

# The psychology of climate change

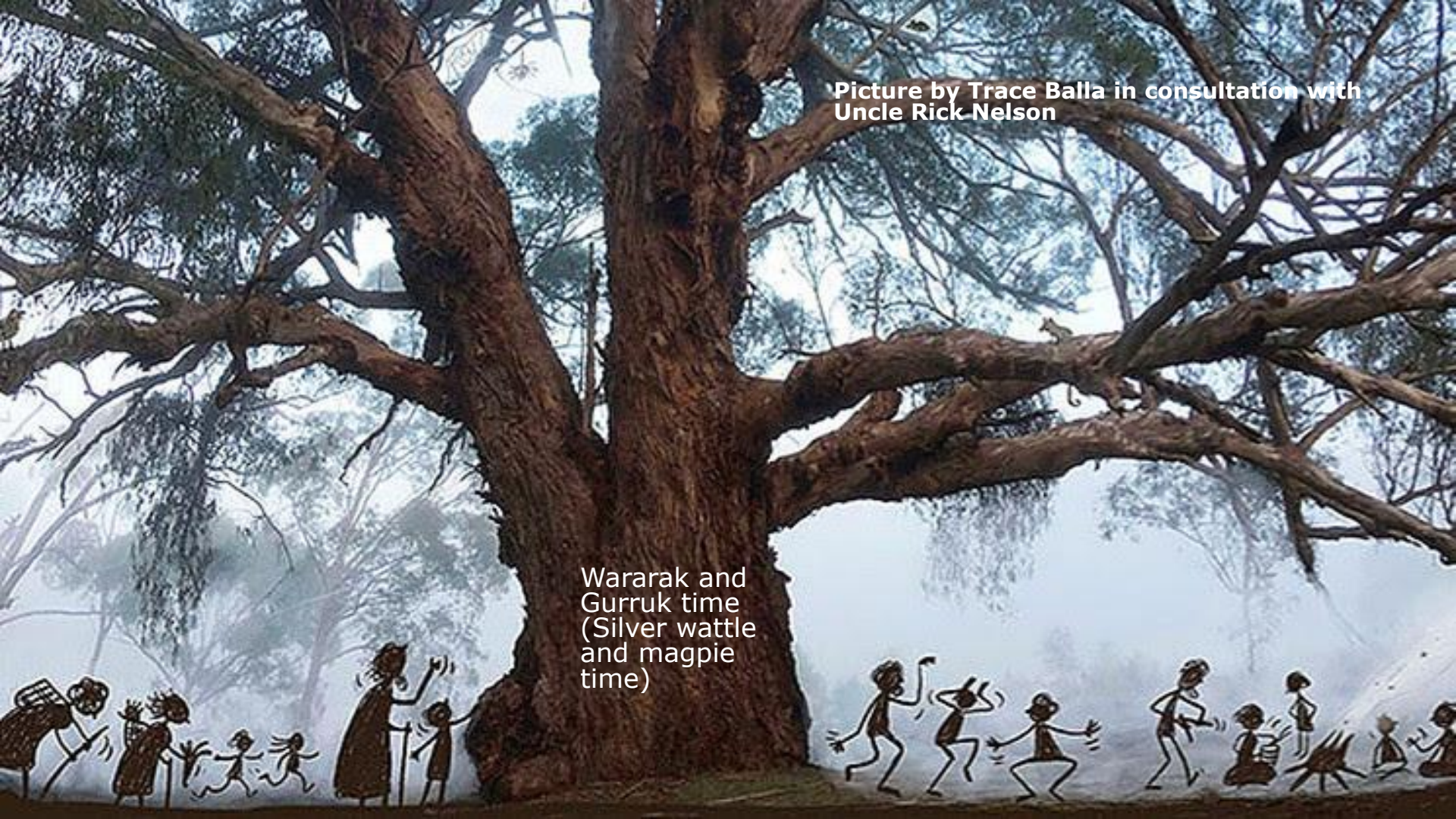
Dr Susie Burke PhD

Djarra Country, Castlemaine, Victoria

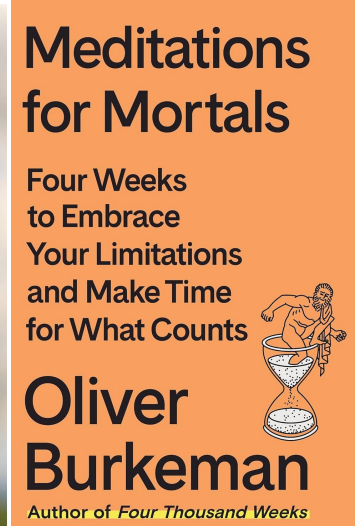
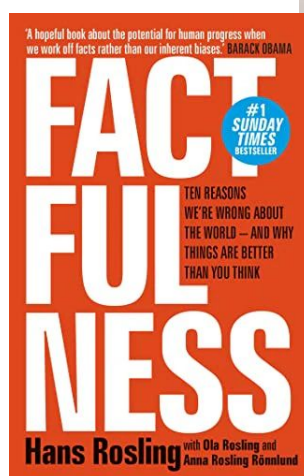
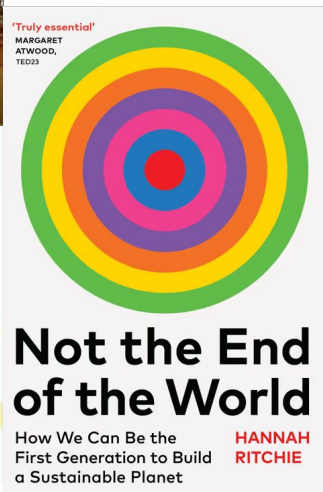
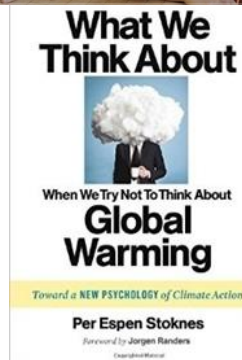
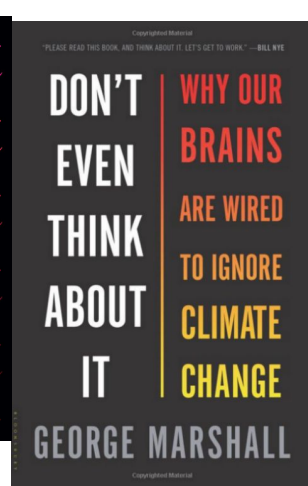
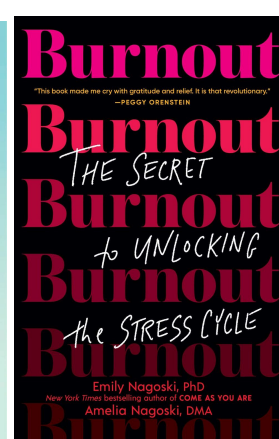
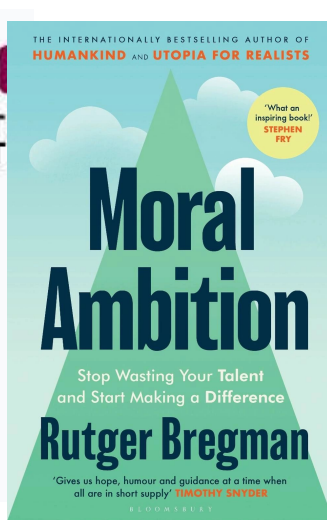
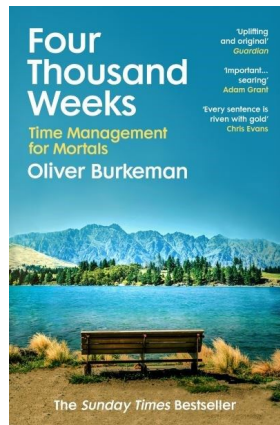
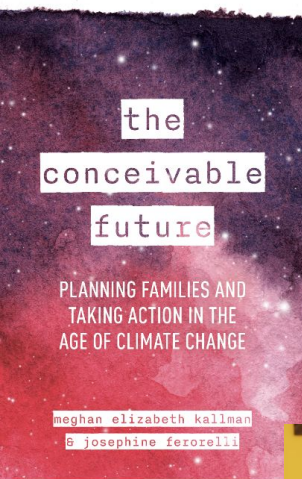
[drsusieburke@gmail.com](mailto:drsusieburke@gmail.com)

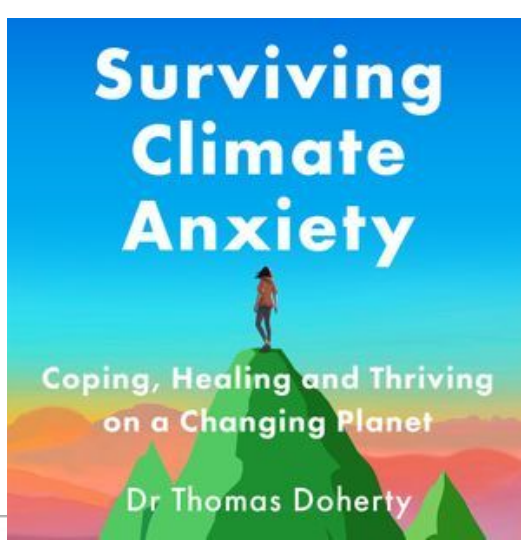
Picture by Trace Balla in consultation with  
Uncle Rick Nelson

Wararak and  
Gurruk time  
(Silver wattle  
and magpie  
time)









Psychology  
for a Safe  
Climate

## DEALING WITH BURNOUT

### THE KEY DIMENSIONS OF BURNOUT

**BURN:** The 'best' component  
expresses as irritability,  
frustration, anger, cynicism and  
growing a distance towards an  
unresponsive public.

**OUT:** The 'out' component  
refers to feeling drained and  
exhausted. Our passion and  
enthusiasm becomes depleted.  
We feel detached and want to  
distance, not just from others,  
but emotionally and cognitively  
from our work.

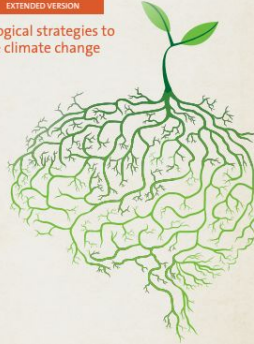
**INEFFICACY:** Burn out is  
often accompanied by negative  
self-evaluation. We judge  
ourselves for feeling burnt out,  
self-doubt, feelings of  
incompetency and a perceived  
lack of personal accomplishment  
can further plague our spirit.



## THE CLIMATE CHANGE EMPOWERMENT HANDBOOK

EXTENDED VERSION

Psychological strategies to  
tackle climate change



## FACING THE HEAT

STORIES OF CLIMATE  
CHANGE CONVERSATIONS



## ACTIVATE

8 Psychological strategies to  
tackle climate change



The Climate Change Empowerment Handbook

Let's  
**speak**  
about  
climate change



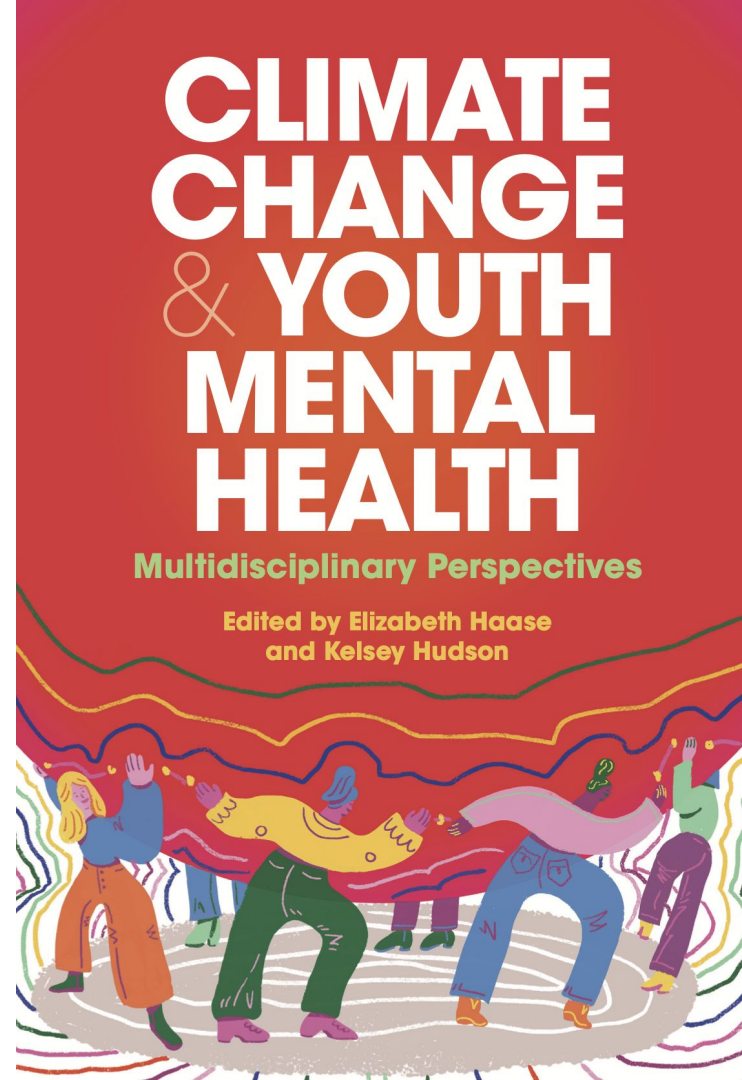


# Parenting and Grandparenting Our Youth in the Climate Crisis

Judith Van Hoorn

Susie Burke

Ann Sanson



# ACTIVATE

## The Climate Change Empowerment Handbook

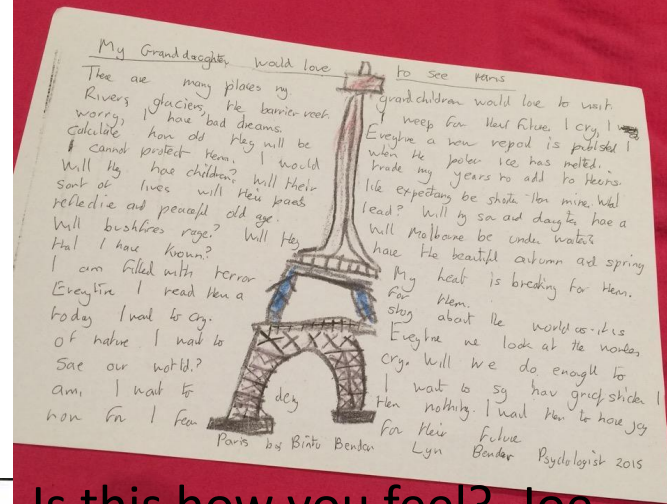
[psychology.org.au](https://psychology.org.au)



# Acknowledge feelings

Sometimes I have this dream.  
I'm going for a hike and discover  
a remote farm house on fire.  
Children are calling for help from  
the upper windows.  
So I call the fire brigade.  
But they don't come because some  
mad pe  
it is a  
The situa  
despera  
the fire  
I cannot  
nightma

Makes me feel vulnerable  
and human. I feel like  
Society always tells me not  
to feel those two things.



Is this how you feel? Joe  
Duggan 2014/2020

# Courage to get real



“The bravest thing - getting real” (Moser, 2012);

Accept reality without illusions; Accept that better tomorrows may not come

We cannot solve a problem we will not face.  
(Pipher)

The truth is inherently energizing.

Successful social movements take hold of the truth and invite us to put it into practice and share it with others.



# Be emotionally honest



- Acknowledge grief and anxiety.
- Provide space for contradiction, ambivalence, loss, and mourning.
- Acknowledge role of your own emissions.
- Value what remains.

# Support your emotions

“When you do witness pain and suffering, try to witness through the lens of deep care and compassion for yourself, take some deep breaths to ground your nervous system, listen to and be responsive to what you might need.

Find trusted people that you can share your concerns with.

You will survive looking at this.



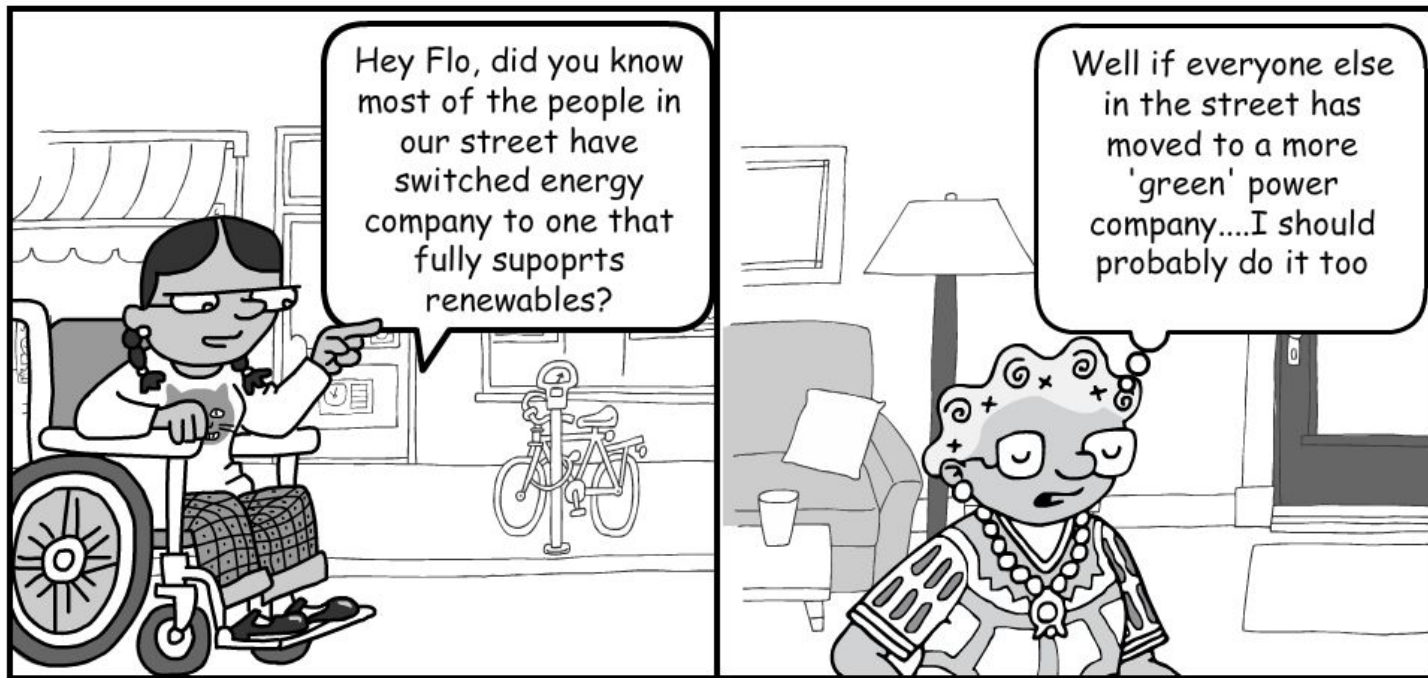




*Emotion-focussed coping*



# Create social norms



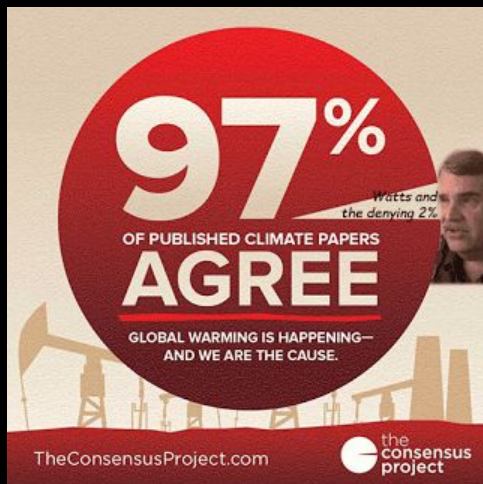
This comic strip was created at [MakeBeliefsComix.com](http://MakeBeliefsComix.com). Go there to make one yourself!

# Talk about it

- **pluralistic ignorance** occurs when we stay silent and think our views are not shared - even when they are.
- A collective silence is dangerous
- It can lead people to downplay the problem and to think that because no-one is talking about it, it isn't important.
- Also risks tacit agreement with damage and injustice.



# Talk about it





# Tell the truth about the climate emergency



# **Tell the truth about the climate emergency**

The truth is a radical and incredibly motivating force.



Groups of concerned citizens have changed the world many times before - and they have done it through the power of truth.

Telling the truth and spreading it rapidly and completely has been a central strategy in successful social movements.



# Inspire positive visions

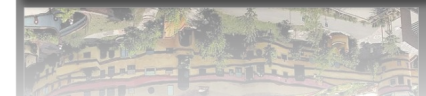
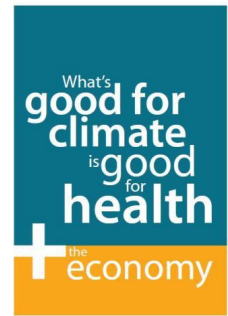
- Build efficacy by showing people that change is possible
- Describe the plausibility and positives of a zero carbon world
- Use personal and vivid stories





# Build narrative of positive change

- Vision of a better world, low carbon heaven
- What's good for climate is good for health and the economy
- Use the availability heuristic
- Build group efficacy



# Relate solutions to sources of wellbeing



- People are happiness seekers
- People who feel good more willing to look at threats, more open to change, more cooperative, more creative
- In the long run a boring system cannot last

# Value it – link values to climate change

- Identify people's core values
- Draw links between people's values and with action on climate change.
- Show people how action on climate makes them even more who they are - that it actually reinforces their identity





# Activate sacred values

- Personal responsibility
- Unity with nature
- Equality
- Cooperation
- Connection with others
- Taking care of yourself and others
- Concern for future generations
- Making the world a better place
- Understanding, appreciation and tolerance for other people



# Act

Action is the antidote to despair

Personal & collective

Must be to scale

Prioritise actions with high  
carbon reduction potential

Beware tokenism and rebound

## 101 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is the biggest threat to the wellbeing of future generations and to the world we love. If we work together, we can stop its worst effects.

Sometimes climate change seems too big a problem for any one person to tackle. This is one of the big psychological barriers that hinders action on climate change. But in fact we all can do something, and these contributions all add up. Psychologists working on behaviour change know that just starting somewhere helps us to engage with the issue and start to create the world we want to see. It also helps us realise how much we need the community to get on board to pressure for bigger social and political change to tackle the scale of the problem.

Acting personally and collectively to reduce our carbon footprint is a significant coping strategy. Our actions not only contribute to the solutions to climate change but also help us to feel we are part of the solution, not just the problem, and help manage the distressing feelings aroused by this grave threat to our future. Action is the best antidote to despair and helplessness. It is also the case that speedy action on climate change will not happen unless we create the political will, and that requires action by all of us beyond the context of our personal lives.

Getting active is one of the eight strategies outlined in the Climate Change Empowerment Handbook, an APS resource which helps people come to terms and cope with the profound implications of climate change and participate in speedy societal change to restore a safe climate. The Handbook draws on decades of research in social, environmental, community and developmental psychology about how to promote behaviour change, activate pro-social values and engage people in effective sustainability actions while also increasing their personal wellbeing.



- The climate crisis is not an individual problem though we experience it as individuals.
- Break the habit of giving individual decisions outsize importance.
- The project to make oneself impeccable distorts one's own perspective about the problem we're trying to fix.
- We must transform the systems that are harming us, causing our anxiety, grief and depression. (Kallman & Ferrorelli, 2024)
- 

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- The problem **is NOT you.**
- The problem is that our economy is built on extraction and thrives on inequality. (Kallman & Ferorelli, 2024)

*Problem-focussed coping*

## 101 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

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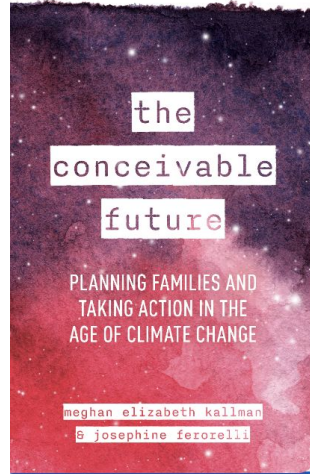
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# The BIG NO!



# The BIG YES!



Meghan Kallman and  
Josephine Ferrorelli

# THE BIG YES!

- Demand the biggest systemic solutions we can imagine.
- Actions must address the DANGERS at the SCALE on which they occur.
- We have to turn 'change the system' into specific, nameable, doable steps.
- Requires imagination.
- Actions must be COLLECTIVE.
- Build your group into a community.
- Build bridges between different groups of people.
- We all know what makes a life worth living and it does us good to cultivate it.



# THE BIG NO!

- No new COAL, GAS, OIL.
- No more fossil fuel subsidies.
- No more logging old-growth forests.
- Public Protest, Non-violent Direct Action.
- “It’s frightening but exhilarating to know that we will never have better odds that we do right now”. (Kallman & Ferrorelli, 2024).



# Understanding NVDA

- You don't have to practice it but you do have to understand it (Kallman & Ferorelli, 2024).
- We need 3.5% to engage in NVDA active disruption for system change (Chenoweth).
- Direct action is the language of life and death - the tactics of people outside the official channels of power who are reaching for the biggest levers out of necessity.
- That small figure is rooted in a sympathetic majority at home.
- They can be domestic and non-confrontational but they have to be **explicit and loud.**



# Public disruptions

- Public disruptions are often widely criticised even as history proves them to be wildly effective.
- Don't make the mistake of valuing order more than the survival of humanity!
- It's normal if we find ourselves more upset than we expect to be when presented with other people's 'misbehaviour'.
- But, resist the impulse to label activists as the problem when rather they are **addressing** a problem.
- Discomfort is part of it. We need to be in solidarity with it at a basic level.





# Effective activism

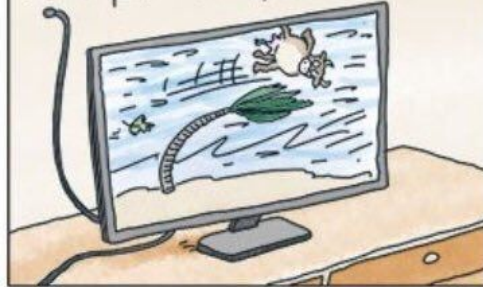
The most disruptive action can be done by people with the highest level of trust in the community. Eg Knitting Nannas.

Winnifred Louis, TED talk.



# The climate crisis: spot the inconvenience

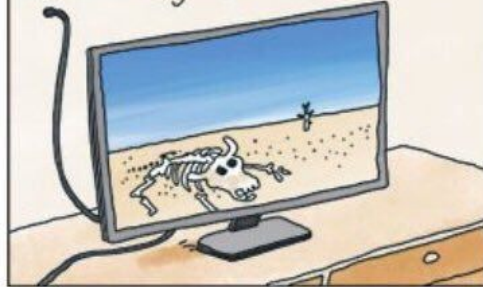
More powerful cyclones



Longer bush fire seasons



Worse droughts



Coastal inundation and erosion



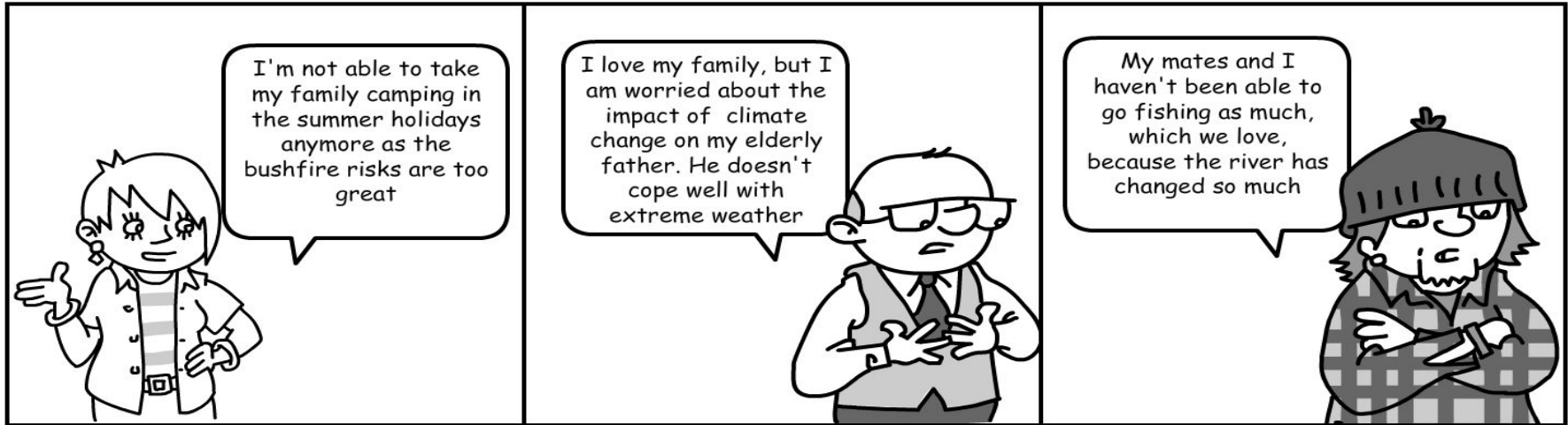
More heatwaves



Protests about climate inaction



# Time is now



This comic strip was created at [MakeBeliefsComix.com](https://makebeliefscomix.com). Go there to make one yourself!



# Emphasise the here, now & for sure



- Use moments of proximity like extreme weather events
- Become local expert observers
- Use disaster preparedness as a way in
- Use trusted communicators

**E**ngage  
with  
nature







Acknowledge  
feelings



Create  
social norms



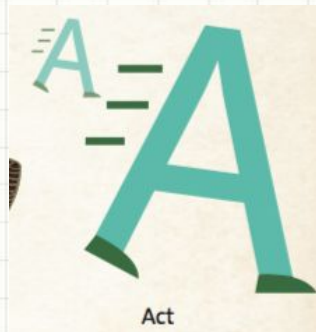
Talk  
about it



Inspire  
positive visions



Value it



Act



Time  
is now



Engage  
with nature



This planet is the  
only home we'll  
ever have.  
There's no place  
like it.  
And home is  
always, always,  
always worth it.  
(Mary Annaies  
Hegler)

