



Psychology for a Better World



Working with people to save the planet



Niki Harré



‘Harré manages to navigate the complexities of moral psychology with admirable ease and insightful purpose – balancing the objective of scientifically informed political advocacy with her own struggles to be the change she wants to see in the world. This book should inspire.’ – Thomas Suddendorf, author of The Gap: The Science of What Separates Us from Other Animals

Can you save the planet and have some fun along the way? Aimed at the teacher who updates students on the latest climate change negotiations, the conservationist who works to protect endangered species, the office manager who buys fair-trade coffee or the city councillor who lobbies for cycle lanes, this book is a guide for everyone who is trying to create a more sustainable planet.

Psychology for a Better World explains how we can get others to join us. Based on the latest psychological research, Niki Harré shows which strategies work (drawing on positive emotions, role modelling and social identity), which don’t, and why. The book ends with a self-help guide for sustainability advocates that outlines how we can work for change at the personal, group and civic level.

‘This book is a great introduction to the psychological literature on motivation and change for newcomers to advocacy. It could be an excellent tool for new organizers, as well as for teachers, university professors, or anyone who works to develop new leaders in environmental advocacy’ – Allison Eady and Manuel Riemer, Community Practitioner

Niki Harré is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Auckland. She is the author of highly-cited articles on social and environmental activism, editor, with Quentin Atkinson, of the book *Carbon Neutral by 2020: How New Zealanders Can Tackle Climate Change* and author of *The Infinite Game: How to Live Well Together* (Auckland University Press, 2018).

Chapter One

Positive Emotions and Flow: Encouraging Creativity and Commitment

Positive experiences are an important way to inspire and motivate people, as they attract us towards the activity or message being promoted. Think about it: if an issue, person or event makes you feel good, you want more. People are happiness seekers – we are attracted to that which induces positive feelings like moths to a flame. Furthermore, positive moods bring out important personal qualities that are essential to social progress. This chapter is about how positive emotions and ‘flow’ states – states in which people feel particularly alive and engaged – can contribute to building sustainability.

The secret of positive emotions

Beginning this chapter are two very different passages, both of which are designed to persuade a reader that our current way of life needs to change. I’ve included these to give you a feel for the emotional effects of positive and negative communications. To get the most out of the passages, read them slowly, and as you read, reflect on how you feel. Next, think about or list the actions you wish to take, given your emotional response to the material. Read and reflect on the first passage and the actions it inspires before moving on to the second one.

Passage One

'The Earth is about to catch a morbid fever that may last as long as 100,000 years' – James Lovelock (2006)⁸

Imagine a young policewoman delighted in the fulfilment of her vocation; then imagine her having to tell a family whose child had strayed that he had been found dead, murdered in a nearby wood. Or think of a young physician newly appointed who has to tell you that the biopsy revealed invasion by an aggressive metastasising tumour . . . Gaia has made me a planetary physician and I take my profession seriously, and now I, too, have to bring bad news.

The climate centres around the world, which are the equivalent of the pathology lab of a hospital, have reported the Earth's physical condition, and the climate specialists see it as seriously ill, and soon to pass into a morbid fever that may last as long as 100,000 years. I have to tell you, as members of the Earth's family and an intimate part of it, that you and especially civilisation are in grave danger . . . as the century progresses, the temperature will rise 8 degrees centigrade in temperate regions and 5 degrees in the tropics . . . We are in a fool's climate, accidentally kept cool by smoke, and before this century is over billions of us will die and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable.

By failing to see that the Earth regulates its climate and composition, we have blundered into trying to do it ourselves, acting as if we were in charge. By doing this, we condemn ourselves to the worst form of slavery. If we chose to be the stewards of the Earth, then we are responsible for keeping the atmosphere, the ocean and the land surface right for life. A task we would soon find impossible – and something before we treated Gaia so badly, she had freely done for us.

So what should we do? First, we have to keep in mind the awesome pace of change and realise how little time is left to act; and then each community and nation must find the best use of the resources they have to sustain civilisation for as long as they can. Civilisation is energy-intensive and we cannot turn it off without crashing, so we need the security of a powered descent . . .

We could grow enough to feed ourselves on the diet of the Second World War, but the notion that there is land to spare to grow biofuels, or be the site of wind farms, is ludicrous. We will do our best to survive, but sadly I cannot see the United States or the emerging economies of China and India cutting back in time, and they are the main source of emissions. The worst will happen and survivors will have to adapt to a hell of a climate.

Passage Two

'Urban New Zealand in 2020 – An organic society' – Holger Kahl (2007)⁹

You are pedalling back from work with the other seven passengers sharing the solar-assisted Octocycle. You are cruising at a leisurely 60 km/h assisted by a light tail wind. You admire the fresh green, and the ripe and luscious fruit on the trees that line the traffic lanes; the birds giving a free concert to your delight.

Cycle vehicles are everywhere, with passengers and by-passers waving and greeting you. You see people cruising around having a free and healthy snack from the trees.

'It's good,' you think, 'that we don't have to worry about pollution when we bite into a fresh fruit offered by someone on the traffic lane side path.' Land transport has been completely exhaust-free for the last six years. Even all the trains are running on sustainably generated electricity.

As you pedal past fields of naturally grown wheat and vegetables you help yourself to wonderfully aromatic, under-rainforest-canopy-grown fair trade coffee from the traffic lane side bar, transported from Brazil on wind assisted containership. Boats and ships are still using the precious oil, although much less, thanks to the new sail designs.

Just then your daughter reminds you via your personal mobile 3D screen to make a detour and pick her up from school. As you reach the school you return the used coffee cup to the traffic lane side bar for re-use.

Your daughter greets you with a glass of freshly pressed juice made from apples, carrots and beetroot – all grown in the school gardens and juiced in the school kitchen. She is all smiles. She has just won her school's compost making contest in the temperature category. Her pile made it to a staggering 87°C. 'She's a smart little cookie,' you think. 'Last year she came second in the earthworm breeding competition.'

Both of you wait at the depot until two seats become available on a flash new, photo-voltaic hexacycle going in the direction of your home. Almost everyone on board wants to stop at the local gardens for some fresh produce, so the hexacycle pulls into the parking lot of the food garden cooperative.

Fresh strawberries are everyone's favourite as the season is now rapidly coming to an end. You purchase some antioxidant purple potatoes, and you find a nice mix of salad greens as well. All harvested earlier that day.

In the old days, all this would have been organically certified, you remember; now, of course, everything is organic by default. There is no organic labelling required.

Finally arriving home, your husband takes the lettuce off you and, together with some herbs and home-made dressing, based on real egg mayonnaise from the local delicatessen factory, turns it into a beautiful salad. This will go well with the main course, home-made pizza. It only takes four minutes in the adobe, dome-shaped oven, fired with sustainable, locally grown firewood.

After the meal, you relax in front of the 3D screen watching the semi-final games in the soccer championships. The teams look good in their latest hemp fibre outfits. You enjoy the game, while thinking back to the times when television broadcasting was interrupted so frequently by annoying commercials. With very little globalised trade and the emphasis on local production and processing, there is no need for nationwide or international advertisements.

The favourites have won again and enjoy the applause and celebrations from the crowd. 'Oh well, time for bed,' you think. After visiting the bathroom you get into your linen nightie sewn by your daughter at school, crawl under the woollen duvet (thanks to Uncle Albert's home flock of sheep) and cuddle up to your husband. Another day in Ecotopia.

The first passage, by James Lovelock, probably made you feel anxious, angry, sad – or a similar cocktail of unpleasant feelings. It is certainly designed to shock. In the second passage, Holger Kahl's vision of a possible 2020 has a very different tone designed to make you feel hopeful, intrigued and positive about what the future might bring. Did either communication inspire you to action? If you are like the participants in many psychological experiments, the passage that created negative emotions will have dampened your ability to imagine possible actions, whereas the passage that left you feeling good will have encouraged you to think broadly about how you and others could contribute to a new way of life. You may not have agreed with everything Kahl suggests is possible, but his imagined future is still likely to have ignited that welcome spark of hope.

What is it about feeling good that gets people going? To answer that, let's look at several psychological studies that have explored this question.

How positive emotions work

Positive emotions work in at least four ways that are of interest here. They open the mind, encourage creativity, make threatening information more palatable, and facilitate cooperation. Hope also has a special role in inspiring us to act collectively.

Positive emotions open the mind

Emotions have three components. First, they are bodily sensations (they aren't called *feelings* for nothing), such as hands trembling with nervousness, jaw clenched with anger, and the particular weightlessness that comes from joy. Second, emotions are thoughts – pictures and words that invade our heads in ways that can be highly disruptive, good or bad. Third, they are 'action tendencies'; that is, ideas about what to do next.¹⁰

Barbara Fredrickson from the University of North Carolina suggests that one of the differences between positive and negative emotions is that positive emotions broaden our sense of what we can do, whereas negative emotions narrow this sense.¹¹ According to Fredrickson, a negative emotion is telling us that something is dangerous, and we had better attend to it. So we narrow our focus to the potential threat and work out how to make it go away. If we feel anger, for example, we have the sense that we or someone we care about has been wronged, and we want to attack in order to restore justice. Anxiety makes us churn the threat over and over in our minds, trying to work out what might happen and what we could do to prevent it. If we are scared we want to retreat. Positive emotions, on the other hand, are a signal that things are going well. One of the implications of this is that we can afford to look around at what the world has to offer. We might try things we haven't done before, even take a few risks. Positive emotions are therefore conducive to creativity, expansion, and looking for and seizing opportunities.¹²

In one study, Fredrickson and her colleague Christine Branigan divided 104 university students into groups.¹³ Each group watched one of five short films intended to produce particular emotional responses. The film *Penguins* shows groups of penguins 'waddling, swimming, and

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