



Hosting Community Conversations

Building Connection and Inspiring Collective Action



Most people do not have a place to express their emotions or experiences. Because of that, issues are not discussed, and people feel isolated. We do not know who our neighbors are - we are disconnected, especially due to the lack of in-person gatherings, which contributes to loneliness and fragmentation.

This isolation makes it difficult for large-scale change to occur, which requires a cultural shift. Culture can only change when enough people recognize the need for change and how to achieve it, and that can happen when we organize and discuss an idea, align with our values, and acknowledge behaviors that need to change.

Why is this important?

People sometimes think of place as an abstract concept, but we need to connect to a place in a way that resonates with us personally. Our physical and emotional connection to place, including the land, water, and people in that place, forms the foundation for everything else. We need to create spaces where people can come together, discuss, and understand shared values, because when we connect with each other and the climate we are in, we are more likely to take action and address what needs to happen. When we have these mycelium networks of people, where individuals feel recognized and listened to, we start changing the culture.

What change are we seeking?

We aim to facilitate large-scale cultural change by organizing community conversations and strengthening the networks of relationships within a community. The change we seek begins with individuals developing the skills to listen, appreciate their neighbors, and identify shared values. These conversations help build coordination and collective action across a network of community members. Our community conversations can target the broader definition of climate — the different “climates” people experience in a day or a week, from our internal, family, local, and political climates. These community conversations do not have to be big public displays; even small, quiet conversations can make a powerful, positive impact.



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Climate Emotions Wheel



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Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed for individuals and groups interested in or open to facilitating community conversations. It is intended for potential facilitators who want more structure, simple tools, and methods to guide these conversations, especially if they possess the social skills and are passionate about building community but are unsure where to start or have not done so yet. Facilitators can also use this toolkit to demonstrate to funders why this approach is important and what it looks like in practice.

What to expect from it?

- This toolkit aims to give you the courage and confidence you need because we understand that hosting can feel daunting.
- It will guide you through organizing and hosting community conversations that build connection, collaboration, and collective action.
- You will find a basic framework and methods to help make these conversations feel welcoming and meaningful.
- These conversations can be with anyone, family around the dinner table, your co-workers, parents of school kids, members of your neighborhood, or however you seek community. There’s no “right” number of people for hosting them, so you can start with even two.

Community Conversations in Greater Erie Niagara

Jennifer Fendya is a climate-aware clinical psychologist who has been hosting climate cafes and facilitator training through the Climate Psychology Alliance, primarily online. Anna Castonguay is a behavioral scientist interested in how to shift culture to one that is more communal and ecological. While they come from different backgrounds, they both recognized the power of holding space for people to come together, build trust, and attune to place.

Jennifer was eager to host Climate Cafes in person, and Anna wanted to focus on community building that helps to better understand people's perspectives of their place and the larger systems they are part of. They have been holding community conversations with various groups at different sites in the Greater Erie Niagara. Jennifer and Anna recognized that while they could host conversations, in order to make significant change, many people need to host many conversations. Their goal is to inspire others to facilitate conversations with their friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, community groups.



If you would like to learn about the community conversations in Greater Erie Niagara, visit [PAGEN](#).

Here are some conversations this duo has held so far:

Place: Big Big Table (Community Cafe)

- Prompts:
 - Each participant chose a natural item from a basket.
 - Introductions included why they chose the item, why they came to the Community Conversation, and their experience with the climate (the climate being very broad - including the social, political, and environment, but also the local climate).
 - The second round was popcorn and based on what was shared in the introductions - participants were able to then go deeper into talking points that interest them.
- Discussion included activists sharing their work and frustrations, people feeling overwhelmed yet comforted by the fact that others are out there making the world a better place, young people were concerned for their future, and several expressed it was nice to speak openly about their concerns.
- Social justice and the environment were often talked about together.



Community Conversations in Greater Erie Niagara

Place: Anderson Art Gallery

- Prompts:
 - Participants took a tour around an art exhibit by a Buffalo-born artist who uses plastic, chemical, and food waste as material for her artwork to highlight the impacts of consumption and pollution. Participants were asked to share what piece of art resonated with them for their introduction.
 - Introduction prompts included the piece of art that spoke to them, why they are here, a little about themselves, and their experience with the climate (social, political, environmental).
 - The second round was popcorn and based on what was shared in the introductions, participants were able to then go deeper into talking points that interest them.



- Participants included social worker students, artists, park conservationists, sustainability professionals, and environmental enthusiasts who spoke about the balance between living simply and sustainably and the imbalance of equity that allows people to do that.
- Participants made initial statements about feeling overwhelmed but left feeling lighter, more motivated to keep going in their fight and work.

Place: Allegany Nature Pilgrimage

- Prompts:
 - This was on the second day of the Nature Pilgrimage, a 3-day nature conference in Allegany State Park in New York with guided walks, workshops, and speakers.
 - Introduce yourself, why you came to the pilgrimage, and one thing that you have heard or seen since you've been here that sticks with you and how that relates to the larger metacrisis.
 - The second round was popcorn and based on what was shared in the introductions, focus on feelings and emotions that come up.
- Discussion included fears about the future, especially grandchildren for older participants and potential children for younger participants.
- Concerns about federal budget cuts impacting future careers or our ability to care for vulnerable citizens, and the increasing polarization of political speech silencing these concerns were expressed, but that work often starts underground and things need to change.

Place: University of Buffalo Sustainability Department

- Prompts:
 - This was with undergraduate and graduate students at UB, most of them in the Environmental Science department.
 - Introduce yourself, why you're here, and what sustainability means to you in this moment.
 - The second round was popcorn and based on what was shared in the introductions - participants were able to then go deeper into talking points that interest them. Unfortunately a lot of the students had to leave so it was a smaller group for the second round.
- Students and professors came together and shared despair and pessimism about the future but also who or what inspires them (i.e. makes their work emotionally sustainable).
- Professors learned more about what motivates students personally.
- Students from different backgrounds shared things they have noticed changing in their region of the world.
- There is concern about the likelihood of certain careers and how to move forward in the current climate.

Step 1: Identify the people you want to bring together

- Consider who you want to connect with and listen to in your community. This could be your neighbors, colleagues, friends, or people in your community whose perspectives are usually unseen or largely unrecognized.
- These conversations are meant to be small (ideally under 15 people) to enable deep and vulnerable exchanges, but there is no minimum number; you can start with two!

Britt Wray – Generation Dread – “Internal Activism”



Step 2: Choose a quiet, welcoming space

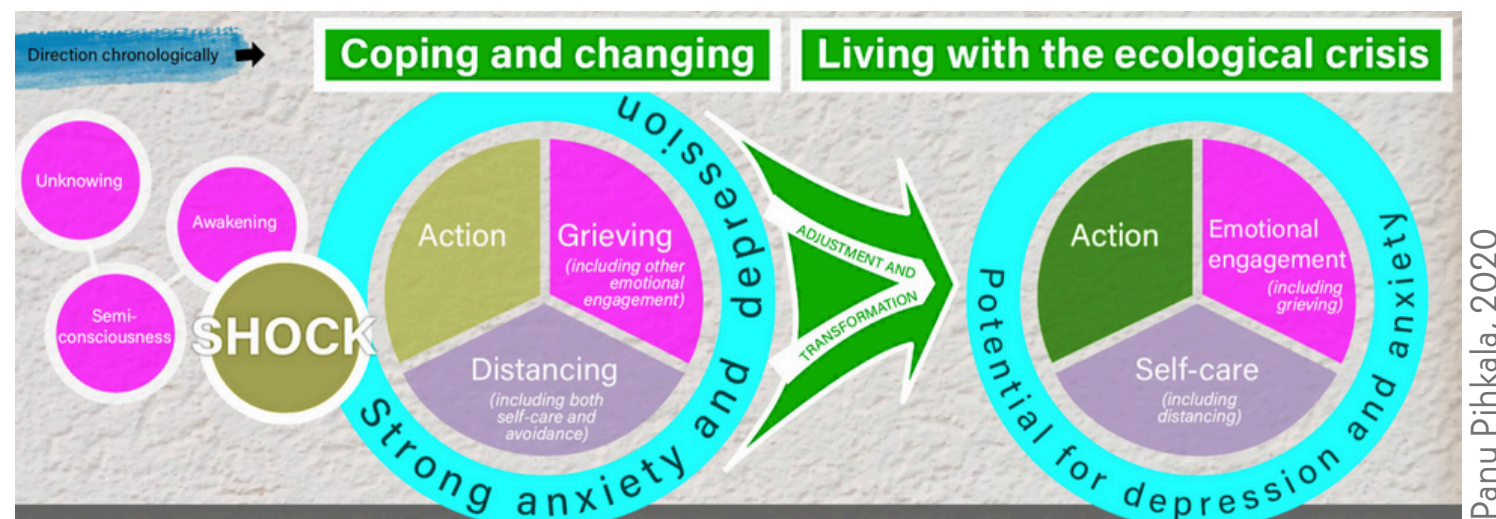
- Select a space where people feel comfortable and at ease, a corner cafe, a community center, a gallery, a park, a church, or even your own living room, somewhere quiet and with not too many distractions.
- Consider adding light refreshments or a potluck-style meal if appropriate, honoring the generosity of a community host.



Step 3: Loosely define your topic

- Block at least 90 minutes for your conversation for an ideal group of 8 to 12 people so that everyone gets the space to contribute to the conversation.
- Design your discussion to enable gradually deepening exchanges following a past, present, and future structure:
 - **Past:** Formulate an introductory question that invites people to share their stories and connect their experiences to the larger context. For instance:
 - What drew you here today?
 - What has been your experience with the climate (environment, social, political, internal, etc.), and how have you been feeling about it?
 - You can decide on a talk piece, e.g., something from nature or their surroundings that they can connect with the larger meta-crisis.

- **Present:** After the first round of introductions, move into popcorn-round exchanges, allowing participants to respond to what resonates with them. The goal is for people to relate to each other and connect about shared feelings. Consider keeping a few guidelines for this round:
 - No cross-talk and make sure everyone has space to speak and no one is taking too much space.
 - Encourage people to reflect honestly (if they are comfortable)- this is a safe place for expression.
- **Future:** Decide on how long you want the conversation to continue and have a wrap-up question.
 - What might you do next regarding what we have talked about today?
 - Who would you invite to your community conversation?



Case Study Insight

Participants chose a natural object, a piece of art, or a moment from their day to aid their introductions- this helped create a feeling of shared vulnerability and creativity.

Step 4: Capture, connect, and follow up

- Prepare a debriefing guideline.
- Take photos and write down phrases or stories from the conversation. Get permission ahead of time and make sure the group feels safe with whatever you decide to do.
- Collect participants' emails or phone numbers (a sign-in sheet). Consider adding them to a community email list or social media group for sharing resources and ongoing connection.
- For next conversations, create a map of participating groups within your community and host conversations linking groups together in the same geographic location.

Step 5: Support and fund future conversations

- Most community conversations are low-cost, mostly self-funded or supported by the generosity of a host or by small donations.
- Consider asking for small contributions from participants to pay forward the cost of food for future conversations.
- Reach out to community foundations for stipends for people hosting community conversations and training more people to have such conversations.
- Consider adding a data collection component to track representation and reach, especially to access groups that are usually not represented.

Resources

- Climate Cafe model that inspired community conversations: Climate Psychology Alliance (Climate Cafe):
 - [Climate Café — Climate Psychology Alliance North America](#)
- Prosocial World: [ProSocial World | Consciously evolve a world that works for all](#)
- Healing Circles: [Home - Healing Circles Global](#)
- Transformational Resilience Hubs: [International Transformational Resilience Coalition – Building Human Resilience for Climate Change](#)
- Bob Doppelt's work "[Transformational Resilience](#)"- it's about bridging and linking, building resilience hubs, linking functions of different organizations to form a core.

If you're interested in contributing to the evolving model and bringing some of these ideas to your community, we provide consulting services to organizations to bring their regenerative vision of a community to life.

Get in touch with us at lamia@inserviceofearth.org