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# 'Courage without the certainty of a happy ending': the emotion regulation of environmental activists

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## ABSTRACT

Climate change and environmental degradation are the most serious and fundamental problems of our time and focal points for many activist groups and organizations. In this paper, we adopt a psychological perspective to explore the emotions and emotion regulation of environmental activists. We know from the literature that facing the reality of the climate crisis, and the risks involved, often means having to deal with powerful emotions such as fear and anxiety. In addition, activists in general typically deal with personal, cultural as well as structural challenges that often lead to dropout or burnout. Although we know quite a lot about the ways in which emotions mobilize and energize activism, we know less about the ways in which environmental activists regulate their emotions to improve their wellbeing for sustained activism. In the present study, we interviewed a broad international sample of 30 activists from Extinction Rebellion and similar organizations sharing the principles of regenerative culture encouraging emotion regulation among members. The informants experienced a wide range of negative, but also positive, emotions in relation to the experience of 'living in climate truth' as well as their everyday activism. Their emotion regulation strategies could be grouped into two themes: 'Taking action to heal' and 'healing to sustain action'. Both themes reflected the ability to remain emotionally flexible through questioning, and not being attached to the outcomes of activism. This implied the down-regulation and transforming of negative emotions as well as the cultivating and tempering of positive emotions.

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## Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation are the most serious and fundamental problems of our time and focal points for many activist groups and organizations. Facing the reality of the climate crisis and the risks involved often means having to deal with powerful negative emotions such as fear, anger, hopelessness, and grief (Clayton, 2020). Activists in general typically deal with personal, cultural as well as structural challenges, and there is a risk of individuals either dropping out or burning out (Driscoll, 2020; Sohr,

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2001). Thus, environmental activists need to learn to live with a wide range of negative emotions and overcome various obstacles to sustain their activism, but less is known about *how* they go about to do this. In the past 20 years, there has been an explosion of research and theory into the emotions of protest and social movements (Jasper, 2018) as well as in the environmental activism literature (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). However, most of the literature on the role of emotions in social movements has focused on the ways in which emotions motivate, mobilize, and energize activism (Lively & Weed, 2014). Furthermore, the literature exploring the ways in which emotions are kept in check in social movements (e.g. Ruiz-Junco, 2013) typically view emotion regulation as emotion management (Hochschild, 2012). In the present study, we adopt a psychological perspective on emotions and emotion regulation. We argue that this perspective represents a contribution to the existing literature as we explore how individuals relate to themselves and their emotions, not as a performance to serve an interpersonal goal, but to feel better in the moment and to improve their overall emotional wellbeing. However, while emotion regulation is not seen as targeted towards external outcomes and achievements, it is important for individuals to continue to act in effective and appropriate ways. Thus, we see emotion regulation as crucial for sustained activism over time.

We understand emotions to occur as the result of a sensemaking process where people use their past knowledge to make sense of not only their surroundings but also their bodily sensations in the present moment, to predict what is going to happen, and to act in appropriate ways (Barrett, 2016). Thus, emotions are shaped by language, culture, and the context of a situation, the individual physiology, and embodied sensations. Emotions are therefore subjective and unique to the individual.

We also assume that emotions are regulated by the individual in the context in which they occur. We refer to emotion regulation as the ways in which individuals influence the types of emotions they experience; when they experience them; and how these emotions are expressed and experienced on an everyday basis (1999). This perspective assumes that individuals regulate their emotions in ways that they find helpful depending upon their bodily sensations, their subjective experiences, and the situation in which they find themselves. Furthermore, that there is a temporal element to emotion regulation. This implies that individuals have various pressure points to touch upon depending upon where they are at in the emotion generation process as they evaluate what is good for them or not. Early in the emotion generation process, individuals may actively choose the environment and situations they are exposed based on the emotions they anticipate they will experience, or they may attempt to change the situation they are in. Later in the emotion generation process, as they cannot necessarily choose or change the situation, individuals may still actively choose to shift their attention or adopt a certain mindset their interpretation of their bodily sensations and the environment or situation they find themselves in. Finally, individuals are left with the strategy of modulating their emotional responses. Emotion regulation may involve up-regulating or down-regulating aspects of both positive and negative emotion episodes in conscious or unconscious ways. Furthermore, individuals may engage in emotion regulation strategies perceived to be helpful in the moment, but maladaptive over time (e.g. taking drugs to regulate anxiety).

Previous contributions to the activist literature have pointed to the fact that activists engage in personalized strategies to deal with challenges and adversity in environmental activism. Driscoll (2018) did for instance find that environmental activists linked their

activism to strong connections to nature, biographical influences, individual tactics and personal, rather than organizational, missions. Driscoll (2020) on the other hand pointed to the fact that environmental activists engaged in various personalized orientations and practices for mitigating challenges, such as bracketing, ignoring challenges, and focusing on what they could control, and that they integrated their activism and sense of life purpose around the environment. The current study aims to explore the emotionality of these strategies. This implies an investigation of the wide range of specific emotions involved, what they are about, as well as the links between emotions and emotion regulation. We argue that although there is some overlap between the perspectives of emotion regulation and emotion management (Hochschild, 2012) there are some important differences (Grandey & Melloy, 2017) positioning our study to represent a unique contribution to the literature. Emotion management refers to the ways in which emotional experiences and responses adhere to requirements or 'rules' in the context, situation, or organization in which they occur. Here, emotions are evoked and suppressed as a performance to achieve something in relationship to others or as emotion labor 'in exchange for wage'. Emotion requirements can be achieved through either surface acting, where felt emotions are masked through the 'pasting on' of expected expressions, or deep acting, where felt emotions are changed to appear more genuine in the performance. Social movements do, for instance, often develop a culture where there are acceptable and unacceptable emotions, and where there are expectations around how emotions should be managed and expressed (Ruiz-Junco, 2013). However, emotion regulation is about controlling the physiology and expression of positive and negative emotions, neither of which necessarily assume there is an interpersonal goal. Emotion regulation refers to the ways in which individuals relate to themselves and their emotions for the purpose of improved emotional wellbeing. The perspective of emotion regulation also extends the limited focus on deep versus surface acting as it implies a wider range of strategies, uniquely tailored by the individual. Finally, the perspective of emotion regulation also accounts for the momentary and temporal nature of emotions and emotion regulation and the complex ways in which they are linked.

In this paper, we report from interviews with environmental activists about their emotions and emotion regulation strategies in the context of the current climate crisis and their activism. The activists were mainly drawn from the environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR). In the following, we will firstly review the literature on emotions and emotion regulation in social movements and environmental activism, arguing for the ways in which the present study contributes to this literature. Here, we will also explore the ways in which the context of environmental activism is unique when it comes to emotion regulation. Secondly, we will outline the methodology before presenting our findings. Here, we focus on the emotions reported by the activists, the emotion regulation strategies they engaged in and the ways in which they could be understood in the context of their activism. Finally, we will discuss how our findings contribute to the literature.

### ***Emotions and emotion regulation in social movements***

In the last couple of decades, there has been an 'emotional turn' (Flam, 2014) in social movement studies, and it has been acknowledged that emotions are present in every

phase and aspect of protest, including recruitment, consolidation, and dissolution (Jasper, 2018). Recent contributions to the field have typically moved from a structural to a cultural and identity perspective (Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 2011). The emerging subfield of emotions has, however, been limited by the contrasting of emotions with rationality, dualistic thinking around the mind vs. the body and the individual vs. the social as well as ambiguous definitions and an overemphasis on a handful of emotion, such as fear and joy (Jasper, 2011). Empirical studies have typically focused on the ways in which emotions contribute to mobilization and movement success (Lively & Weed, 2014). Gould (2009), did for instance find that the experience and expression of anger in the gay and lesbian community towards the federal government led to the rise and success of the ACT UP organization. At the same time, this channeling of anger turned out to be a double-edged sword as it eventually led to movement decline where members felt that this emotional climate did not allow for the processing of emotions such as despair. Rodgers (2010) similarly pointed to the role of anger in mobilizing action in Amnesty International. Empirical research on environmental activism such as climate strikes has also emphasized the ways in which various and specific emotions motivate and accelerate activism (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Martiskainen et al., 2020). Ransan-Cooper et al. (2018) similarly found that anger helped mobilize opponents of coal seam gas in Australia, but that it was the combination of anger and joy that helped sustain the movement over time.

The current study contributes to this literature through adopting a psychological perspective on emotions and emotion regulation. Here, the socio-cultural context is considered as crucial, but from the point of an individual who makes sense of not only their surroundings but also their embodied sensations in the present moment. Thus, the mind and body are not seen as separate, and emotions are viewed as rational and functional as they guide decisions around appropriate actions. The study also aims to move beyond the emphasis on specific emotions, such as anger, through exploring the full range of emotions reported by environmental activists and what they are about. Furthermore, to explore the link between emotions and emotion regulation and the ways in which emotion regulation serves the purpose of improved emotional wellbeing.

In the next section, we will explore the concept of emotion regulation in the context of environmental activism in general, and ‘Extinction Rebellion (XR)’ in particular. This will also imply an exploration of the concept of regenerative culture, which is one of the pillars of XR.

### ***Emotions and emotion regulation in environmental activism and Extinction Rebellion***

Common emotional responses to climate change are anxiety, frustration, feeling overwhelmed, grief, guilt, and hope (Clayton & Manning, 2018; K. Hayes et al., 2018). Furthermore, for many, these experiences have widespread, profound, and cumulative negative impact on mental health (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Ojala et al., 2021). Orbach (2019) similarly argues that being an environmental activist implies having to face and come to terms with immense loss and ‘climate sorrow’. At the same time, it has been reported that climate activists, unlike other activists, often express and discuss their emotional experiences with others and create a supportive social network and collective

identity with particular emphasis on self-care to sustain activism and avoid burnout (Gravante & Poma, 2016; Hoggett & Randall, 2018). King (2005) did for instance find that activists were able to sustain their work through engaging in practices such as re-feeling, reflecting upon, problematizing, and discharging emotional experiences, to encourage emotional reflexivity.

'Extinction Rebellion (XR)' is a nonviolent global environmental movement with the stated aim of using civil disobedience to compel government action to avoid tipping points in the climate system, biodiversity loss, and the risk of social and ecological collapse. XR was established in the UK in May 2018 with about 100 academics signing a call to action. The organization is relatively decentralized and loosely connected and grew significantly in a short amount of time. XR consists of a wide range of population groups and several activists in the movement accept arrest and imprisonment. XR has carried out numerous non-violent actions and protests in the UK and elsewhere (mainly in Europe) to cause disruption and create awareness on the ecological and climate crisis whereby many individuals were arrested. One of the pillars of the movement is the notion of regenerative culture where it is assumed that acknowledging and dealing with difficult emotions (e.g. mourning the climate crisis) makes the movement more robust (Orbach, 2019). There is no singular definition of regenerative culture, but the main idea is that the organization commits to building resilience in members, physically as well as mentally, to precede, hold through and last beyond the actions that members take as part of their rebellion. The basis for a lot of XR's regenerative culture comes from the 'the work that reconnects' by the eco-philosopher Joanna Macy (Macy & Brown, 2014). Regenerative activities typically involve the creation of time and space for sharing and processing emotional experiences, and the building of community, e.g., through debriefing and the creation of ceremonies to hold difficult emotions. This is something in which resembles the Transition Network and the notion of 'inner transition' (Carvalho & Ferreira, 2022). Here subjective changes, e.g., through mind-body and spiritual practices such as mindfulness, are seen as integral to social change, often to the extent that the individual is made directly responsible for tackling environmental and climate issues. Thus, it has been argued that emotion regulation emerges in the context of, and serves the purposes, of neoliberalism where social problems are individualized and broader structural, cultural, and social forces are ignored (Carvalho, 2021; Purser, 2019). Furthermore, that dominant models of subjectification and is deeply rooted in a neoliberal perspective on the 'self' (Maxton-Lee, 2020; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). It can, however, be argued that the context of XR is different as the organization calls for systems change (Stuart, 2022). Furthermore, 'the work that connects', inherent to regenerative culture, is founded on a Buddhist lineage that challenges the notion of a detached and autonomous self and the separation of private and public (Schmid & Taylor Aiken, 2021). Thus, individual strategies such mindfulness are seen as not only engendering more resilient individuals but also as a way of bridging the false division between inward and outward transformation. Furthermore, individuals concerned by climate change and environmental issues often adopt a worldview with blurred distinctions between the self and society, culture, and nature (Kałwak & Weihgold, 2022; Norgaard & Reed, 2017; Pihkala, 2018; Verlie, 2019).

At the same time, there has been cultural and social tensions around emotion regulation strategies in social movements in general, as well as in XR. Rodgers

(2010) did for instance find that there was a culture of selflessness among paid activists in Amnesty International whereby self-care was seen as unnecessary and self-indulgent. It has also been argued that there is a gendered dimension to activist identity whereby the 'ideal activist' is male (Craddock, 2019). Thus, many activist organizations are characterized by a macho culture where hard work, direct and 'real' actions are favored. In a study of participants engaged in risky forms of human rights activism, it was found that there were gendered feeling rules in the organization that favored bravery, sacrifice, and selflessness (Nah, 2021). Hence, conversations about mental health and emotional wellbeing were perceived as complicated and triggered feelings of guilt and a sense of self-indulgence. Activists therefore relied on private rather than collective strategies to regulate their emotions. Brown and Pickerill (2009) in a similar vein pointed to issues of sexism, homophobia, and racism in activist circles, which people with mental health problems are drawn to actions and protest and the fact that burnout is seen as an individual problem. Kleres and Wettergren (2017) pointed to similar issues among a select group of climate activists where anger was treated as something that should be pacified and transformed, while guilt was largely rejected. In XR, there has been ongoing tensions related to the notion of regenerative culture. It has, for instance, been argued that the concept is not understood and/or does not resonate with everyone (Westwell & Bunting, 2020). XR, like many other activist groups, have also been criticized for not speaking to, and for, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic and working-class communities (Bell & Bevan, 2021) and for being dominated by well-educated individuals (de Moor et al., 2021).

## Methods

### *Data collection*

Data was collected in the form of 30 semi-structured interviews with environmental activists. Twenty-three of the informants were drawn from XR. We initially searched for activists who held work positions in XR via the professional networking platform LinkedIn.com and asked informants to recommend other informants that we could reach out to. We were made aware that the participants we initially recruited to take part in our study held quite unique positions in XR, because they were based in London and were involved in the media and communication team. It was also pointed out by many that the XR movement is very European and 'white' and that perspectives from the global south, as well as indigenous perspectives, were not properly represented within the movement. We therefore proceeded to recruit informants from various nationalities and positions in XR Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and India, as well as informants from other, but similar, environmental activist organizations outside of Europe. Five of the informants were recruited from sustainability activist organizations in Australia that utilize civil disobedience and elements from regenerative culture. We also included one Indian representative from the United Nations and one sustainability consultant doing work around regenerative culture. Our sample consists of 17 females and 13 males, and their ages ranged between 20 and 50.

## Interviews

During interviews, we asked the activists to tell us about themselves and their role in the activist organization, if they had committed to being arrested during actions, and how they experienced the work that they do. In addition, we asked them about difficult as well-rewarding experiences associated with being committed to environmentalism and activism. Throughout the interview, we continually probed the informants through asking questions such as ‘How did this make you feel?’ and ‘What strategies do you typically engage in to handle emotional experiences and/or situations like that?’ All the interviews were carried out via the video conferencing platform Zoom. Interviews typically lasted around one hour and were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber.

## Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed through a theory-led form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This meant that although we remained close to the data, we specifically searched for instances of emotions and emotion regulation and continued to return to the literature throughout the analytical process. The data was analysed in five steps: data familiarization; initial coding generation; generation of themes based on the initial coding; review of themes; and theme definition and labelling.

In the first step, we read through the interview transcripts several times. We then identified and extracted excerpts from the transcripts that related to emotions, the ways in which emotions were regulated, and what these experiences were about. Here we tried to include contextual background information, while also attempting to reduce the total amount of text, to prepare for the next step of the analysis. In the second stage of analysis, we coded the extracted text for emotions, what they were about, and ways in which emotions were regulated (such as venting to a friend and meditating). In the third step, we re-examined our coding from step two, to explore how their emotions and emotion regulation could be understood in the context of their activism. This implied systematizing the emotions that the informants needed to regulate and the emotion strategies in which they were utilized (please see Table 1). Two broad themes were identified that illustrate the ways in which our informants regulated their emotional experiences: ‘Taking action to heal’ and ‘healing to sustain action’.

## Findings

Overall, all the activists were very open and candid about their emotions around the ecological issue and climate change as well as related to their activism (please see Table 1). Most of the activists experienced a wide range of negative, and sometimes intense, emotions (e.g. *grief*, *anger*, and *fear*) related to acknowledging and processing the current ecological and climate crisis. Informants from XR typically labelled these experiences as living in ‘climate truth’. For some of the informants, these experiences were amplified by underlying mental health problems. Burnout was something that came up a lot as many of the activists had experienced, or seen others experience burnout. At the same time, many of the informants reported that the experience of *grief* and *sadness* around the state

**Table 1.** Emotions related to the ecological and climate crisis, activism, and emotion regulation strategies.

| Emotions related to the ecological and climate crisis                                                                                                                                                          | Emotions related to activism                                                                                                                                                                               | Emotion regulation strategies    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Grief/sorrow/sadness, pain, fear, anxiety, anger, depression, frustration, worry, confusion, feel paralyzed, sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. Living in 'climate truth'. Feeling alienated from others | Have no choice, but to take action-privilege means obligation do their part/make sacrifices. Sense of legacy.                                                                                              | <i>Taking action to heal</i>     |
| Guilt- feeling like a hypocrite, but also grateful about being privileged- not worried about the future on a personal level-positioned to have hope-denial.                                                    | Underlying mental health problems/trauma creates the need for action/activism- need to feel needed and important.                                                                                          |                                  |
| Grateful to be alive now, joy-surrendering to the moment- acceptance but not apathy- feeling courageous.                                                                                                       | Activism provides energy, sense of nourishing, empowerment, confidence, and assertiveness- feels life-enhancing. Provides sense of purpose. Feel excited about what the future might bring/new beginnings. |                                  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Experiencing socially rewarding and meaningful relationships/joy/love                                                                                                                                      |                                  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Burnout- take on too much responsibility, fighting and proving worthy for the movement, exhaustion, resentfulness, negative energy, anger, feeling underappreciated, feeling self-righteous.               | <i>Healing to sustain action</i> |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Culture of 'depressed servitude'                                                                                                                                                                           |                                  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Difficult experiences related to conflict around leadership/lack of leadership and taking action vs. self-care/"inner work".                                                                               |                                  |

of the world had led them to a path where they were able to accept and embrace the present moment, feeling *grateful*, but also *courageous* to take action to create change in the world. Living in 'climate truth' was also associated with a sense of loneliness and alienation from others, which had important implications for the experience of engaging in activism. On the one hand, 'thinking about death all the time' and experiencing activism in the context of a 'wartime environment' fueled strong positive emotions such as *love* within the activist community. On the other hand, this led to a culture of 'depressed servitude' ('we're all going to be dead; the world is over already'). The informants also reported that there was friction and conflict in the group around leadership/lack of leadership and the role of taking action vs. self-care and 'inner work'. It was noted by some that there was a tension at the heart of XR, between the 'female' vs. 'male energies', represented by their two founders (Gail Bradbrock and Roger Hallam). This implied friction, but also potentially a unique and fertile dynamic between the forces of 'being the change and changing from the root upwards' vs. 'tearing everything down' to propel movement in the desired direction. Furthermore, although this created frustration among both males and females, it appeared that male informants expressed this more strongly, e.g., claiming that 'egos are allowed to flourish' and labelling others as 'self-indulgent'. Female informants appeared to be more open to accept the complexity of this dynamic.

The issue of privilege was also something that came up as many of the informants felt guilt and hypocritical, but also grateful, about their lifestyles, for living in less climate affected areas of the world (Europe) and for having the financial means to live a comfortable life even in times of crisis. Thus, they felt that they had to atone for their

privilege and do their part through environmental activism. This applied to both males and females and activists of all ages, but the older activists often referred to their activism as their '*legacy*'. They were not worried for themselves but were concerned about what they were leaving behind to future generations. Some did, however, also acknowledge that their personal sense of safety in the context of ecological collapse and climate change was an act of denial as societal disruption and food shortages, etc., may indeed hit everyone and everywhere.

In the context of these emotions, the informants engaged in a wide range of emotion regulation strategies that could be grouped into two themes: 'Taking action to heal' and 'healing to sustain action'. The first theme reflects that the informants found an outlet for, and engaged with, emotions in meaningful ways through taking action. The second theme reflects the various self-care practices that they engaged in to sustain their actions over time. Both themes implied the down-regulation and transforming of negative emotions and the cultivation and tempering of positive emotions. Furthermore, the issue of questioning and not being too attached to the outcome of activism ('*saving the planet*') as well as the seeking of community was something that came up in relation to both themes.

### ***Taking action to heal***

This theme reflects that although 'taking action' was mainly about creating awareness and causing disruption to compel the government to take action on the ecological and climate crisis, it was also utilized as an outlet for emotional experiences. Thus, 'taking action' was about the 'cause' and implied joining an activist group, and engaging in regular meetings, protests and in some cases civil disobedience and arrest, but also a strategy to process and make sense of negative emotions around environmental issues. This was something that happened on two levels. Firstly, taking action was about seeking community and feeling less lonely about living in 'climate truth', and as one informant put it: '*People need other people, and that's what XR is providing for most people*'. Secondly, the 'doing' was something which made them focus on something outside of themselves and gave them purpose; focusing on what they could do, rather than everything that was outside of their control. 'taking action' was seen as a '*cure*', as '*therapeutic*' and an '*antidote to grief*' as they came out of the '*apocalyptic tear*'. 'taking action' simultaneously also provided an outlet for a wide range of positive emotions and helped them feel '*empowered*', '*confident*' and '*assertive*'. One of the activists did, for instance, refer to activism as having a '*life force moving*' and saw their activism as '*life enhancing and nourishing*' while also providing a sense of purpose.

There were also instances where activists reported that their mental health issues were a more substantial driver for them to engage in activism. For instance, one of the informants claimed to be '*addicted to actions*' and an '*adrenalin junkie*' while at the same time pointing to the fact that activism had positive implications for mental health in the sense that '*for the first time ever I don't feel suicidal*'.

It was, however, evident that while 'taking action' was seen as an important strategy, it was also seen as crucial to find ways to temper the enthusiasm around protests and actions and the potential outcomes of activism. One of the more experienced activists, who had also been part of other activist groups in the past, did for instance reflect around

having to re-establish her relationship to activism because she used to see herself as a *'fighter', proving worthy of the fight for the planet*. This *'rebellling'* and building her identity on that *'raging energy'* had *'exhausted'* all of her *'inner resources'* leaving her *'empty'* and burned out.

Overall, the informants were very concerned about not being *'fixed on'* and *'attached to'* the outcome of their activism. On a deeper level, this implied acknowledging, and engaging in critical reflection around, the severity of the ecological and climate crisis. For instance, one of the informants had started to question what there is to save as *'our world has not been saved, it's been destroyed, like when you talk about saving the world, what do you mean? Do you mean like we can still go to the high street? You can still order on Amazon?'* To some extent this also involved some sort of awakening and slow spiritual journey *'to transforming ourselves and through that transformation recognizing that there are more transformations to be made'*.

Furthermore, not being attached to the outcome also implied opening to the possibility of environmental collapse and coming to terms with, and finding ways to hold, uncertainty. Ultimately, acceptance of the unknown, although it was associated with a wide range of painful emotions, was experienced as liberating and something that provided energy and courage to *'take action'*. One of the informants did, for instance, describe having gone through *'a little death in the sense of surrendering to the possibility of environmental collapse'* something in which ultimately proved to be *'tremendously liberating and peace inducing, coming to a place of acceptance, but not apathy'*. This implied that it was not relevant whether their efforts were successful or not, they still perceived that their activism was important and worthwhile.

### **Healing to sustain action**

The informants in our study were quite deliberate about engaging in a wide range of self-care practices on a regular basis. Overall, these practices allowed them *'heal'* from negative experiences related to the ecological and climate crisis as well as to their activism. Ultimately, these practices were about taking a break from their emotional experiences and create a spaciousness that allowed them not to be so emotionally attached and reactive in the moment, to process negative experiences and stimulate positive emotions. The informants reported that personal self-care practices, such as regularly taking time out, going for a run, doing yoga, meditating, spending time in nature and perspective taking helped them in moments of distress, as well as to maintain and improve their mental and physical health. Ultimately, this was also something which allowed them to continue with their activism from a calmer state of mind, focusing on the present moment, and not being so attached to the outcome of their activism. One of the informants did, for instance, describe a profound spiritual experience in nature where he sat on a big boulder and suddenly experienced that he was *'like the dust in the wind, being completely insignificant, but part of immenseness'*, something in which allowed him to feel *'infinitely powerful'*. Furthermore, this was something he could always come back to, like *'an anchor point'* in challenging situations.

However, the informants also mentioned *'self-care'* practices, such as smoking, excessive drinking, taking drugs and binge eating, that helped them regulate negative emotional experiences in the moment, but were less helpful over time in that they fueled

episodes of self-destructiveness and burnout, and ultimately made them less efficient as activists.

Self-care practices were also embedded in collective organizational practices. The notion of regenerative culture and other communal practices implied that there was a system in place for self-care and the sharing and processing of emotional experiences. Furthermore, these practices were not only accepted but also encouraged and systematically carried out in the organization on a regular basis. Examples of regenerative communal practices that the informants had participated in were grief/mourning circles, constellation work, check-ins during meetings, workshops on burnout prevention and communal debriefs. These *communal healing* practices were rooted in the need to acknowledge and process difficult emotions such as ‘grief’ and ‘sorrow’ around environmental issues as well as their experiences as activists (e.g., actions and arrest). It was noted that these practices were a *‘reminiscence of the anonymous alcoholics’ talk groups, you’ve got your support group, and that’s your lifeline’*.

However, communal self-care practices were also contested, especially in XR. On one level, this was about friction in the movement when it came to understanding the concept of regenerative culture. Most of the informants, representing a wide range of nationalities and cultural backgrounds, appeared to sympathize with the foundational principles of regenerative culture. However, one of the informants, with an American background, pointed out that XR would never work in the United States *‘because of race issues’* and because XR’s *‘whiteness is really challenging in an American context’*. This not only had implications for the perceived effectiveness of XR in the US but also for the acceptance of the communal self-care practices as it was claimed that XR had *‘taken the S off the initial concept of regenerative cultures’*, ignoring the multiple ways in which resilience can be built. Another informant noted that *‘the conversation in black American communities around resilience is so much more sophisticated and richer with a lot of space for celebration and spirituality’* and that *‘white Westerners have never had to be resilient’*. On another level, there was disagreement in the organization around the role of regenerative practices and activities in XR on an everyday basis, and how best to accommodate for various needs within the organization. Some of the informants felt that regenerative culture practices were taking up too much time and space in the movement to the detriment of *‘taking action’* around the climate crisis. It was also pointed out that there was a real risk that individuals within the organization used these practices for *‘self-indulgence’* purposes.

## Discussion

The current study contributes to the literature through adopting a psychological perspective on emotions (Barrett, 2016) and emotion regulation (Gross, 1999). We illustrate how environmental activists experience a wide range of positive and negative emotions in relation to the ecological and climate crisis and their activism and explore what they are about. Furthermore, the ways in which individuals relate to these emotions through emotion regulation within the socio-cultural context of environmental activism.

The emotions reported in relation to the ecological and climate crisis were often intense and negative (Clayton, 2020; Ojala et al., 2021; Orbach, 2019), but also mixed and ambivalent (e.g. in relation to privilege). This resonates with the notion of climate change

as a ‘wicked problem’ without definitive solutions (Incropera, 2015) requiring complex sensemaking (Whiteman & Cooper, 2000). The emotional ramification of this complexity was the painful, but also liberating, experience of living in ‘climate truth’. Similarly, engaging in environmental activism was associated with a wide range of positive emotions in that it provided a sense of purpose, meaning and rewarding social relationships, but also negative emotions, and burnout, in the event of taking on too much responsibility, not being heard and experiencing friction and conflict within the activist community (Driscoll, 2020; Sohr, 2001; Westwell & Bunting, 2020).

Through exploring the ways in which emotion regulation served the purpose of improved emotional wellbeing in the socio-cultural context of environmental activism, we found that the act of engaging in activism was an important strategy in and of itself to regulate emotions around climate change and environmental issues. Thus, ‘taking action’ was an important strategy to intervene in the emotion generation process through actively choosing to engage in a social community around activism where painful emotions around the climate crisis were accepted and could be processed. Furthermore, activism was an activity that alleviated, and was an outlet for, painful emotions. Thus, on one level, activism allowed the informants to sit with and actively work through painful emotions around the climate crisis in ways that enabled them to let go of common defense mechanisms around climate change, such as repression, dissociation, and denial (Norgaard, 2006). On another level, letting go of the constant effort to avoid ‘truth’ also opened to, and allowed the time and space to cultivate, positive emotions such as gratefulness in the present moment. For some, the act of engaging in activism provided an experience of emotional catharsis to the extent that underlying mental health problems were alleviated (Brown & Pickerill, 2009). In turn, this also provided the energy and courage needed to continue to engage in activism.

The notion of regenerative culture implied that individuals were situated in a socio-cultural context where certain emotion regulation practices were encouraged and facilitated. This was a source of friction and tension within the community (Bell & Bevan, 2021; Westwell & Bunting, 2020) and individuals engaged with regenerative culture in at least two ways. One group of individuals felt, in line with findings already reported in the social movement literature, that the focus on self-care implicit in regenerative culture took attention away from ‘real’, ‘masculine’ (Craddock, 2019; Nah, 2021) and ‘self-less’ (Rodgers, 2010) action. Thus, ‘inner work’ was seen as separate, and less useful than ‘outer work’. This implied that inner work was seen as something in which it could be taken too far through self-indulgence. In line with this way of thinking about the ‘outer’ as separate, there was in XR also a tendency of ‘depressed servitude’. This implied the imposing of certainty about the ‘outer world’ through apocalypticism and assuming the imminent collapse of civilization.

However, most of the individuals participating in this study adopted a non-dualist perspective on the self vs. nature and self vs. culture (Katwak & Weihgold, 2022; Pihkala, 2018) aligned with some of the foundational values of regenerative culture (Schmid & Taylor Aiken, 2021). Thus, emotion regulation was seen as embedded in the socio-ecological (Verlie, 2019). This had at least two implications for the informants. Firstly, even though emotion regulation was adopted to build resilience and emotional grit, it was not in the individualistic sense of transforming the self (Carvalho & Ferreira, 2022; Purser, 2019). To the contrary, emotion regulation was

practiced in community and for the purpose of connecting with nature and finding ways to live with other people. Secondly, 'inner' and 'outer' transition was seen as inextricably linked, whereby emotion regulation was seen as 'feminine', radical, and efficient way to change the world from the inside and out (Bell, Dennis and Brar, 2022). An important aspect of emotion regulation from this perspective was the notion of questioning and not becoming too attached to the outcome of activism and to temper the urge to 'save the world'. Thus, as the individual and the 'outer world' were not seen as separate activism was not about achieving goals or being successful 'out there', but about committing to activism because it was the right thing to do and meaningful and life enhancing in the present moment. Many of the informants also reported that having been on a mission to 'save the world' in the past had depleted their resources and led them on a path to burnout. It was therefore considered crucial to commit to everyday emotion regulation practices that allowed them to create the spaciousness where they were not so emotionally attached and reactive in the moment, something in which allowed them to engage activism from a place of humility, acceptance, and equanimity around the uncertainty of the future of the world.

From a psychological emotion regulation perspective, it can be argued that 'self-less' action, to the detriment of self-care, and a separation of the 'inner' from the 'outer' are not helpful and effective strategies for sustained activism because they reflect lack of emotional flexibility (S. C. Hayes et al., 1999). Emotional flexibility refers to the ability to remain present and open in the moment and accepting whatever emotions come up without focusing on the past or future and/or avoiding or suppressing emotions. Ultimately, this will allow individuals to adapt and respond more effectively to the demands of a situation in ways that serve their values and goals. We therefore argue that emotional well-being and sustained action are closely linked in that it allows activists to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016), but as a 'tempered radical' (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

## Conclusion

Navigating the emotional experience around climate change and ecological degradation is a challenging endeavour. Facing 'climate truth' and 'taking action' through joining an environmental activist organization is a powerful strategy to come to terms with this emotional experience. At the same time, it is crucial for environmental activists to continuously engage in various emotion regulation practices to build emotional resilience to sustain activism over time and avoid burnout. However, through exploring emotions and emotion regulation strategies in the socio-cultural context of environmental activism, we show that the distinction between the 'inner' vs. 'outer' and 'the self' vs 'performance' is blurred. For some individuals, emotion regulation strategies are more than tools to develop emotional grit, they also enable connection with nature and other people. Thus, emotion regulation allows affective adaptation, as a process of socio-ecological evolution that involves a change of the self to enable new ways of relating to the world and creating change (Verlie, 2019). However, it is worth noting that the socio-cultural context of this study consisted of individuals with university degrees that came from privileged middle-class

backgrounds and were based in Western, mainly European, countries less affected by climate change and ecological degradation. This it would be worthwhile for future studies to explore emotion regulation in more diverse contexts of environmental activism, e.g., in the global south.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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