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PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE IN DENVER, COLORADO

Being fully cognizant of climate change impacts to the environment and society can be a heavy emotional burden to carry. In addition to bearing this burden in their personal lives, educators and environmental leaders work to maintain a strong emotional presence in front of their audiences. They require the psychological resilience to teach and know about climate change and yet remain positive. Here we tell the story of Maria Talero, who decided to tackle the issue of psychological resilience among environmental educators and other environmental professionals.

How do those who are concerned about climate change develop coping strategies and the psychological resilience necessary to teach and think deeply about difficult issues like climate change? (See chapter 3 for resilience definitions.) Maria Talero, a freelance climate change educator and former university philosophy professor in Denver, Colorado, decided to address this challenge. She developed Climate Courage Resilience Circles, which are small group meetings to increase members' psychological and emotional resilience through participation in climate change action. The resilience circles were so popular that Maria crowd-funded and implemented a Community Climate Courage Film and Discussion Forum. Through these experiences, Maria hoped that participants would walk away with "a strong, positive experience at the end—a feeling of excitement and energy." Her goals are to foster fellowship, psychological support, learning, and action.

Maria engages a range of audiences, from environmental professionals to concerned community members looking for ways to become involved in organized

climate action. Her audiences see climate change through the lens of saving the planet and as a crisis for their grandchildren. Maria describes them as easily feeling “doom and gloom” about climate change. In her resilience circles, Maria starts by getting people on the same page about the topic of the day. As an invitation to discussion, Maria shows short videos. “There has to be a piece where we get on the same page, like an orchestra tuning instruments together.” Maria chooses the videos carefully so that they present climate change as a serious issue, appeal to people’s social nature, and inspire. She makes sure that immediately after the videos, people engage in some form of social interaction that avoids doom and gloom. “We want movement, we want communication, we want the learning to happen in shorter cycles. You don’t want people to sit passively for too long. And you want their voices and their knowledge and their experiences to be part of what happens.”

When I asked Maria about the language she uses to describe climate change, she said that she avoids catastrophe framing, tries to make her messages relevant and accessible to the audience, and frames solutions in terms of collective action. Maria explained, “If I’m going to say twenty different sentences, I want fifteen or seventeen of them to have an easy, relatable structure, and metaphor helps, examples, personal stories help, and that’s so important.”

When asked about the psychological barriers to climate change action, Maria, who has read widely about climate change and psychology, emphasized learned helplessness, or feeling like you have no control over a situation and thus deciding against action. She also cited environmental education’s history of promoting individual-level solutions that fail to address the scale of climate change. In Maria’s experience, people intuitively sense that “easy and painless” actions that people can take all by themselves, such as recycling or turning off the lights, will not solve the problem, and that “if you appeal to the single individual, you’re missing out.” Maria works to shift away from learned helplessness by inviting local representatives from organizations like 350 Colorado to resilience circle meetings, enabling participants to sign up that very night for collective action in their community. At film forums, “birds of a feather groups” form around interests like renewable energy collectives and become action groups that continue after the forum ends.

When asked about advice for environmental educators, Maria counseled that educators should “be really suspicious of one-size-fits-all approaches.” She reiterated that recycling, a behavior perceived as a stock solution for many environmental ills, will not suffice as a climate change solution. She emphasized that the field of climate change education is in a period of “ferment and crisis” as it transitions from individual behavior changes to collective action and social behaviors, and this period means that environmental educators need to look for information and resources in new areas. Maria herself draws on a wide breadth of resources, from empirical sources like Yale’s Cultural Cognition Project to books

TABLE 14.1 Summary of Maria Talero’s climate change programs and how they connect to concepts covered in chapters 1–10

SETTING	VARIOUS LOCATIONS IN DENVER, COLORADO
Audience	Environmental community
Primary program outcomes	Climate literacy Self-efficacy Collective action
Climate psychology connections	Uses conversation and discussion strategically to avoid feelings of doom and gloom Provides opportunities to sign up for action projects during the program, potentially avoiding cognitive dissonance
Climate communication connections	Uses positive, hopeful messaging Frames climate change around collective solutions Frames climate change in the big picture but then provides examples of local actions participants can take Takes into account how discussion and films will impact her audience’s emotions
Program strategies	Starts with an element that addresses the problem and then quickly moves to opportunities for discussion and conversation Organizes small-group discussions in film forum by putting people into different interest groups and then posing general discussion questions to the whole audience

on psychological resilience like Mary Pipher’s *The Green Boat*.¹ In this book, Pipher writes about how to avoid, as Maria puts it, being “overcome by despair and how to turn toward passion as a resource, as something healing. It’s not just that you’re doing something about some external problem” when you take up environmental action; “you’re actually helping yourself.”

Summary

Maria structures her programs so participants move from knowing climate change is an issue to opportunities to socialize, discuss, build community, and, finally, to take climate change action. Her goals are to increase her audience’s climate literacy and self-efficacy and to promote community and collective action. Most important, she hopes to increase audience members’ psychological resilience (table 14.1).

Maria’s Tip for Educators

Maria recommends that educators be wary of stock environmental solutions, like recycling, that don’t actually meet the scale of the climate change problem.