

Climate Activism and Coping With Eco-Emotions: The Roles of Action, Collective Emotional Engagement, and Self-Care

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Abstract

This study examines how participation in the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion influences individuals in coping with difficult eco-emotions and psychosocial factors contributing to fluctuations between them. Using the three dimensions of coping in Pihkala’s process model of eco-anxiety — *Action*, *Emotional Engagement*, and *Self-care* — as a theoretical framework, we conducted a thematic analysis of interviews with current and former Extinction Rebellion activists in Sweden. Findings reveal that Extinction Rebellion support Emotional Engagement by providing social validation, normalization, and collective ‘holding’ of eco-emotions, although individual need for collective emotional engagement vary. We show how taking action in Extinction Rebellion may function as a coping strategy when perceived as socially or instrumentally meaningful, which can be undermined by conflicts or losing contact with one’s working group. Participants highlighted Extinction Rebellion’s norms of balancing action and self-care, yet former activists described how personality and strong eco-emotions of guilt and responsibility undermined this balance, triggering exhaustion and prolonged distancing. Overall, this study illustrates psychosocial factors within climate activism that may either enable or disable coping strategies for individuals. We also highlight the importance of recognizing variation in coping preferences and needs which is important for effective collaboration and societal adaptation during the climate transition.



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Keywords

climate anxiety, eco-anxiety, eco-emotions, coping, climate activism, collective action

Non-Technical Summary

Background

The climate and ecological crises provoke a range of emotions, such as fear, anger, and hopelessness, often categorized as eco-anxiety or eco-emotions. When these emotions become overwhelming, they can reduce mental well-being, but they can also inspire climate engagement. Instead of pathologizing these emotions, an alternative perspective focuses on different ways that people can navigate them — a process referred to as coping. Coping strategies can include taking action to address the source of the distress, employing techniques to regulate the emotional response in itself, or temporarily distracting oneself from the distressing emotions.

Why was this study done?

Research on how people cope with eco-emotions is still limited, and most existing studies focus on the individual. This study aimed to broaden that understanding by examining the role of social context. Specifically, it investigated how participation in the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR) influenced eco-emotions and the use of different coping strategies.

What did researchers do and find?

We interviewed current activists in the Swedish chapter of XR and individuals who had left the movement. The findings highlight that XR provided not only a way to cope through action, but that acting collectively offered extra coping benefits in the form of having one's eco-emotions validated and normalized by others. Participants highlighted the relief of entering a space that allowed for the expression of eco-emotions, as this was something they had lacked in social contexts outside of XR. Some former activists reported being more in states of avoidance after leaving XR, which they related to a lack of social validation for their eco-emotions. However, the need for collective sharing of emotions and concerns varied among individuals, with some former activists experiencing that it took away focus from action and achieving change. We found that perceiving the engagement to be meaningful and cohesive is important for action in XR to serve as a coping strategy, and something that can be strengthened or weakened by social connections or conflicts. Finally, participants discussed how XR encouraged balancing action with self-care and periods of distance, but former activists also shared how certain personality traits and strong eco-emotions of guilt and responsibility made it difficult to maintain this balance, eventually leading to exhaustion.

What do these findings mean?

The findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study contributes to the coping literature by going beyond individualistic frameworks and highlighting the critical role of social context in shaping experiences of eco-emotions and coping processes. Practically, at the individual level, the study underscores the importance of access to a diverse range of coping strategies and the ability to balance them. Findings highlight psychological and social factors among climate activists that can foster or undermine coping for individuals. At the collective level, the results emphasize the need for climate organizers and collaborative groups to recognize and address diverse coping needs, preferences, and abilities of individuals.

Highlights

- Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 26 current and former Extinction Rebellion climate activists, we explore how participation influences coping with challenging eco-emotions.
- Activism within XR not only facilitated coping through action but also provided a social context that supported collective emotional engagement and a balance between action, self-care, and necessary distancing.
- Accounts from former activists highlight how individual needs and preferences for coping strategies vary and interact with personality traits and eco-emotions. Recognizing this diversity thus appears crucial in collaborative groups.
- This paper contributes to the eco-emotions and coping literature by moving beyond individualistic coping paradigms and by shifting the narrative away from pathologizing eco-anxiety.
- For individuals experiencing difficult eco-emotions and practitioners in this field, these findings are valuable as they illustrate several ways in which collective engagement can support coping.

Climate- and eco-anxiety has emerged as a psychological response to the climate and ecological crises, encompassing an array of emotions such as fear, anger, helplessness, and guilt (Pihkala, 2022). While the term *climate anxiety* has been the most widely used in academic discourse and media, the broader term *eco-emotions* has been proposed to better reflect the diversity of emotional experiences and is adopted in this article (Marczak et al., 2023; Voški et al., 2023). These emotions represent an adaptive response to real threats and influence our actions and psychological well-being in complex ways (Bouman et al., 2020; Landmann, 2024; Lutz et al., 2023; Ogunbode et al., 2022). Given these associations, understanding how individuals navigate and cope with difficult eco-emotions is crucial for promoting both mental well-being and constructive environmental engagement.

‘The process model of eco-anxiety and ecological grief’ (Pihkala, 2022) offers a framework for understanding the phases of emotional responses and coping strategies that individuals use to navigate eco-emotions. The core of the model identifies three dimensions of coping: *Grieving and Other Emotional Engagement*, which highlights the importance of processing emotions and grieving ongoing environmental losses; *Action*, which emphasizes behaviors to address climate issues; and *Distancing and Self-Care*, which recognizes the necessity of balancing engagement with self-care and taking breaks. The process model suggests that access to all these coping dimensions is needed for constructive coping and that an over-reliance on any one of them can make adjusting to the climate crisis more challenging. Furthermore, it suggests that individuals will move between different coping strategies, and that such oscillations are influenced by the social context. However, research on how social context (e.g., social norms and group dynamics) influences coping strategies is scarce and called for (Pihkala, 2022).

A social context that has received increased attention in recent years is climate activism, with studies highlighting how difficult eco-emotions such as fear, anger and despair (Bird et al., 2024; Furlong & Vignoles, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2023) — but also positive emotions, such as sense of purpose and being moved by protest (Conner et al., 2021; Landmann & Naumann, 2024) — may drive engagement. Using Pihkala’s (2022) process model as a theoretical framework, the present study explores how engagement in Extinction Rebellion (XR) influences the use of the three coping dimensions in navigating difficult eco-emotions. Moreover, by including the perspectives from former activists, it investigates psychosocial factors contributing to the abandonment of certain strategies and transitions to others. The term *psychosocial factors* refers to the interplay between psychological characteristics and social experiences in shaping individuals’ behavior and mental health (Andrews & Hoggett, 2019; Vizzotto et al., 2013). First, we review the literature on coping with eco-emotions and the theoretical background to the three coping dimensions.

Pihkala’s (2022) process model partly draws on Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) coping theory and its application to eco-emotions (Ágoston et al., 2022; Homburg et al., 2007; Mah et al., 2020; Ojala, 2012, 2013; Ojala & Bengtsson, 2019). Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141) define coping as “cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and internal demands.” The theory identifies three main types of coping: problem-focused coping, which addresses the source of stress; emotion-focused coping, which attends to one’s emotional responses; and meaning-focused coping, which involves seeking meaning in challenging situations rather than altering the situation or regulating emotions (Folkman, 2008).

In Pihkala’s model, *Action* corresponds primarily to problem-focused coping. Meta-analyses have shown that individual pro-environmental behaviors are associated with better subjective well-being (Zawadzki et al., 2020). However, others caution that, given the complex and multi-level nature of the climate crisis, placing too much emphasis on

individual actions can lead to feelings of inadequacy and despair (Ojala, 2012; Pihkala, 2022). Collective action, such as participation in activist groups like Extinction Rebellion, offers additional psychological benefits that may buffer against these negative effects. These include increased social connection, a sense of purpose and empowerment (Conner et al., 2021; Vestergren et al., 2018, 2019). Boehnke and Wong (2011) found that long-term activist engagement predicted better mental health outcomes over a 21-year period compared to non-activists who were concerned with the same sociopolitical threat but remained passive. Regarding environmental activism specifically, studies have shown that it may provide a buffer against climate anxiety (Schwartz et al., 2023) and offer a sense of hope even in the presence of despair (Nairn, 2019).

However, other studies highlight the risks of over-reliance on action as a coping strategy (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), noting the potential for burnout, particularly among activists (Conner et al., 2021; Eklöf et al., 2025; Hoggett & Randall, 2018). To mitigate these risks, scholars emphasize the importance of balancing action with other dimensions of coping, referred to as coping flexibility (Mah et al., 2020).

In Pihkala's (2022) second coping dimension, *Grieving and Other Emotional Engagement*, grief is highlighted as it is central when confronting loss and change, but it also encompasses the processing of any emotion arising from the ecological crisis. Various concepts proposed in the literature align with this dimension, including Emotion-Focused Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Emotional Approach Coping (Moreno et al., 2017), and Emotional Reflexivity (Hamilton, 2019, 2022). This dimension involves the intentional use of emotional *processing* – such as allowing and exploring one's emotions – and *expression*, such as writing about or verbally/nonverbally communicating one's emotions to others (Moreno et al., 2017; Pihkala, 2022). Rather than avoiding or suppressing emotions, emotional engagement allows for the transformation or integration of emotions, such as gratitude evolving alongside despair and grief (Hamilton, 2019). When undertaken collectively, this process can provide additional benefits (Eklöf & Klöckner, 2026; Haddaway & Duggan, 2023). The concept of *containment* (Bion, 1961) is relevant here, describing a process in which one person helps another manage overwhelming eco-emotions by mirroring, "holding," and temporarily containing them (Hamilton, 2019). This involves absorbing the emotional intensity and reflecting it back in a more manageable form, which facilitates emotional integration and understanding.

However, scholars have drawn attention to cultural norms that hinder acknowledging and expressing emotions related to climate change, introducing concepts such as 'socially organized denial' where individuals avoid the topic due to its overwhelming and emotionally challenging nature (Hamilton, 2019; Lertzman, 2015; Macy & Brown, 2014; Norgaard, 2011). It has further been suggested that a lack of such emotional engagement may contribute to the adoption of psychological defenses like suppression, disavowal, and denial (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Weintrobe, 2012). Other scholars have discussed societal expectations and social norms of avoiding negative affect and ideologies that

frame positive emotions as more productive states (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021; Eklöf & Klöckner, 2026; Haugestad & Carlquist, 2025). Consequently, the need for spaces that facilitate emotional expression has been emphasized (Eklöf et al., 2025; Hamilton, 2019; Pihkala, 2022).

Nevertheless, Pihkala (2022) cautions that engaging with difficult eco-emotions can also become overwhelming if other dimensions of coping are neglected. Although distancing and avoidance are often viewed as maladaptive responses in environmental behavior literature, from a psychological perspective, some degree of distancing is necessary with uncontrollable, multifaceted, and complex problems such as the climate crisis. Therefore, the third dimension of the process model encompasses self-care and a healthy degree of distancing (Pihkala, 2022). Problems arise when distancing becomes the sole coping strategy. From a societal perspective, it hinders collective efforts to address ecological challenges while psychologically it may create cognitive dissonance and distress when the anxiety inevitably surfaces (Kenworthy et al., 2011; Pihkala, 2022; Weintrobe, 2021). However, for individuals experiencing burnout from excessive engagement (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Conner et al., 2021), prolonged periods of distancing and self-care as primary coping strategies may be necessary.

Overall, this background highlights the importance of accessing multiple coping strategies. Developing awareness of one's own coping dynamics and building skills for more intentional oscillation is suggested to be a crucial task in coping with difficult eco-emotions in the long term. As individuals' adoption of coping strategies, like all behavior, is shaped by social context, it is essential to investigate ways in which social context influences these strategies. In line with this, Pihkala (2022) emphasizes the need for research into how psychosocial factors influence emotional responses, shape coping strategies, and drive the oscillations between them. Accordingly, we applied the process model (2022) within the social context of climate activism to explore how psychosocial factors influenced coping with eco-emotions. Climate activism provides an interesting social context for investigation, as individuals in such groups experience strong eco-emotions (Furlong & Vignoles, 2021; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023; Schwartz et al., 2023). Furthermore, it offers an opportunity to examine how eco-emotions and coping strategies are influenced by moving in and out of this specific social setting which distinctly challenges cultural norms of avoidance.

By using Extinction Rebellion in Sweden as our case, we asked: How do current and former activists perceive psychosocial factors associated with their participation in Extinction Rebellion Sweden to influence their use of, and transitions between, coping strategies, as outlined in Pihkala's (2022) process model of eco-anxiety?

Method

Case

Since its inception in 2018, XR as a movement has rapidly expanded, reaching 79 countries across six continents within three years (Gardner et al., 2022). Although XR employs various tactics, its primary strategy is mass mobilization through nonviolent civil disobedience. This involves large-scale participation in law-breaking activities, such as occupying public spaces and blocking roads, to create disruption and draw attention to the climate crisis (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020). To foster a cohesive internal culture within a decentralized movement and support sustainable engagement, XR has institutionalized practices of emotional reflexivity under the concept of regenerative culture (see Sauerborn, 2022 and Westwell & Bunting, 2020 for an in-depth discussion). These practices help activists express and confront difficult emotions like hopelessness and despair, and through this processing cultivate motivation and hope grounded in shared values (Stuart, 2020).

Recruitment and Participants

After obtaining approval for the study from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services [435803], we employed a combination of purposive and convenience sampling methods. Current activists were recruited from XR Sweden through an advertisement posted in XR's communication channel and by the first author attending a monthly meeting at one of XR's local chapters. To achieve a more balanced representation of gender and age, two young women were purposefully approached during this meeting and invited to participate. For former activists, recruitment relied on snowball sampling from current activists. In total, 28 individuals initially expressed interest, with 26 ultimately participating. Based on previous comparable qualitative studies, we anticipated that this number would provide data with sufficient depth and breadth for a detailed and nuanced analysis, and recruitment was subsequently halted. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information on the final sample. On average, the current activists had been active for 2.5 years ($SD = 1$ year), whereas former activists had been involved for 1.4 years ($SD = 5$ months) before disengaging. The former activists had, on average, been inactive for 2.1 years ($SD = 5$ months). Participants were from three different cities, all were Swedish citizens, and all but one had Swedish as their native language.

Table 1
Demographics

Group	Gender		Age		Occupation			
	Male	Female	Range	Mean	Employed	Student	Retired	Unemployed
Activists	6	7	21–67	44	9	3	1	0
Former activists	7	6	23–56	39	9	3	0	1
Total sample	13	13	21–67	43	18	6	1	1

Interview Procedure

Interviews were carried out either in-person or online during the winter and spring of 2022, with durations ranging from 45 to 80 minutes (mean length: 65 minutes). No compensation was provided. At the start of each interview, informed consent was obtained orally or in writing, adhering to the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2024). The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions that allowed for follow-up inquiries. A narrative approach was used (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016), encouraging participants to share their experiences – including the background and process of joining XR, experiences during engagement, and, for former activists, the process of disengaging¹ – with minimal interruption from the interviewer. No targeted questions about coping were asked, as this was a theoretical framework applied to the data at a later stage. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Analytic Procedure

We employed an inductive-deductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013; Byrne, 2022; Roberts et al., 2019) and by using Pihkala’s process model of eco-anxiety as a guiding theoretical framework (Pihkala, 2022). The deductive approach involved guiding our coding with established theories and frameworks on coping and eco-anxiety, focusing on addressing our research questions. Concurrently, the inductive approach allowed for an exploratory coding process, incorporating codes that diverged from or challenged our theoretical framework. Both descriptive and latent coding were employed: descriptive codes captured participants’ explicit statements, followed by la-

1) Specifically, this part consisted of questions pertaining to the research questions for a previous study (Eklöf et al., 2025), about barriers and facilitators for sustained engagement in climate activism. In that project, an inductive open coding was conducted on the entire dataset. This process highlighted aspects related to coping with eco-emotions that were irrelevant for the original research. Recognizing the potential of these themes to contribute to a concurrent academic discussion on eco-anxiety and coping strategies we proceeded with a second round of analysis, as outlined in this study.

tent, interpretative coding to connect these insights with theory. For example, the statement: ‘I had a really hard time letting go of responsibility; I had a very strong sense of guilt’ were first categorized under the descriptive sub-theme ‘Strong sense of responsibility and guilt,’ before being classified under the interpretative theme of ‘Factors making it difficult to balance action with distance and self-care’. The first author coded all interviews and developed the initial codebook. This codebook, along with the coding of two interview transcripts, was reviewed by the second author. This validation took the form of discussing and refining theme and coding definitions, leading to the division of two codes into four new codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The first author subsequently revisited interview segments where these codes were found to check if the new coding structure fit in with all interviews, which they did (the final codebook is provided in Table A1 in the Appendix). The results of the analysis are presented below, with translated quotes labeled with ‘A’ to denote active activists and ‘F’ for former activists, followed by a unique participant identifier.

Reflexivity

Consistent with the principles of thematic analysis, we acknowledge the importance of researcher reflexivity throughout the qualitative research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). We recognize our positionalities as climate-concerned psychology researchers as central to our data interpretation, rather than viewing themes as passively ‘emerging’ from the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This positionality also informed our research focus; for instance, had we lived in regions more affected by climate disasters, we might have pursued different research questions. The interviewer chose not to actively conceal their support for the participants’ cause during the interviews. While this approach might be viewed as introducing potential bias within more positivist epistemologies, we believe it facilitated rapport and trust, thereby yielding richer data (Vestergren & Drury, 2020).

Results

The results of this study are organized into three themes, which take as their starting point one of the three coping dimensions outlined in the process model (Pihkala, 2022) and expand it by discussing how psychosocial factors and processes influence the use of coping strategies and fluctuations between them. *Theme 1* discusses how collective action groups may facilitate coping through grieving and emotional engagement but also highlight how individuals’ need for that may vary. *Theme 2* discusses the roles of social factors and meaningfulness for collective action to work as a coping strategy. Finally, *Theme 3* discusses how group norms and personality traits interact in coping through distancing and self-care.

Theme 1: Collective Action Groups as Enablers of Emotional Engagement Although Individuals' Coping Needs Vary

Both current and former activists talked about how XR provided a space where it was accepted to express and feel difficult emotions regarding the climate crisis, and how comforting this was due to experiences of lacking such acceptance outside of XR:

"I think that's what was most comforting for me, being with others [...] to be able to grieve with others and make something meaningful out of it." (F5)

"In other situations...there is not the same understanding, or you become the party pooper if you even talk about climate change." (A13)

A3 commented on practices within XR of starting and ending each meeting with a check-in and check-out round, where everyone was encouraged to share a feeling or thought they were currently experiencing. To them, this was a new practice that they appreciated:

"It was okay for grown men to sit and say: 'Today I'm not feeling so well, so I don't want to talk much.' That doesn't really happen anywhere else [...] and I like that structure." (A3)

Moreover, participants described a relief in being part of a social context where others shared their concerns regarding the climate crisis and from having their eco-emotions validated and normalized by others: "It was just so comforting to be around others who share this fundamental perspective, where I don't have to explain everything, and who have taken the information to their hearts and feel the same way as I do" (A13). A4 mentioned how this made them feel less 'crazy': "Being with a group of people who understand how important this is for me makes a huge difference; it prevents me from feeling...crazy".

Although appreciated by many, some former activists also reported a sense of too much focus on emotions within XR: "XR is also very emotion-focused, which isn't always good because people might then spend 15 minutes of a meeting talking about their feelings" (F1). This sentiment was echoed by F6, who emphasized their more instrumental motivations for being engaged in XR:

"For others, XR filled more of a therapeutic role. It's comforting to be around people who think the same way, and that was really important for many. [...] My motivation was a bit more nerdy than most others; I wanted to figure out how social movements can save the planet and contribute to that. I didn't just want to join up with people who also think the climate crisis is awful."

Former activists, who spoke positively about the collective emotional focus in XR, described experiencing a lack of social validation of their eco-emotions after leaving. They spoke about how they, after having left XR, had shifted towards states of avoidance. For example, F5 stated: “It felt like my anxiety was true. And now I’ve kind of returned to the status quo, like everyone else, and I can’t confront the truth as it is.” F11 linked this to no longer receiving social validation for their concerns: “when I was in XR, and there were others around me who kind of affirmed that it was reasonable to care and be worried. Now it’s more like I’ve cut off how I feel.”

Overall, participants’ accounts of the relief in entering a social context that allowed for grieving and experiencing difficult emotions and the fact that this was new to many illustrate how social context may enable individuals’ access to new coping responses. The need for such spaces is further highlighted by former activists’ experiences of feeling ‘cut-off’ from their eco-emotions after leaving XR. However, the variation among participants in the perceived need for collective emotional engagement highlights how preferences for coping strategies can differ between people. This may be important to keep in mind in collaborative groups as resistance can arise when it is perceived as irrelevant for instrumental goals. Indeed, in this sample, disagreements regarding what should be prioritized and doubts about the efficacy of XR were reported as reasons for leaving XR (among burnout and social friction, further discussed in Eklöf et al. (2025).

Beyond collective grieving and emotional engagement, taking action was also discussed as a coping mechanism, a theme explored in the next section.

Theme 2: Collective Action as a Coping Strategy When Perceived as Meaningful and Cohesive

Participants highlighted several ways in which taking action served as a coping mechanism. For some it reduced their anxiety (“My anxiety was a driving force for me to join, and then it faded over time. Being engaged helped a lot” – F5), reduced feelings of guilt (“You can look at yourself in the mirror now. It feels like I’ve seen something I can’t ignore” – A3) and provided a sense of meaning (“Looking back, I think about how great things were during that time. I’ve never felt such a strong sense of meaning, for anything, ever” – F11). Participants described various ways in which acting in a group, rather than individually, offered additional coping benefits:

“It makes me feel a bit better knowing that I’m trying to do something together with others, not just recycling at home and trying to do everything perfectly, but that there are others who care and are engaged; we have a community.” (A2)

Acting with others and thereby gaining a sense of belonging and community provided positive buffers against concurrent eco-anxiety: “My engagement has been quite anxiety driven. But...like, the hope, community, and sense of belonging have also been significant

positive consequences of my engagement.” (F7) For many, the community added to the sense of meaningfulness, as expressed by A7: “Fighting for what you’ve decided is the most important cause...together with others, it feels so much more...tangibly meaningful, you know”.

However, former activists’ perspectives on XR and their reasons for leaving provide insights into when action in the form of activism may fail as a coping mechanism. Firstly, a number of activists left due to exhaustion, which is discussed further in Theme 3. Secondly, some former activists described how their involvement in XR felt increasingly demotivating and less meaningful as they began to face internal conflicts. F12 stated that: “There were conflicts, and eventually, I lost motivation and trust in the entire project,” which was echoed by F13: “People started to disagree about stuff more and more, and because of that, it became less fun and lost its importance for me.” F7 connected loss of motivation to losing access to their social context due to the corona-pandemic:

“Then the corona pandemic hit and my working group quit having meetings. I felt a bit of hopelessness, like this: ‘Well, it’s great that people have the energy to keep going, but it’s totally pointless.’ So, I lost my motivation quite a bit and my faith in civil disobedience as an effective strategy.” (F7)

Talking about the pandemic, F8 similarly expressed that: “Just seeing other people faces on the screen and not having access to the group any longer, it didn’t feel meaningful at all”.

Overall, this theme illustrates how social dynamics within activism - either feeling a sense of community or experiencing conflict — affected the coping potential of collective action. XR provided a means to cope through activism, reducing anxiety and guilt while offering community and meaning. When social friction occurred, or when individuals lost access to their working group, activism in XR felt less effective and meaningful, triggering some to disengage and transition away from action-focused coping in the form of activism. The findings suggest that perceiving engagement as meaningful, either socially or instrumentally, may be important for collective action to serve as a coping strategy.

Theme 3: Coping Through Distancing and Self-Care: Interactions Between Group Norms and Personality Traits

Although XR is an activist group focused on taking action for the climate crisis, participants spoke about a culture within XR that also promoted expressing one’s need for a break and a high acceptance for coming and going:

“At all our meetings, we have standard reminders like, ‘Be careful not to take on too much. Let others know if you’re overwhelmed.”

Talk to others.’ And sometimes I feel like, ‘Yeah, yeah, I already know this,’ but I think it makes a difference to be constantly reminded of it.” (A6)

Despite the reminders and awareness of the pressures of activism, some former activists left precisely because of burnout and a need of more distancing and self-care. F8 stated that: “I was very active in XR to the point that I nearly burned myself out. [...] I had to prioritize my own health and recovery, and therefore I had to leave”. This individual, like others who dropped out due to burnout, had transitioned into a phase of primarily distancing and self-care. Some of these stated that this would hopefully not last forever, and that they wanted to get back into activism as they felt more energized again. Dropouts also discussed eco-emotions and aspects of personality that made it difficult to achieve balance between activism and self-care. F4 mentioned traits of having a strong sense of duty and responsibility: “I’ve probably struggled a lot with this sense of duty [...] I feel like I want to do so much, and I have quite a strong sense of responsibility”. This was echoed by F8, adding feelings of guilt: “I had a really hard time letting go of responsibility; I had a very strong sense of guilt [...] Yeah, it was almost a bit of a martyr complex, I think”. F6 and F9 both discussed perfectionistic traits and ‘all or nothing’-personalities. F9 expressed: “I’m a bit of a perfectionist [...] I have a bad habit of being a little all over the place; as a person, I’m like: What’s happening over there? I want to be involved in everything.” F6 stated: “I really immersed myself in the climate movement, as a full-time commitment [...] I’m not very good at doing things part-time; I tend to go all-in on one thing. So let’s see, I’ll try to engage in climate activism part-time, but we’ll see how that goes”.

In summary, our analysis suggests that social norms within XR encouraged participants to recognize the importance of taking breaks and distancing themselves, thus facilitating a balance between action and healthy self-care. However, these norms were insufficient to counterbalance strong eco-emotions of guilt and responsibility, as well as certain personality traits, which contributed to an overemphasis on action. Over time, this paved the way for exhaustion and ultimately forced participants to abandon this type of coping strategy - at least temporarily.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how current and former activists perceive psychosocial factors associated with their participation in Extinction Rebellion Sweden to influence their use of, and transitions between, the three coping dimensions — *Action*, *Grieving and Other Emotional Engagement*, and *Distancing and Self-care* — outlined in Pihkala’s (2022) process model of eco-anxiety.

In the first theme, we illustrate that participation in XR facilitated coping through *Grieving and Emotional Engagement* as it offered a social context that allowed for the expression of difficult eco-emotions. Participants found this experience to be novel, aligning with previous research highlighting social resistance to acknowledging and expressing emotions related to climate change (Eklöf & Klöckner, 2026; Hamilton, 2019; Lertzman, 2015; Macy & Brown, 2014) and social norms that encourage avoiding such emotions (Haugestad & Carlquist, 2025; Norgaard, 2011). This was also illustrated by former activists' statements about experiencing a lack of validation for the legitimacy of their eco-emotions after leaving XR, resulting in them feeling 'cut off' and unable to 'confront the truth as it is'. These results suggest that with existential issues like climate change, and without access to a space with collective holding of these emotions, people risk transition into states of psychological defences of suppressing and avoiding, and the coping dimension of distancing (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Hamilton, 2019; Weintrobe, 2012). Therefore, we argue, that social contexts that allow for grief and emotional expression, where emotions are mirrored and contained by others, can be crucial in addressing eco-anxiety (Bion, 1961; Haddaway & Duggan, 2023; Pihkala, 2022). We show how the climate activist group XR provided such a space. These findings contribute to coping theory literature, which has historically been more individual-focused (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Helgeson et al., 2018).

However, it is important to recognize the variation in individual preferences and needs for coping through emotional engagement. Participants in a group may exhibit varying levels of comfort with exploring, sharing and witnessing the emotions of oneself and others (Eklöf & Klöckner, 2026; Hamilton, 2019), depending on personality, previous experience, dynamics in the group and the extent to which they have already processed their eco-emotions (Büchs et al., 2015; Pihkala, 2022). There may also be resistance to certain practices if they are perceived as irrelevant to action-oriented goals (Hamilton, 2019; Westwell & Bunting, 2020). Social tensions can arise when one person feels energized by action-oriented coping, another needs a break and distance, and a third seeks collective grieving. These differing needs can lead to frustration within groups. Therefore, it is valuable for individuals to be aware of their current coping strategies, recognize other strategies, and understand that others may be using different approaches. Acknowledging this diversity in coping needs is essential in collaborative groups.

In the second theme our findings confirm positive effects of activism on eco-emotions, aligning with previous research (Nairn, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2023; Vestergren et al., 2018, 2019). The findings further suggest that for action to function as coping, it must be perceived as meaningful and demonstrates the significant influence of social factors on this process. In Pihkala's (2022) process model, meaning-focused coping is not identified as a separate coping dimension but is emphasized as an integral component of all three coping dimensions. Ojala (2012) defines meaning-focused coping as, among other aspects, the ability to activate positive emotions, hope, and trust to maintain

well-being in the face of adversity that cannot be immediately resolved. Participants in this study talked about how their feelings of community within XR fostered positive emotions and sense of meaning. Conversely, the absence of community – or presence of conflict – diminished their sense of motivation, efficacy and meaning, prompting them to shift from activism as a coping strategy. Given that both perceptions of efficacy and social dynamics can fluctuate over time and contexts, individual coping may benefit from having access to multiple actions that feel personally meaningful (Mah et al., 2020). It is important to note, however, that meaning can also be derived from activism through a moral commitment of upholding and expressing values (Eklöf et al., 2025), which mirrors another aspect of meaning-focused coping (Ojala, 2012; 2013).

Overall, the findings of the second theme contribute to the so far limited number of studies exploring instances where action fails as a coping strategy, with previous studies primarily focusing on when activism becomes excessive and results in burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Hoggett & Randall, 2018). Future studies could explore how to harness the positive influence of community on sense of meaning and extend it beyond activism. Which behaviors in the green transition can be designed as collective activities? What additional methods can enhance individuals' sense of meaningfulness in various behaviors, thereby ensuring their access to action as a coping strategy? For organizers, research on how to minimize social friction within groups is also important.

In the third theme, we demonstrated how organizational practices and social norms within XR, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a healthy distance and practicing self-care, supported activists in balancing action and self-care. These practices align with the normative idea in Pihkala's (2022) model underscoring the necessity of balancing multiple coping strategies. XR's collective approach to achieving a balance between coping strategies in dealing with eco-emotion, is significant, as it shifts the focus from individual to shared responsibility of achieving this balance (Sauerborn, 2022). Exhaustion is a prevalent issue across various forms of environmental engagement and should be understood not only as an individual but a collective problem, with shared stressors and eco-emotions such as despair, fear, guilt and responsibility (Bird et al., 2024; Furlong & Vignoles, 2021; Lorenzini & Rosset, 2023). By addressing these challenges collectively, XR offers an alternative to individualistic coping paradigms and cultural ideals portraying individuals as autonomous, self-regulating agents solely responsible for managing their emotions (Adams et al., 2019). However, our findings highlight that the effectiveness of this approach is not uniform across individuals. Personality traits and intense feelings of guilt and responsibility can make it difficult for some activists to balance collective action with personal self-care, ultimately leading to burnout. By illustrating the interaction between social norms and individual factors, our findings extend previous research on activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015). Future research could delve deeper into social-psychological factors that hinder the balance between action and self-care, such as group conformity pressures or inadequate organizational support.

Limitations and Future Research

As an explorative qualitative study with a limited number of participants from a specific activist group, the generalizability of the present results is limited. The sample was drawn from a WEIRD population (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic), and compared to countries like Germany, France and UK (Marandi, 2024) climate activists in Sweden have faced relatively mild legal consequences for civil disobedience. It has also so far been less affected by climate-related natural disasters. These factors may interact with individuals' coping needs and influence their decision to engage in action-focused coping in the form of activism and may therefore limit transferability to differing contexts. More research is needed in settings where people face more immediate climate impacts or intersecting injustices, with previous research indicating that eco-emotions and barriers to collective action may differ significantly (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Ogunbode et al., 2022). However, given the limited literature on coping with eco-emotions, this study aimed to provide exploratory data that may inform future investigations. This could include in-depth qualitative studies delving deeper into specific processes, and quantitative research with larger, more diverse samples to validate these findings in different contexts. Another limitation of the study is the potential for self-selection bias and a potential overrepresentation of individuals who felt particularly emotionally invested in their activism or disengagement process.

Conclusion

Overall, this study illustrates the interplay between social contexts, individual factors, and coping strategies in navigating difficult eco-emotions. We found that activism within XR not only offered coping through *Action* but also provided a social context that supported the use of the other coping strategies *emotional engagement*, *self-care* and necessary amounts of *distancing*. These findings are likely influenced by specific organizational practices within XR – such as meeting check-ins and active reminders that encourage sustainable engagement – which limits the transferability to other climate action groups that do not have these practices. Nevertheless, this paper contributes to the discussion on coping by illustrating that coping does not need to be an individual responsibility centered on self-regulating difficult eco-emotions but can be supported collectively. For individuals experiencing difficult eco-emotions and practitioners working in this area, these results are relevant as they highlight several ways in which collective engagement can support adaptive coping with eco-anxiety. However, individual factors, such as personality traits, needs and preferences for different coping strategies, also interacted with social context. These findings have implications for organizers and collaborative groups, raising the question of how best to support and balance diverse coping strategies and individual needs. While no straightforward answer exists, acknowledging the complexity of these dynamics is an essential first step. Aligning with what Pihkala (2022) argues, fos-

tering awareness of different coping strategies and the capacity to consciously oscillate between them is critical.

Asking participants about past experiences comes with risks for post hoc constructions and rationalizations. However, this methodology offers initial ideas that could be further explored in longitudinal studies. Our analysis has focused on the individual, the group, and their interactions. Future research could examine factors at the societal and cultural levels, as well as the influence of the current political climate.

Openness and Transparency Statements

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Diversity Statement. In the list below, the check mark (☑) indicates which steps were taken to increase diversity within the context of this paper. Steps that were not taken or did not apply are unmarked (☐).

- ☐ Ethnically or otherwise diverse sample(s)
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- ☒ Discussion of generalizability
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Supplementary Materials. The following table provides an overview of the accessibility of supplementary materials (if any) for this paper.

Type of supplementary material	Availability/Access
Data	
No data provided	—
Code	
No code available	—
Material	
No material provided	—
Study/Analysis preregistration	
No preregistration	—
Other	
Codebook	Available in Appendix.

Badges for Good Research Practices.

Open data: NO.

Open code: NO.

Open materials: NO.

Preregistration: NO.

Diversity statement: YES.

Note: YES = the present article meets the criteria for awarding the badge. NO = the present article does not meet the criteria for awarding the badge or the criteria are not applicable.

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Appendix

Codebook

Table A1
Codebook with Themes, Sub-Themes, Codes, And Example Quotes

Theme & Sub-themes	Code	Example quotes
Theme 1: Collective Action Groups as Enablers of Emotional Engagement Although Individuals' Coping Needs Vary		
XR providing a space where it was accepted to express and feel difficult eco-emotions, and experiences of lacking such validation outside of XR.	Comforting to process grief with others.	"I think that's what was most comforting for me, being with others [...] to be able to grieve with others and make something meaningful out of it." (E5)
	Comforting to have climate concerns validated within XR.	"It was just so comforting to be around others who share this fundamental perspective, where I don't have to explain everything, and who have taken the information to their heart and feel the same way as I do" (A13)
	Comforting to have all emotions accepted in XR.	"You don't really have to explain. (...) There's always been space to feel bad, to not have the energy, to not be super positive, to just be as you are. It's a huge comfort to be accepted for who you are in that moment. That's how it should be everywhere, but it's not." (E7)
	Staying sane due to normalization of climate concern within XR.	"Being with a group of people who understand how important this is for me makes a huge difference; it prevents me from feeling...crazy." (A4)
	Not having one's climate concerns validated outside of XR.	"In other situations...there is not the same understanding or you become the party pooper if you even talk about climate change." (A13)
	Lack of sharing and collective emotional engagement outside of XR.	"It was okay for grown men to sit and say: 'Today I'm not feeling so well, so I don't want to talk much.' That doesn't really happen anywhere else, that you check in and check out, and I like that structure. It wasn't at all what I expected when I joined XR." (A3)
	Too much focus on expressing emotions in XR.	"I felt like XR was more about: 'Let's just gather people and express our opinions together! And express our emotions!'" (E4)
	Talking about emotions take up too much time.	"XR is also very emotion-focused, which isn't always good because people might then spend 15 minutes of a meeting talking about their feelings." (E1)
	Having primarily instrumental motivations for their engagement.	"For others, XR filled more of a therapeutic role. It's comforting to be around people who think the same way, and that was really important for many. [...] My motivation was a bit more nerdy than most others; I wanted to figure out how social movements can save the planet and contribute to that. I didn't just want to join up with people who also think the climate crisis is awful." (E6)
	Less in contact with eco-emotions after leaving XR.	"My friends and family outside of XR, they know but maybe not as much...we don't talk about it anyways, so I feel a bit more disconnected now; I try not to feel or think about it too much." (E3)
After drop-out, experiencing shift towards states of avoidance and a lack of social validation of eco-emotions.	Not being able to confront 'the truth' and one's anxiety.	"It felt like my anxiety was true. And now I've kind of returned to the status quo, like everyone else, and I can't confront the truth as it is." (E5)
	Experiencing a distance towards one's eco-emotions.	"When I was in XR, and there were others around me who kind of affirmed that it was reasonable to care and be worried... Now it's more like I've cut off how I feel." (E11)

Theme & Sub-themes	Code	Example quotes
Theme 2: Collective Action as a Coping Strategy When Perceived as Meaningful and Cohesive		
Ways in which engaging in activism worked as a coping strategy.	Reduced anxiety. Reduced feelings of guilt. Provided a sense of meaning.	"My anxiety was a driving force, it helped me to be engaged, quite a lot I would say. Then in faded over time." (E5) "You can look at yourself in the mirror now. It feels like I've seen something I can't ignore." (A3) "Looking back, I think about how great things were during that time. I've never felt such a strong sense of meaning, for anything, ever." (E11)
Sense of meaning, community and belonging from acting together.	Sense of community and belonging as positive consequences of acting in XR. Sense of meaningfulness from engaging together. Feel better doing things together and being in a community.	"My engagement has been quite anxiety-driven. But...like, the hope, community, and sense of belonging have also been significant positive consequences of my engagement." (E7) "Fighting for what you've decided is the most important cause...together with others, it feels so much more...tangibly meaningful, you know." (A7) "It makes me feel a bit better knowing that I'm trying to do something together with others, not just recycling at home and trying to do everything perfectly, but that there are others who care and are engaged; we have a community." (A2)
Diminished motivation and meaning due to internal conflicts, disagreements or losing contact with working group.	Motivation undermined by conflicts. Activism feeling less important due to conflicts. Loss of meaning due to lack of in-person interaction. Demotivation and doubt due to lack of in-person interaction.	"There were conflicts, and eventually, I lost motivation and trust in the entire project." (E12) "People started to disagree about stuff more and more, and because of that, it became less and less fun and lost its importance for me." (E13) "Just seeing other people faces on the screen and not having access to the group any longer, it didn't feel meaningful at all." (E8) "Then the corona pandemic hit and my working group quit having meetings. I felt a bit of hopelessness like this: 'Well, it's great that people have the energy to keep going, but it's totally pointless.' So, I lost my motivation quite a bit and my faith in civil disobedience as an effective strategy." (E7)
Former activists talking about doubting the effectiveness of this particular type of action.	Doubts about the efficacy of XR's strategy making activism feel pointless. Taking action in other ways feeling more meaningful.	"Stopping cars in the streets doesn't lead to structural change! In Sweden, I didn't feel that the actions were well-timed. It would be better if they were connected to a specific political decision, activism like this is pointless." (E1) "I think activism is best when it's focused on specific issues, which I felt XR wasn't. For me, it felt more meaningful to redirect my engagement to politics instead." (E4)

Theme & Sub-themes	Code	Example quotes
Theme 3: Coping Through Distancing and Self-Care: Interactions Between Group Norms and Personality Traits		
Social norms and practices within XR promoting distancing and self-care.	Standard reminders during meeting to not take on too much. High awareness of burnout. High awareness and understanding of need for breaks. Common to express that you need a break.	"At all our meetings, we have standard reminders like, 'Be careful not to take on too much. Let others know if you're overwhelmed. Talk to others.' And sometimes I feel like, 'Yeah, yeah, I already know this,' but I think it makes a difference to be constantly reminded of it. [...] It's such a relief when you finally share with the group, 'I can't handle this right now,' and they don't blame you." (A6) "Everyone talks about burnout, that one must be careful." (A1) "So I really appreciate that in XR, there's this awareness. [...] It's such a relief when you finally share with the group, 'I can't handle this right now,' and they don't blame you." (A6) "There's definitely a lot of understanding for when someone says, 'I can't do this anymore,' and that's very common." (A9)
Former activists leaving due to exhaustion.	High level of engagement in XR leading to exhaustion. Engaging too much in information about the climate crisis.	"I was very active in XR to the point that I nearly burned myself out. [...] I had to prioritize my own health and recovery, and therefore I had to leave." (E8) "I was so involved in everything related to climate, environment, alternative societal systems: I read so much about it. It was super fun, but then I became tired of it. Now I can't really take it in anymore." (E2)
Strong eco-emotions and personality traits hindering self-care and driving exhaustion.	Feelings of guilt. Sense of responsibility and duty. 'All or nothing' personality. Perfectionistic traits.	"I had a really hard time letting go of responsibility; I had a very strong sense of guilt [...] Yeah, it was almost a bit of a martyr complex, I think." (E8) "I've probably struggled a lot with this sense of duty [...] I feel like I want to do so much, and I have quite a strong sense of responsibility." (E4) "I really immersed myself in the climate movement, as a full-time commitment [...] I'm not very good at doing things part-time; I tend to go all-in on one thing. So let's see, I'll try to engage in climate activism part-time, but we'll see how that goes." (E6) "I'm a bit of a perfectionist. [...] I have a bad habit of being a little all over the place; as a person, I'm like: What's happening over there? I want to be involved in everything. [...] And the people who've stayed in XR probably have better recovery strategies. I have very poor strategies for that." (E9)