

# Mind Over Chatter: Exploring Climate Psychology

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**Announcer:** This is Climate One, changing the conversation about energy, the economy and the environment.

According to some psychologists, their patients who report trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, feelings of dread or hopelessness, could be suffering from climate anxiety.

**Leslie Davenport:** ... whether they realize it or not. I'm starting to notice in my practice that sometimes people come in with ambient anxiety they're just more distressed even if they haven't always connected the dots about why.

**Announcer:** On today's program, we'll talk about some ways to cope with overwhelming anxiety over climate change. And how to approach those tough conversations with people who may not see things the same way.

**Renee Lertzman:** The key I think to talking about climate change is to recognize and tune in to what the others might be feeling and thinking...and learn how to hold off on pushing our own anxiety and sense of urgency on to the other.

**Announcer:** Mind over chatter - the psychology of climate change. Up next on Climate One.

**Announcer:** Are you suffering from climate anxiety?

Climate One conversations - with oil companies and environmentalists, Republicans and Democrats - are recorded before a live audience, and hosted by Greg Dalton.

We all know about the environmental and physical effects of climate change. But what about its impact on our mental health? Clinical psychologist Leslie Davenport likens her patients' feelings

about climate change to the five stages of grief.

**Leslie Davenport:** *And so, you know, denial, anger, sadness, bargaining have its versions of what it might look like in the climate world...really what we're talking about is any kind of loss. Loss of identity, loss of lifestyle, loss of environmental, you know, the degradation we're talking about can trigger a very similar process.*

**Announcer:** But dealing with those feelings isn't always easy, says climate psychologist Renee Lertzman.

**Renee Lertzman:** *The whole topic of loss and grief and feelings, it freaks a lot of people out.*

**Announcer:** Whether your coping strategy is fight, flight or freeze, Lertzman says we should remember:

**Renee Lertzman:** *...that there is a spectrum, that there's strength and power in our ability to stay present with our feelings, that we won't get stuck and lost in a hole of despair and gloom.*

**Announcer:** Today on Climate One, Greg Dalton talks with three experts on climate psychology.

Leslie Davenport is the author of *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change: A Clinician's Guide*. She works as a clinical psychotherapist in San Francisco and Tacoma, Washington. Renee Lertzman is a Climate Engagement Strategist and author of the book *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement*. And Bryant Welch is a clinical psychologist and the author of *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*.

Here's their conversation.

**Greg Dalton:** Welcome to you all. Renee Lertzman, tell us some of the key ingredients for people who want to talk to someone else about climate change. It's a difficult topic. Some think it's like sex and politics. You don't talk about it in polite company. How should we do that?

**Renee Lertzman:** Well, I want to acknowledge at the outset that it's an incredibly challenging topic to talk about because our feelings, our investment in the issue run so high. It's urgent, it's time sensitivity, has all those attributes that make it incredibly difficult to talk about in a productive way. And so what I've learned over years of studying with all kinds of clinicians and motivational interviewers is that the key I think to talking about climate change is to recognize and tune in to what the others might be feeling and thinking. And so it really is more about the quality of how we show up and how we invite the other to reflect and speak to whatever it is they might be experiencing about the issue. And learn how to hold off on pushing our own anxiety and sense of emergency on to the other which will often be what the person is mainly responding to and then you get into these charged dynamics.

So the first thing I say is, you know, it's really about listening, but I don't want to minimize what that really means. There's an internal process so it's how do we enter into these interactions whether you're a company or whether you're an individual or organization. How can we have compassionate ways of communicating about climate and I think that being able to tune in and listen and reflect and bringing that quality of again just a sort of an acceptance which paradoxically, I think leads people into entering the topic in a new and different way.

**Greg Dalton:** Right. And so Leslie Davenport, often there's this impulse to talking about climate to persuade or convince people. To jam a fact or an idea down someone's throat and, you know, I need to convert you right now.

**Leslie Davenport:** Yes.

**Greg Dalton:** Has that work?

**Leslie Davenport:** No, it's reminding me of that saying that smashing heads won't open minds. It's about opening to new possibilities new ways of thinking. One thing I wanna add is that, you know, not everyone that we're gonna engage with is on the same place the same level of receptivity. When I was bringing innovative programs into a medical setting I learned that there was sort of a group of people that no matter what just weren't interested weren't listening. There was the ones who agreed totally with the new programming and then there was this really fertile middleground; people who didn't quite know about it or maybe a little skeptical, curious, less familiar.

And that just was a really rich area to work with and that's where a lot of the, you know, the success could be felt of people kind of awakening to it rather than kind of necessarily going for those that just had really closed and latched the door to possibilities.

**Greg Dalton:** Right. And according to the Yale Six Americas studies of American public opinion only 9% to 10% of Americans are just basically never gonna accept it. There's a big persuadable middle that you can connect with it might be through technology, not climate, but there's food, there's ways to connect with people where they are.

Bryant Welch, you talk about disassociation and how things people -- is a defensive mechanism that when there's trauma people disassociate from something that they feel is uncomfortable or painful. How does that apply to climate?

**Bryant Welch:** Well, I think to support what Renee and Leslie are saying. It really helps if you're gonna talk to another mind to understand a little bit about the mind. And if you look at the American mind as I have over the last 20 years it's stunning how much it's deteriorated.

[Laughter]

I can see that my need to persuade this audience is limited. But if you want to do just a quick test. I did write a book 10 years ago when I talked about this and to kind of take a look at it and wrote pretty much the same book only applied to now. If you want to have a quick litmus test of how the American mind has changed and I'm not saying this to be facile. Picture George W. Bush and then picture Donald Trump. Now I was appalled at George Bush and the way in which the American mind was responding at that time. But now we get Donald Trump and so if you look at what's happened to the mind, you know, we all feel that the environment has been neglected. I think that's probably a safe assumption in this group, but let me tell you nothing's been as neglected as the American mind. The mind is a very limited instrument to begin with. We've done unbelievable things to it just like we've done to the environment. And we now have skilled political manipulators who are experts at making us crazier and crazier.

So in terms of we have got to understand the mind if we're gonna get a rational decision out of it.

So I think when you talk about listening to people and connecting with their mind and I think what you're talking about is making a connection with a person which eases their anxiety unbelievably. If you listen to them you connect with them. Once you connect with them people are in such desperate shape they'll get dependent on anything. They got dependent on Donald Trump because he was offering them some profound experience. So I totally agree with you but I think there is a bigger issue it's not just the environment. Our kids are not safe to go to school it's a very, you know, we had a second amendment and we can't figure out a way to keep guns out of school. So my argument is that we have to all of these issues have to we have to be looking at the American mind itself

because it's really been abused over the last 20, 25 years in a number of ways.

**Greg Dalton:** And we'll talk later a little bit about how climate is a symptom of some broader things and connected to other things. You mentioned anxiety, Lise Van Susteren is a Washington DC psychologist who specializes on how people feel about the future of climate impacts.

**Lise Van Susteren:** *Pre-traumatic stress disorder is a subset of climate anxiety. There is a subset of people who are very focused on future harm and I have intrusive thoughts about it and may have had seen their moods and thoughts affected by it. And sometimes they might know they're anxious but they don't know why. And they will say they can't sleep or they're sleeping too much. They've lost their appetite or they've gained weight. Certainly the angry outbursts the fears the ongoing feeling of dread of hopelessness these are all signs. When we think about future injuries to future generations there's a fear that is generated and this is a profoundly distressing state. I have no doubt now, especially considering recent event whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, whether we accept it or not everyone is now engaged in some form or has some form of climate anxiety.*

**Greg Dalton:** Lise Van Susteren a Washington DC psychologist. Leslie Davenport, is that true do you agree that everyone has some level of climate anxiety whether they realize it or not?

**Leslie Davenport:** Yeah exactly that's the thing whether they realize it or not. I'm starting to notice in my practice that sometimes people come in with ambient anxiety they're just more distressed even if they haven't always connected the dots about why. And that's what I'm trying to do is also introduce it more into the mental health field to bring those questions in and help people see where that is. You know and related to this, you know, it feels like all of you who are here are here because of your interest in this already. And that as we learn how to talk about it more effectively I just want to introduce the idea that all of us can take a leadership role in whatever sphere of influence your life lives in. We don't all have to write books we don't all have to sit up on a stage but if we're looking --

**Greg Dalton:** Or march in a march.

**Leslie Davenport:** Or march in a march which is wonderful and I do that too. But yeah, to redefine what is leadership and to redefine what is advocacy that if you're responding and looking through the lens of we are interconnected and I stand for a just and sustainable future. How will that influence the words that come out of your mouth and the things that you choose to do and the lifestyle you choose to lead. And that will be a guide that that can very powerfully ripple out in a lot of directions.

**Renee Lertzman:** I wanna -- can I follow on that?

**Greg Dalton:** Renee Lertzman.

**Renee Lertzman:** I think that what you're saying relates to are we all, is everyone experiencing eco-anxiety. What I've noticed is the tendency for those who are very engaged and concerned is to have a perception or an assumption that a lot of people don't care because if they did care more then they would be doing what I'm doing which is coming to events like this and doing the various things we try to do. And I think that's a very, it's an inaccurate assumption that for a lot of people this is sort of in that like you said an ambient kind of anxiety.

And I think one of the most powerful ways we can express the leadership that I think you're talking about is by sparking different kinds of interactions and conversations in our lives to create the

context where we have permission to go there to name to talk about. I mean evidence-based psychology supports the fact that having conversations and interactions is the driving force for behavior change. And so when people say to me well that all sounds great Renee, we don't have time to have conversations that sounds very kind of not scalable --

**Greg Dalton:** We don't need talk. We need action.

**Renee Lertzman:** Yeah exactly. It makes zero sense to me. For one thing, humans are social beings and we are interacting all the time in our organizations, our schools, our churches our social media whatever, we are interactive social beings. The quality of that interaction makes all the difference. And if more of us were skilled and tuned into how to do that more effectively and again I think it comes back to compassionate communication even if you're running a political campaign. It can be empathetic and it can be compassionate, which I think relates to Bryant's work, right, which is the lack of that gross kind of generalization not to be too simplistic has led to what we're seeing which is that there's this fear and anxiety that's just been simmering under the surface. Well what if we actually start communicating in a more skillful way.

**Bryant Welch:** You know I think it is astonishing, I mean it's startling. I've been doing psychotherapy now for 40 plus years. And I'm always, it's a constantly renewing realization that when people are listened to it is a very unusual experience for them and a very powerful experience for them. And the human connection that comes from that is being torn asunder all across our society. You know, families are broken up, there are now more children who grow up missing one of their biological parents than grow up with both parents. And so the dissociation, disconnection, and ultimately the dehumanization that results from that is astonishing. And it's not just anxiety and trauma a lot of it has happened, you know, I think Renee more than anyone opened my awareness to, you know, to the environmental melancholia with the -- look at what's happened in Green Bay in terms of environmental deterioration it's depression; there is loss. And when you connect with someone in these kinds of conversations that environmentalists are now talking about. I think very, very wisely, it is stunning the impact it has on the person being listened to. And what you all are doing for me right now is wonderful.

**Renee Lertzman:** Exactly. And I think that we need to learn how to listen; that these are skills we can actually be supporting and cultivating in ourselves. I mean HuffPo did a listening tour around the country last summer I think. I went out and did a training with them. What struck me is very odd because they were journalists and I would've thought okay, that's what they do but they actually we need support to learn how to listen, especially in such charged, you know, environments.

**Greg Dalton:** But we live in a culture of avoidance, you know, take a pill, distract yourself don't feel that grief or pain. So I want you, Leslie Davenport, to tell us about the climate grief cycle. The five stages of climate grief that you write about.

**Leslie Davenport:** Well, first I just want to clarify that sometimes when we think about grief because some of the early models like with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, were developed around when someone dies. And that really what we're talking about is any kind of loss. Loss of identity, loss of lifestyle, loss of environmental, you know, the degradation we're talking about can trigger a very similar process. And so I was overlaying what that looks like when it relates to struggling with the losses that are around climate change. And truthfully it's less important to look at the stages as it is to recognize that there is a purposefulness to the feelings; there's a sanctity to pain. It's kind of like if there's a pain in our body it's telling us something that we need to attend to. If a signal light comes on in our car it's saying, hey look something is going on here. And as you were saying, in our culture we tend to shut down and want to erase the pain and not that we want to reside there but we need to recognize what's the message which helps us move through these different ways that it

shows that. And so, you know, denial, anger, sadness, bargaining have its versions of what it might look like in the climate world. But the most important part is underneath that making room for the emotional landscape that accompanies this experience so that we can attend to what's happening with more of ourselves instead of investing so much energy at keeping the feelings at bay.

**Greg Dalton:** Bryant Welch.

**Bryant Welch:** I'd like to sort of underscore that because I think the attention -- one of the fascinating things for me as a mental health professional, I spent most of my life on the East Coast; I've been out here maybe eight years or so. The kind of interdisciplinary the cross-cultural blending of Eastern thinking with Western psychology is really an incredibly explosive coming together. And when you're talking about attending what those trainings I think are really all about is increasing our capacity for awareness. And so when you're talking about do you, you know, how many of these things can you look at it really is a pretty good measure of mental health. How big your cup of awareness is. And what meditation does is it expands one's capacity to do that and increasingly it's becoming clear that really is mental health and it leads to a lot better a lot more efficient functioning and a lot more wisdom.

**Renee Lertzman:** I just want to add that I think that there is tremendous confusion right now in the climate community, if I can call it that, around how to relate with the emotional spectrum that this is bringing up. And as you are speaking I was imagining the climate folks that I know. The whole topic of loss and grief and feelings, it freaks a lot of people out and it's probably freaking out some people listening right now to think oh come on like we've got the solutions: project drawdown, you know, positivity, storytelling, hope, you know, all of that. And I think that we've got to cut through the confusion and bring in some actual grounded psychological expertise and insight into how we understand this work, which is that there is a spectrum that there are strength and power in our ability to stay present with our feelings that we won't get stuck and lost in a hole of despair and gloom.

You know folks like yourselves who work with people on a day-to-day basis, you know from your experience that these things change at a lightning pace when we give a little bit of attention a little bit of listening. We as humans, we move on to the solutions we move on into something but you've got to pause we've got to have some kind of a reflection and empathy for, you know, this is painful this is hard. And that's healthy, that's okay to name it we won't stay there forever.

**Leslie Davenport:** I think there are a lot of ways of building resiliency. You know, we tend to think of resiliency as being able to bounce back from a difficult situation. But I think it's more than that. I think we can proactively say I'm going to stand for and choose the values that I want to live by related to climate, even with what's going on.

In other words, it's not just dealing with the feelings but there's a resiliency and empowered action in keeping your eyes, your heart and your mind open as a way that leads to clears the path for good decision-making. Because I think part of another way of thinking about what we're talking about is if we're just trying to do climate work out of stress reactions, fight, you know, send those blogs, you know --

**Greg Dalton:** Attack.

**Leslie Davenport:** Yeah, attack. Or flight, this is too hard I'm just gonna go disappear or freeze just don't know what to do because it's too big. That's what we're talking about is how can we not get caught in that. It's natural we're gonna feel it but how can we process it so that we are centered and grounded when we speak when we act when we manage our lives and our relationships with

each other.

**Announcer:** You're listening to a Climate One conversation about exploring climate psychology. Coming up, rethinking climate denial.

**Renee Lertzman:** *If you look up any, you know, textbook on defense mechanisms you've got denial and disavowal and dissociation. And I think that's a very powerful reframe because it takes denial out of being a thing, a concretized kind of like climate denial.*

**Announcer:** That's up next, when Climate One continues.

**Announcer:** We continue now with Climate One. Greg Dalton is talking with three climate psychologists about the impact that climate change can have on our mental health. His guests are Bryant Welch, Leslie Davenport and Renee Lertzman.

Let's get back to their conversation.

## PROGRAM PART 2

**Greg Dalton:** Renee Lertzman, I'd like to ask about denial. It's a viable necessary coping mechanism for getting through the day. You don't go around saying I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die, right. So tell us about climate denial and its various permutations.

**Renee Lertzman:** Well I think climate denial is actually more nuanced than we acknowledge. For one thing, there's denial and then there's disavowal. So to deny something is to literally say this is not real, doesn't exist. And to disavow I think is much more common, which is the capacity we have to basically say I'm gonna choose to not acknowledge that this is an actual reality and a problem. So I disavow when I fly there's a certain quality where you know I have to do it to function to drive, I drove here, right.

But the thing about denial and disavow is they're well-known defense mechanisms, right. If you look up any, you know, textbook on defense mechanisms you've got denial and disavowal and dissociation. And I think that's a very powerful reframe because it takes denial out of being a thing a concretize kind of like climate denial. I think there's some issues with that actually because it's not investigating it's not inquiring into what is this really about what is this symptomatic of. And I don't pathologize in my work but in my experience denial is a symptom of profound anxiety profound, you know, uncertainty it reflects difficulty in tolerating ambiguity, uncertainty, all of those things that as humans we really struggle. I think this relates to Leslie's work around resilience. And so I'd love to see us relate with denial, ideally with compassion. And it does not mean acceptance or getting off the hook. It means oh okay, there's some pain going on here there's something going on how can I serve and support.

And I'm not talking this is not the same as dealing with the industry, the oil industry -- I mean I'm not it's like a different situation. I think we're talking about the majority middle that you are talking about which I think is in some kind a low grade denial. I think there's a lot of low-grade melancholia, low-grade denial. And one of the most powerful ways of working with that can be to again bring out and acknowledge this can be really hard. You know, in my fantasy I'd like to see more climate scientists and communicators coming out of the gate saying, look, you know, I wish as much as you do that this was not happening that this didn't exist. I'd rather be doing something else

right now this is kind of sucky, you know, but here we are and now we've got an opportunity to figure out what to do. But that little piece I believe can actually cut through and disarm that tendency to want to create the distance and to deny and disavow and it's simple but it's tricky. But just name it and then, you know, now we can have a conversation or get to work basically.

**Greg Dalton:** Bryant Welch, I think that some people get to denial or disavowal, you know, either or diminishing because they look at climate and say, wow that's big it's scary I don't know what I can do maybe I'll change my light bulbs, change my diet a little bit. And then they kind of put it away, they park it because it's just so overwhelming they get swallowed by it.

**Bryant Welch:** You know that's what's happening to the American mind, it's what happens when you talk about environmental terror. It's what they experience when they deal with economic terror, which is rampant throughout the Midwest where I grew up. So the mind the big task of the mind is to create once reality sense. To give us what at least feels to us like a coherent sense of what's real and what's not. And it's much more important to us that we have a sense that we know what's real than that that sense be accurate. So and the more anxious people get and the more threatened they feel in their ability to do that, the more your denial get stronger and stronger and stronger. So this is what you see with the incongruous reactions people have to Donald Trump. It really doesn't matter what he does. When he says he can go walking down Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and no one would blame him, he's right. He's got it. That's exactly what he knows. He's created an enthralled state around these very weak American minds that have to deny and have to pretend and adhere this kind of blind obeisance to a leader.

So it is denial and the sicker people get, the more pronounced and the more striking the denial is. You look at the propaganda of the Bush administration and then you look at the propaganda of the Trump administration. In retrospect, what the Bush administration had to do to sell its environmental messages, the Clear Skies Initiative I think it was called, then you compare that with what Donald Trump has to say, hey, I don't believe it. Boom, done, that's how more simple the mind is and how thick the denial is as the minds are scared and retreat and move back from reality.

**Greg Dalton:** So I'm having a flashback moment when I was sitting up here a few weeks ago with Arlie Hochschild who wrote *Strangers in Their Own Land*, tremendous amount of empathy. She went to Louisiana and talk with people and listened and did what Renee advises, you know, didn't talk didn't interrupt just listened. I'm wondering Bryant Welch whether what you just said has a whiff of coastal elitism, looking down at the simple people in the middle.

**Bryant Welch:** Well -- maybe.

I do think that everyone is being very careful to not differentiate kind of different degrees of mind. I'm not talking about differences in terms of conservative liberal. I worked for a Republican congressman it was a long time ago but there are good, solid, intellectually challenging arguments that can be made to support a conservative political agenda. But that's not what we've got here now. We've got craziness. And I do think it does not help to call it something other than what it is. And is there an elitism well, Jesus, criminy if we think we're elite we're doing a pretty bad job of leading. So I think there's a difference a qualitative difference in the minds and I don't think it translates into being liberal or conservative. I think it translates into how much denial are you using. I don't think the environment is a fictitious issue, you know, we see some commentators saying that liberals are more hysterical. This is not what I view as hysteria I think it's very real. I think when children get killed in school that's very, very real.

**Greg Dalton:** If you're just joining us we're talking about climate psychology at Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. My guests are Leslie Davenport, a clinical psychologist and author of *Emotional*



Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change. Renee Lertzman, psychologist and consultant, author of *Environmental Melancholia*. And Bryant Welch, a clinical psychologist and author of *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*.

Leslie Davenport, Bryant Welch mentioned children. I'd like to, you know, often climate is invoked as what about the children. This is really scary for kids. How can people talk about climate in a real way to I mean the younger someone is the longer they're gonna be living with a disrupted climate. I've looked at seven-year-olds in the eye and said, I can't really come to tell them how difficult I think it's going to be. So what's your advice on how to be authentic with children about climate future?

**Leslie Davenport:** Well, the main thing I would say I don't feel like I have the answers to all of that I think we're discovering that as we go. But this idea of building resiliency in from early, early on, luckily there are some schools starting to include things like mindfulness programs are becoming much more common. Not necessarily all around the environmental issues but just that capacity to be present with thoughts and feelings as they arise rather than just being sucked into them. The earlier those are learned, the easier it is to build that and rely on that more consistently. So that's certainly a step in the right direction.

**Renee Lertzman:** And I would just add that one way I've thought about this is the frame or the narrative that we as humans are figuring out how to be humans and how to live on the planet and we haven't always gotten things right. And here we are and we have, I mean that's kind of my, that's basically my interpretation of our ecological climate crisis is we didn't intend for this to happen; that we made a lot of progress there's been a lot of benefits we've learned a lot. And now we've discovered that this isn't really working too well and now we've got this opportunity to do what humans do so well, which is to grow and create and innovate and have ingenuity and, you know, to really highlight that this is -- and Kim Stanley Robinson, author, I heard him speak about this a few years ago. Where he goes even further and says to especially young people, youth, you know, this is your opportunity to make history and you know, inviting people into a narrative where we're part of something bigger. But it depends on the developmental stage but I really love the kind of like hey, you know, as humans we're figuring it out and you're part of that, right. So again it's inviting people and all of us into this story because the other danger about, you know, with young people on the kind of projection onto people like Jane Goodall and, you know, they're out there doing that they're the eco-heroes. Here I am in Minnesota whatever and some small town and what can I possibly do.

I think it's vital that we really work on the narrative around look, no matter who you are and where you are, you know, you absolutely have a role to play and it's up to you, you know, only you really know what that is and to invite that kind of reflection on what we can, but again not being like oh every little thing like we have to, it's a very fine line between that kind of narrative and, you know, being kind of right and simplistic about it.

**Greg Dalton:** I bought a Prius, I'm good I'm done. Okay, yeah, I trust my conscience. Are you sincerely hopeful Leslie that we'll surmount this challenge?

**Leslie Davenport:** My hope lies in being more and more aware as I get older of how much I don't know. There have been so many points in my life where I was sure about something that I've been proven wrong that that keeps me very open to possibility. I do find it daunting because I track the science pretty closely. So I am happily with the jury that's still out and want to be very much part of the story.

One thing I like that Renee said, you know, sometimes in discussions like this there's a certain segment that says oh, you know, the earth will be just fine, we're just gonna eject all the humans.

But I think evolution is more elegant than that. I think humans are part of this and evolutionarily speaking for a kind of purpose and that we are still figuring it out. And with that there's an investment in the hope of what might be possible.

**Announcer:** You're listening to a Climate One conversation about maintaining hope – and sanity - in the age of global warming. Coming up, facing down our fears.

**Bryant Welch:** *There's a saying, if you can name it you can tame it. Now there's a lot of optimism in that. And it really does produce health, mental health in and of itself. And so I've never been more optimistic. I don't know if we're gonna survive. But I've never been more optimistic.*

**Announcer:** That's up next, when Climate One continues.

**Announcer:** You're listening to Climate One. Greg Dalton is talking about ways to cope with our anxieties about climate change, with climate engagement strategist Renee Lertzman and clinical psychologists Leslie Davenport and Bryant Welch.

Let's get back to their conversation about using hope to overcome our fears. Here's Greg.

### PROGRAM PART 3

**Greg Dalton:** Let's go further about hope. Bryant Welch, a lot of people say, I think I should be hopeful that I should feign optimism because that's what works. Don't tell people really how dark it is because they'll become paralyzed it'll turn them off. So sugarcoat it, you know, don't tell grandma how bad her cancer is and she'll have a better chance to getting better. Is that viable?

**Bryant Welch:** No, I don't I'm not a big positive psychology fan.

[Laughter]

That being said, I really have never been more optimistic about what we can do with the mind now. We're really talking here about trauma and its treatment. And if we get a mind that isn't traumatized and if we get those traumatized minds sitting around talking together, if you have connection and you have a tranquil calmed mind, you know, we can really live up to the vision that Renee is talking about. So the potential is there. And I totally with your scientists that sometimes it looks pretty good but sometimes it looks pretty bad. And when you wake up and you're inhaling smoke it's pretty alarming. So I think, you know, there are a lot of good things that are happening. There just are a lot of good things. And if we can calm the mind enough to be rational and communicate with people, yeah, I believe that we can there's plenty of reason for optimism. Unfortunately, the outcome is not clear.

**Renee Lertzman:** Can I just add two quick things.

**Greg Dalton:** Sure. Renee Lertzman.

**Renee Lertzman:** One is the tendency we have to be very binary or dualistic. We tend to ping pong between the optimism and the hope and the despair. In actuality we I think intuitively we know that that's not real, right that it's much more complicated than that. And I'd love to see us supporting one another and really holding that place that's sort of in between. The other thing I wanna say based on, you know, following on what you said is I want us to acknowledge that at the same time that we're learning more about our ecological impacts and climate crisis, we are also experiencing a tremendous revolution of insight into the minds.

I mean it's phenomenal so neuroscience and trauma studies and attachment theory and contemplative practices are exploding motivational interviewing I've been doing a training here in the city that's changed my whole outlook. There is no excuse for the climate and environmental community to not be mining and exploiting these resources as actively as we can. I think there's such an opportunity to be partnering between these areas of expertise. Not that we all have to go out and become experts in the psychology, but it's really exciting to me to see how that field is growing and presents this opportunity for new kinds of collaboration and synthesis and creativity.

**Bryant Welch:** I totally agree. You know the thing we got going for us in this is the very act of awareness is a corrective therapeutic act. And I just think all these things that are encouraging us to be aware and that's a word that we use every day. But when you look at what neuroscientists are doing with the concept of awareness now, you know, there's a saying, if you can name it you can tame it. Now there's a lot of optimism in that. And it really does produce health, mental health in and of itself. So I really think we've got 50% or 60% of the variance is right there in that discovery. And so I've never been more optimistic. I don't know if we're gonna survive. But I've never been more optimistic.

[Laughter]

**Greg Dalton:** Leslie Davenport, one of the strongest statistical correlations is between we know that the temperatures are rising. And one of the stronger statistical correlations between heat and human aggression. When the heat rises there's more fights at baseball parks the more people honk on their horns, there's more domestic abuse. All sorts of things happen when humans get hot and cranky and angry. So the world is gonna get hotter now what do you look out towards like how can people think about a more angry world and not to become one of those angry people.

**Leslie Davenport:** Yeah. Well, I think in a way the answer to that is being spoken to about awareness. You know if we enter into anything knowing a little bit more of what we might encounter what we might expect that's already one step in the right direction. I think also what we were talking about earlier of increasing our capacities to be present with more rather than give in, you know, another way of talking about this is what's called the window of tolerance. And it's our again our ability to be with and be present with without being thrown off. And there's a lot of things that bring it down. Heat, being hungry, being tired, being overly stressed, and there's a lot of things that stretch it, meditative practice, awareness. And when we're outside our window of tolerance it often goes toward that aggression. It can go that direction or it can go toward disassociation and kind of checking out. But if our practice is about being aware of and expanding our window of tolerance that's part of what we're all gonna be asked to do while we're hopefully working on the temperature and all of that as well.

**Renee Lertzman:** Leslie, would you say that applying that so it sounds like you're saying what therapist do which is to say, look this might, you might feel a little uncomfortable you can anticipate this happening consume them and support our resilience in navigating difficult circumstances.

Could you imagine a campaign or something that puts out there like look folks we're in for some potentially rocky times this is what you might anticipate or expect but here's what we can do to support ourselves and each other.

**Leslie Davenport:** Be fantastic.

**Greg Dalton:** If you're just joining us we're talking about climate psychology and resilience at Climate One. I'm Greg Dalton. My guests are Bryant Welch, a clinical psychologist. Also, Renee Lertzman, author of Environmental Melancholia and Leslie Davenport, author of Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change.

Welcome to Climate One.

**Male Participant:** My name is Carter Brooks. We've made some allusions to sort of the generality of the climate community. There are some generalizations around the climate community that work against all the things we're talking about here. And so my question to all the panelists is what are your personal sort of pet peeves that if you could tell all in general sense stop doing that sort of or stop reinforcing this idea. What would those be?

**Greg Dalton:** Renee Lertzman you think a lot about scaling messaging. And if you were to advise a politician head of a state that sort of thing on policy communication what would you say?

**Renee Lertzman:** So I do have a lot to say about that. Okay. I guess the main thing I would say is to stop -- so you see it's very easy for me to do it, right. What I'm advising is that we stop telling people to stop doing things. But what concerns me a lot about the climate community I know it's not a generalized group, is the tendency to speak at and to people, one. To not design genuinely conversationally invitational oriented campaigns and initiatives. To rely on polling data that's very blunt and very limited that keeps us at a certain level that doesn't really go deeper as far as the anxiety and the ambivalence and the aspiration.

And I think that there is some inherent -- there's so much frustration and anger I think within folks working on climate that's very understandable and that affect that feeling can leak out and be very alienating and has caused a lot of damage over the years. I would love to see some more self-reflection on how are we working with our own anxiety urgency and frustration and do some capacity building around that so that we can actually show up and be more effective as allies partners facilitators and not trying to get people. Every client I have says how do I get people to do this? We've got to just get rid of that. How do we invite how do we facilitate how do we catalyze.

**Greg Dalton:** Lot to talk about there. Let's go to our next question. Welcome to Climate One.

**Male Participant:** Hi, my name is Kyle Jennings. A lot of what you've been talking about here has been is all very wonderful and it's all very focused on the individual and the people you happen to interact with. But with as segregated as the country is politically and as politicized as climate change has become if the people in this room do a little bit and we spread a little bit to the people we're going to interact with, I still don't know if that's enough to get over the fact that the Senate overrepresents rural states. What insights do you have about how we can depoliticize climate change and how these ideas can reach into the areas that people in this room aren't gonna reach?

**Greg Dalton:** Renee Lertzman.

**Renee Lertzman:** First of all I don't think what we're talking about is just about the individual one-to-one context. We're talking about basic psychological insights that can be applied in a whole number of media and scales and context. And so I want to acknowledge that there are folks working within, you know, conservative Republican different communities that care very deeply about these issues like Katharine Hayhoe, Bob Inglis, they're out there. I was involved with the project that was the most exciting thing I've ever done which is working with a Republican I never thought I'd say that. But it really was where we did in-depth interviews with conservative climate skeptics around the U.S. and we listened very carefully to what they said and did interviews that were very nonconfrontational. Took the primary anxieties and concerns and put those into scripts and messaging and frames and then tested those and they scored incredibly high.

So I feel very strongly that the more that we can actually design messaging and framing and again opportunities for people to be coming together that are not about trying to persuade trying to, you

know, motivate none of that but more about recognizing that there's some core concerns values that we share and relying on a variety of messengers we need everyone, right. And so I feel, you know, so excited about the whole phenomenon of people who have been one thing, you know, like and then they have some sort of transformation moment now they're something else. A farmer who then becomes vegan or, you know, a conservative Republican who becomes, you know, I feel like we really need to be supporting those folks who can work within their particular communities.

Music: In

**Announcer:** We've been exploring the psychology of climate change on Climate One. Greg Dalton's guests today were Renee Lertzman, a Climate Engagement Strategist and author of the book *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement*. Leslie Davenport, psychotherapist and author of *Emotional Resiliency in the Era of Climate Change: A Clinician's Guide*. And Bryant Welch, clinical psychologist and author of *State of Confusion: Political Manipulation and the Assault on the American Mind*.

To hear all our Climate One conversations, subscribe to our podcast at our website: [climateone.org](http://climateone.org), where you'll also find photos, video clips and more. And join us next time for another conversation about America's energy, economy, and environment.

**Greg Dalton:** Climate One is a special project of The Commonwealth Club of California.

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Tyler Reed is our producer.

The audio engineers are Mark Kirchner and Justin Norton.

Anny Celsi and Devon Strolovitch edit the show.

I'm Greg Dalton the executive producer and host.

The Commonwealth Club CEO is Dr. Gloria Duffy.

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