

Therapy and Climate Change – for BACP’s therapy today

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By Mark Brayne

Headline in the Guardian Nov 20, 2007: “We’re the only species on the planet ever to document our own extinction.”

As therapist to therapist, let me get straight to the point. I need some help with a couple of clients.

My first challenge is a mother of a certain age, indeed a grandmother and great-grandmother multiple times over. Wise, wrinkled and worn, she’s a tough old bird who over a very long life has survived a lot of ups and downs. Her problem now is her large and chaotic family who still live in her house and have nowhere else to move.

So far, she’s been the archetypal Good Enough Mother, trying to teach her children by example and with the occasional slap on the wrist the consequences of unsustainable behaviour. But her family don’t get the plot. They have little idea of healthy boundaries, or hygiene, or the importance of delaying gratification. They eat and drink the fridge empty the minute she puts something in it, and they’re heating the house, and burning fuel and resources, like there’s no tomorrow, squabbling incessantly that all the mess is someone else’s fault.

Our elderly but previously robust client is finding it increasingly hard to cope, and she fears that her family’s dysfunction will be the end of all of them. We’re her therapist. What do we do?

So, to our second client – and I suspect you may be grasping by now where I’m taking us.

This man is one representative member of our first client’s household who’s been told by doctors that if he doesn’t address his self-destructive behaviour – his smoking, his drinking, his addiction to fatty and sugary foods, his lack of exercise, his thinking only of his own immediate pleasure – then he’s going to die. Probably quite painfully and probably quite soon.

On the bright side, this client *has* listened to the doctors sufficiently to come into therapy. He’s perfectly intelligent, but his response is not untypical. Can’t be happening to me. Let’s get a second opinion. A third. A fourth. Perhaps if he tries minor adjustments to his lifestyle, he can avoid the radical surgery, the chemo- and radiotherapy, the massive life changes which the doctors say he must make.

As this client’s therapist, our dilemma is how to help him to realise that the doctors are right and that he really must change.

I guess you know by now who I’m talking about. Client one is of course Gaiaⁱ, our Earth Mother, the planet we live on. Overcrowded, running out of resources, but above all heating up at potentially catastrophic speed as global warming gases build up in the atmosphere.

Our second client is ourselves – humankind. Desperate for that second, third, fiftieth scientific opinion which will tell us that the prognosis isn’t so bad. That maybe it’s not our fault. That maybe the earth just does heat up and cool down once in a while, quite naturally, that just some small adjustments will be enough, and that we’ll get through this.

We all want to be lied to about climate change. It’s just too big.

Right up front, then, my appeal in dealing with these two clients. How DO we calibrate the message that things, this time, really, honestly, are very serious? How do we avoid propelling our client straight from denial to despair? How, in the words of a recent Guardian article, DOES one cry wolf, but gently?ⁱⁱ How DO we break this bad news?

There's already good evidence that on matters of climate change, as the media and politicians begin to talk more of what is happening, people are swinging straight from ignorance and denial through alarm to numbing and weary boredom. You will have heard the arguments. The Greenies and other Cassandras have constantly got it wrong. The ozone layer, acid rain, nuclear power or nuclear winter, the Millennium Bug, and now this. Just another scare story. We just don't want to listen any more. And anyway, there's nothing we can do.

I'll return to the issue of breaking bad news, but let me for a moment *be* that boy coming off the hills and seriously warning of the wolf.

The truth is that if we – I, and you, as well as the Americans, the Chinese, all of THEM out there – carry on living and consuming, driving, burning, thinking and just living as we currently do, and do not make massive changes very soon indeed, then human civilisation will end, if not in our own lifetimes then possibly as early as in those of our children or grandchildren.

It's that bad - in effect a terminal diagnosis that raises profound questions about how we as humans order our affairs. Our politics, our economics (the systemic failure, as described in report last year to the British government by Sir Nicholas Sternⁱⁱⁱ, of the market system), our thought systems, the way we elect our governments, the way we practice journalism or organise our health services. None of which are, if we're honest, truly fit for purpose for the challenges of the 21st century.

If the most serious of consequences are to be averted, it won't be enough just to drive a Prius hybrid, change our light bulbs to energy savers or ban plastic bags or set up a climate change helpline. All those things must be done and much, much more. The arguments and the evidence are now clear, but for perhaps all-too understandable but potentially catastrophic reasons of human psychology, the message is neither truly getting through or being acted on.

In a nutshell, and as has been powerfully argued by the former American Vice-President Al Gore in his Oscar-winning film *An Inconvenient Truth*, the debate over whether climate change is happening, and whether it's human-induced, is over.

That's a bald scientific fact which we as therapists in particular now need to understand - confirmed in the plainest of language by the respected Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its fourth report last month^{iv}.

Just as there was once heated disagreement about whether the sun revolved round the earth or vice versa, or over the nature of gravity, this matter is resolved. The disagreements that matter are no longer about whether global warming is happening or whether it's caused mainly by humankind, but rather about just how much time we have left to correct things, and whether it might already be too late. Scientists advising the IPCC^v talk of a window of less than 10 years – TEN YEARS! – to start making the massive global changes that might give humankind a chance of survival.

In the meantime, people the world over continue with their everyday lives as if nothing untoward was happening. Coverage of the last IPCC report in most British media lasted just one day, before they returned to business, celebrity and Christmas preparations as usual.

True, newspapers, radio and television are increasingly reporting strange happenings in nature – unusual floods here, unprecedented drought there, the disappearance of butterflies, collapses of bee populations, Arctic melting, the disappearance of ski runs in the Alps, hawthorns blossoming in the autumn, unprecedented jellyfish swarms killing salmon in Ireland. But where is the comprehensive and universal articulation of an overarching, corrective narrative of imminent danger which might give ordinary people the motivation and the tools to respond properly?

One is reminded of tourists in Sri Lanka at Christmas 2005 who excitedly and naively, and tragically, explored the rock pools uncovered by a retreating sea without realising that this meant they were about to be hit by a Tsunami.

Let me pause for a brief moment. Are you, like our second client, finding this difficult to read and to hear? Is this something you don't really want to know? Perhaps you would rather put this magazine aside at this point, or turn your attention to something less disturbing.

In naming what's happening in ordinary conversations, and with clients, I'm acutely aware how easily people can be shut down and put off. So the temptation is to sugar the pill, to focus on the opportunities rather than the threats.

But without a *felt* and not just a *thought* understanding of how urgent this is, will people really change? I fear not. So, please bear with me as we return to what's actually now a very straightforward narrative.

In the space of less than 300 years, from the start of the industrial revolution to when very much later this century we might achieve a carbon neutral global economy, we are in the process of pumping back into the atmosphere, through the burning of oil, gas and coal, an amount of carbon which Gaia took 300 million years to capture. That's a process one million times faster than that which laid those reserves down. Gaia managed for a while to absorb the extra, but she's showing every sign of no longer being able to cope. She has a fever.

Even with the delayed greenhouse effect of the industrial revolution so far, we're already committed to a global temperature rise of most probably two degrees centigrade. And – this is the really alarming piece – scientists who have been at the forefront of understanding how Gaia works, notably James Lovelock^{vi}, now warn of a tipping point, to which we may already be committed, of some two and a half degrees heating, beyond which the feedback mechanisms which have kept the planet cool for millions of years flip, and start to accelerate rather than moderate temperature rise.

The consensus-driven, cautious and measured IPCC continues to argue in its latest report that the current trend of climate change can still be averted, as it puts it at reasonable cost. But for the first time, it is also now warning of the likelihood, if the world continues with business as usual, of “abrupt and irreversible impacts.”^{vii}

Let's consider some of those possible impacts. If the Earth approaches six degrees of heating, which is within the IPCC's range of forecasts for *this century*, scenarios being taken very seriously^{viii} could include:

- Extensive melting of the ice caps, and combined with the heat-driven expansion of sea volume, sea level rises of several metres. That would irreversibly flood coastlines and some entire countries, and cities such as Shanghai, London and New York. The consequences for the global economy and human welfare would be dire.
- The melting of tundra and permafrost, and the release into the atmosphere of huge quantities of methane, a much more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.
- The drying out and possibly the wholesale burning of the Amazon rain forests and their transformation into dry savannah.
- The disappearance of Tibet's and South America's glaciers, and with them the summer river flows that water the agriculture of hundreds of millions of people.
- The desertification of Northern China, North Africa, Southern Europe and much of the Western and Central United States.
- The death of carbon-absorbing algae in the oceans and the collapse of fish and food chains as the seas warm dramatically.
- All of this leading to hundreds of millions of refugees on the move, and death on a scarcely imaginable scale.

And if you think it may not be as bad as the scientists are warning us, in fact almost every indicator of change is happening even faster than the previous worst-case scenarios.

So what has this got to do with therapy?

Let us consider again the clients with whom we opened, and the analogy of breaking bad news.

As any doctor is now trained, bad news – of the death of a loved one, for example, or of a terminal diagnosis – has to be conveyed with compassion and kindness, but also clearly, honestly and directly, without beating about the bush. The bearer of such news can't make the *fact* of the message any less painful to the person receiving it. One does not amputate a leg in slices.

As a therapist, you may indeed already have had clients coming to you with fears of what climate change will mean, for themselves and especially for their grandchildren. How do you respond?

I have no data to prove it, but I can imagine that that quite soon, within years and not decades, and possibly as a result of some particularly serious natural disaster, public opinion on a global level will at last begin to grasp the meaning of what is happening, and suddenly be very, very afraid. Speaking with Carl Jung, we may experience a seismic shift in consciousness as a presently hidden collective awareness breaks the surface. And we must profoundly hope that the shift does not come too late.

So, if as therapists and counsellors - and indeed as journalists writing that first draft of history - we presume to be at the leading edge of human consciousness, I believe we should prepare ourselves in three important ways.

We must first inform ourselves of the simple science of what is happening, and address our own denial and avoidance – and be ready to deal with the existential fears for ourselves and those we love which will be revealed when do that.

Second, as therapists and as fellow human beings, we must seek to help our two opening clients – Gaia and her children – to work together to understand the threats that face them, and together empower both ourselves and those who govern us to make the choices and changes that might yet avert the worst.

Third, some might wonder whether there's any point in engaging with therapy if things are so bad. I think that's wrong. Just as we would continue to work lovingly in a Hospice, for example, with someone who is dying, we also need to work lovingly with each other and our clients as we openly address the meaning of climate change.

I am personally not optimistic, but we must still hope that a miracle cure may yet be found, or that our immune systems will mobilise in time to fight the infection. In addressing the dangers we now face as individuals, as families, as communities and as a species, we need to show realism, clarity and courage, but also congruence and compassion. Whatever the outcome.

Mark Brayne (www.braynetwork.com) is a former Reuters and BBC Foreign Correspondent now working as a transpersonal and EMDR psychotherapist specialising in trauma support and treatment for individuals and organisations in the news business and beyond. For the past six years, he has been Director Europe of the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma (www.dartcentre.org).

Possible set of illustrative graphs from the IPCC report.

Changes in temperature, sea level and Northern Hemisphere snow cover

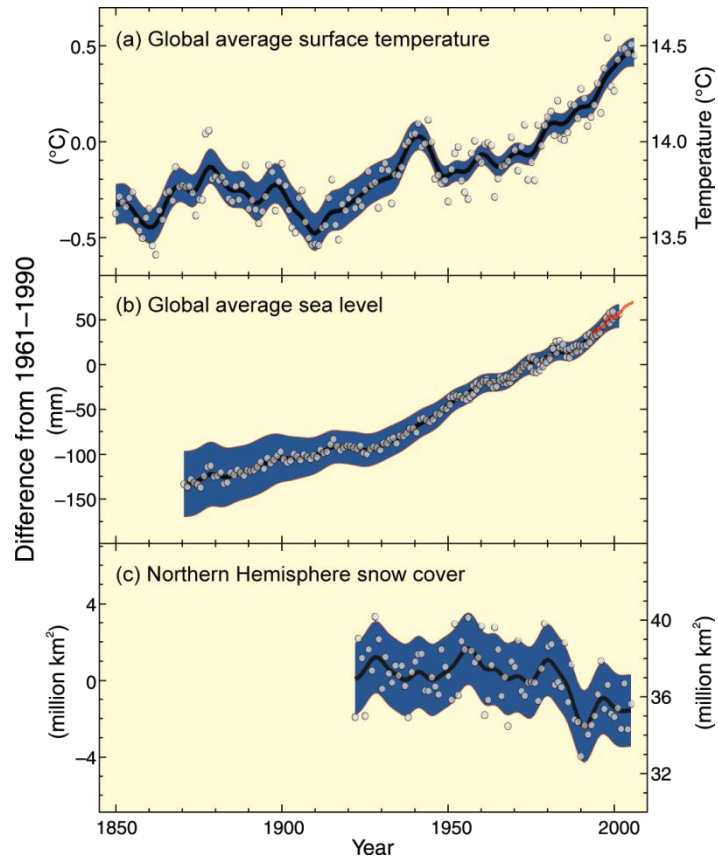


Figure SPM.1. Observed changes in (a) global average surface temperature; (b) global average sea level from tide gauge (blue) and satellite (red) data and (c) Northern Hemisphere snow cover for March-April. All differences are relative to corresponding averages for the period 1961-1990. Smoothed curves represent decadal averaged values while circles show yearly values. The shaded areas are the uncertainty intervals estimated from a comprehensive analysis of known uncertainties (a and b) and from the time series (c). {Figure 1.1}

ⁱ LOVELOCK, J. (2000). *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford. Oxford Paperbacks.

ⁱⁱ HICKMAN, L. "Cry Wolf but Gently". *The Guardian*. 2007. November 10

ⁱⁱⁱ STERN REVIEW, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/sternreview_index.cfm

^{iv} <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

^v Harding, S. Schumacher Institute. Personal communication, Gaia Coach Institute Retreat. 2007, June.

^{vi} LOVELOCK, J. (2007). *The Revenge of Gaia*. London. Penguin. 2007.

^{vii} <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

^{viii} LYNAS, M. *Six Degrees*. London. Fourth Estate. 2007.