Climate Health Inquiry Submission

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### 1. Challenges regarding climate change and health in WA and how they can be addressed

The challenges regarding climate change and health in WA are systemic and will be increasingly widespread. In this submission, I outline how loss and grief theories can provide guidance to develop responses that both support people and build holistic interventions to build capacities in both mitigation and adaptation responses to climate change. The challenge that this submission addresses is the lack of opportunity at all levels to build systems and interventions that enable people to engage their grief and then to take action to live differently and sustainably.

The premise of this submission is that there is a widespread unacknowledged grief for the loss of ecological systems, mass extinction and climate change. For some people this grief is so profound and deep-seated it remains buried and unacknowledged (disenfranchised) leading to active denialism and/or paralysis (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Cunsolo & Landman, 2017; Lertzman, 2014; Willox, 2012). For others this grief is felt deeply and can lead to depression, anxiety, even panic (Australian Psychological Society, 2019). All these responses have left people (including I might add politicians) unwilling to change as well as a sense of powerless with the concomitant impacts on mental health. There is an increasing realisation that this grief is likely to lead to an epidemic of mental ill health into the future (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018).

In addition, for those people who live well in developed countries, there is a second loss connected to the need to change the way we live on this Earth. This change requires shifting our ideas of what makes a good citizen, i.e. from consumers to active producers who are engaged in the production and maintenance of eco-systems that support life. This includes urgently reducing emission-producing industries, developing local food systems, and supporting the development of local economies. The focus of Government needs to shift from measuring the health of a State's population using economic growth to ecological growth. We cannot expect people to cope with this significant loss of life style without providing them with examples of how we can live differently (Lorenzen, 2014).

The Dual Process Model of Coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) is a loss and grief model that postulates that a grieving person engages in two primary types of coping with loss. Loss Orientated Coping and Restoration Orientated Coping with the key to optimal adjustment is **oscillation** between the two (see diagram below). There is not the space to explain this in detail here but I offer this diagram to focus this submission.
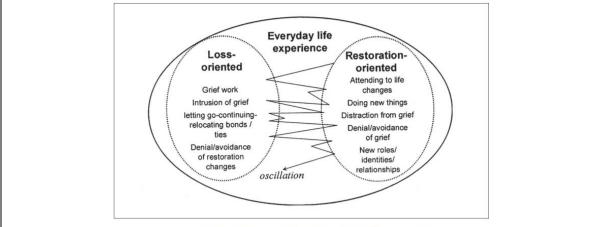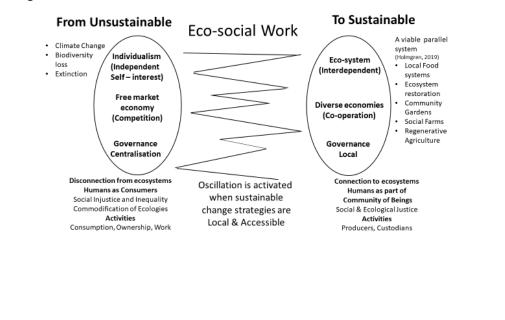
Figure 1. The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

My research and community practice work focuses on two key strategies. The first is to support people to process their grief by acknowledging, expressing and normalising their reactions (loss orientation). The second is to provide opportunities to connect to others who are also in this process (Westoby & McNamara, 2019). The focus is on building and developing restoration-oriented spaces where people can learn new roles, identities and relationships with each other as collectives but also with natural systems and non-human life (Bailey, Hendrick, & Palmer, 2018). There is overwhelming evidence that contact with eco-systems is beneficial for health (Robinson, 2018; Townsend & Weerasuriya, 2010) and includes connection with community gardens, social farming networks, ecosystem restoration, and regenerative agriculture. It has also been shown to counter some of the ecological grief paralysis and shift people into taking action.

Community gardens and other community based collectives offer opportunities to respond to climate change by supporting mental health, building collectives of support, providing education about sustainable living, and food security (Firth, Maye, & Pearson, 2011; Nettle, 2014; Turner, 2011). There are currently existing community garden networks all across Western Australia and they, along with Community Centres, provide existing infrastructures that could be developed to support people in a climate changed world using community development approaches. The diagram below develops the Dual Process model outlined above and outlines the conceptual underpinning of this work.

**2. Strengths regarding climate change and health in WA**

There are many strengths.

There are significant existing networks of people who are already engaged in developing local actions and strategies in response to climate change that can support people through difficult times. These include but are not limited to;

- Local schools
- WA Community Garden Networks
- Yokai Healing
- Linkwest
- Neighbourhood Centres
- Community Resource Centre Networks
- Ecosystem restoration organisations like WA Natural Resource Management, Trillion Trees

**3. Recommendations to**

- *Protect the public from the harmful health impacts of climate change;*

Reduce emissions immediately

- *strengthen the preparedness and resilience of communities and health services against extreme weather events, with a focus on the most vulnerable in the community*

Develop new positions of locally based climate justice community development workers to support and develop the work already been undertaken at the community level

**4. Describe what you or your organisation would be willing to do or contribute following the Inquiry**

As a member of the eco-social work group at the Edith Cowan University, we could develop and provide education and training support to develop workers' skills in responding to climate change in a systemic way including individual, community, economic and political.

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