the nervous system recover and support long-term engagement.

Positive emotions are not a distraction from the reality of climate change. They help calm the stress response and restore balance, making it easier to remain present with difficult truths.

Gratitude anchors us in what is still present. Noticing what is good right now does not deny loss—it reminds us of what is worth protecting and nurturing.

Meaning can coexist with grief. Reflecting on values, relationships, and growth helps transform hardship into purpose without minimizing pain.

Hope often grows through action. Acting in alignment with values—especially alongside others—builds agency, reduces helplessness, and strengthens emotional resilience.

Connection sustains endurance. Relationships, community, and shared effort regulate the nervous system and transform private concern into collective responsibility.

Resilience is an ongoing practice. Letting in what nourishes us—again and again—supports sustained engagement in a climate-changed world.

Relevant Resources

- **Climate Catcher**: Sharing and Self-Care Game: Based on a children's fortune teller game, this "climate catcher" is a fun approach to sharing climate emotions and self-care strategies, with prompts like "What gives you courage or hope?" and "Describe a special place in nature." It's a lighthearted way to start a conversation about climate emotions with friends, family, or the kids in your life.
- **Take Action & Self Care Guide**: Exercises to help you identify ways to take action and take care of yourself.
- Meditation and Reflection: **So Much Beauty to Fight For**
- **Guided meditations on YouTube**: Various guided meditations led by Bonita Ford, Sarah Jaquette Ray, Derrick Sebree and others.
- **Bookshop page**: Recommended reading about resilience and self care.

"I'm tired of people asking, what gives you hope? Ask instead, what are you doing to create hope? We are not passive, helpless observers of our fate. We have the ability to change it, and it begins with our actions today."

— Katharine Hayhoe, Chief Scientist for The Nature Conservancy and Professor in the Department of Political Science at Texas Tech University

Conclusion

Building emotional resilience in a climate-changed world is not about mastering your feelings or staying positive in the face of loss. It is about learning how to stay present with what is real—without becoming overwhelmed or disconnected—and choosing, again and again, to remain engaged with what you care about.

The practices in this guide are simple, but they are not small. By noticing what you feel (Let Be), allowing emotions to move through you (Let Flow), and making room for what sustains you (Let In), you strengthen your capacity to live with uncertainty, to care deeply without burning out, and to act in ways that are both meaningful and sustainable.

Resilience is not something you achieve once and for all. It is an ongoing process—one that unfolds through attention, compassion, connection, and practice. Some days will feel steadier than others. What matters is not doing this "perfectly," but continuing to show up for yourself, for one another, and for the world you are trying to protect.

In a time of profound change and uncertainty, emotional resilience is not a retreat from reality. It is what allows us to face our changing world with clarity, courage, and care—and to keep choosing connection, meaning, and action.

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