

Young People and the Environment

Ending the oppression of young people and young adults is crucial to creating the massive, broad-based movement we need to stop the degradation of our environment and limit human-caused climate change.

The oppression of young people and young adults stops us from taking the leadership of younger people seriously. Unchallenged, it leaves many younger people with the incorrect idea that they are not smart or powerful. You can see the oppression in many school systems, where young people are told what to do at all times and given little space to take leadership or explore their own interests.

Despite the oppression, young people and young adults have led many environmental and social-justice movements. Many of us older people have accumulated feelings of discouragement about making the wide, sweeping changes needed to limit the destruction of the environment. However, young people have had less time to accumulate discouraged feelings and can often remember human beings' inherent connection to nature and to other humans. One can see this with young children—they want to play outside and are curious about the natural world and the people in it.

Every person in the world either is a young person or was once a young person. This means that all of us have felt the effects of young people's oppression. We can heal from the hurts, take our ideas seriously, and leave behind any discouragement or hopelessness about the environment. It might be hard to do this, because when we tried as young people we were teased or ignored by the adults around us. However, by sharing our stories with one another, releasing the painful emotions, and taking action together, we can recover from the hurts.

Adults who have given up on fighting environmental destruction and climate change often see young people and young adults as "the last hope." At the same time, young people and young adults are not considered completely intelligent and capable and therefore not fully supported in our environmental leadership. Adults need to fully support the leadership of young people and young adults, while working on their own initiatives in regard to the environment.

We all need to heal from the effects of the oppression of young people and young adults to be able to create a united movement to end environmental degradation and restore the environment. This is not quick or easy work. Many of us resist emotional work. We may think there isn't time to do it. We may feel that we have been able to succeed in life only by not showing anyone how much we've been hurt. We may feel ashamed of or embarrassed by our feelings. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the damage we carry and by assuming we will never be free of it. We may feel it would be unbearable to look at and to feel those feelings again. Perhaps this is because we have had no opportunity to tell our stories or have not been treated well when we have tried to tell them.

In *Sustaining All Life* we have learned that it is possible to heal the emotional damage from oppression, and we offer the tools to do this. By releasing distressed feelings connected to young people in a supportive network, we can grow evermore united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. Healing from the effects of the oppression of young people and young adults and supporting their initiative and leadership are vital steps to building a strong environmental movement.



The Work of Sustaining All Life

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment—and some big changes are needed if this is to happen. These changes will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background.

In Sustaining All Life we believe that the barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually caused by oppression) between nations and between groups of people within nations, (2) widespread feelings of discouragement and powerlessness among the populations of many countries, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the environmental crisis, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of capitalism. Sustaining All Life works to address these issues and others.

The source of the environmental crisis

We modern humans have lived on the Earth for about 200,000 years. For much of this time we have struggled for survival. Ancient fears for our survival have been passed down to each generation and have resulted in societies based on exploitation, oppression, and division.

These societies demand growth and profit with little regard for people, other life forms, or the Earth. And they have come to rely on dividing us, scaring us, discouraging us, and hurting us in other ways, to keep us from making meaningful change.

The role of oppression

Oppression (such as racism, classism, sexism, and the oppression of young people) is institutionalized in our societies. This makes it much more difficult for us to address and end climate change. All of us, at some point in our lives, are targeted by oppression. We are all harmed by it. Then we are pulled to act out on others the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the emotional damage done to humans is the result of this passing on of hurt. Oppression is neither inherent nor inevitable in human beings. It arises from and operates on the basis of emotional hurt.

The importance of healing personal damage

The emotional harm done to us in our societies interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. This makes it difficult for us to think about and respond effectively to the environmental crisis. People would not cooperate with a society that exploits people and damages the environment if they had not first been hurt.

We can heal from hurtful experiences if someone listens to us attentively and allows and encourages us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions.

This happens by means of our natural healing processes—talking, crying, trembling, expressing anger, and laughing. Sustaining All Life uses the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling* to help people build ongoing mutual support for this personal healing.

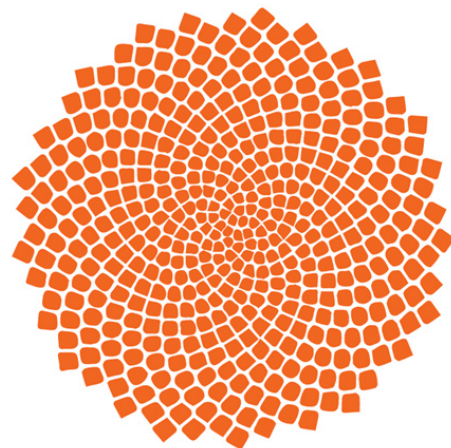
Healing from the hurts that drive oppression and other damaging behavior is not quick or easy work. Many of us resist it. We may feel like there isn't time. We may feel that we have been able to succeed in life only by not showing anyone how much we've been hurt. We may feel ashamed of or embarrassed by our feelings. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the damage we carry and by assuming that we will never be free of it. We may feel it would be unbearable to look at and to feel those feelings again. Perhaps this is because we have had no opportunity to tell our stories or have not been treated well when we have tried to tell them.

In Sustaining All Life we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from these hurts.

By releasing distressed feelings in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This will strengthen us in building our movements.

* Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that helps people of all ages and backgrounds exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from the emotional scars of oppression and other hurts. By taking turns listening to each other and encouraging emotional release, people can heal old hurts and become better able to think, to speak out, and to organize and lead others in building a world in which human beings and other life forms are valued and the environment is restored and preserved.

For more information, see:
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