

# REPORT

**Green Foundation Ireland and Feasta**

invite you to an

**IN-PERSON** afternoon Workshop

with **JOHN SHARRY,**

*Family Psychotherapist / Feasta*

**Building Personal, Community and National Resilience  
in the Face of Climate and Biodiversity Breakdown**



*Photo by: STIOFÁN NUTTY*

**Venue: The Great Hall, Tailors' Hall  
8 Back Lane, The Liberties, Dublin, D08 X2A3**

***Thursday 18 January 2024 – 15:00 to 17:00***

Admission to this event is **FREE** but you **MUST** register beforehand.  
You can do so through [our Eventbrite page here](#).

# Building Personal, Community and National Resilience in the Face of Climate and Biodiversity Breakdown

## ABOUT OUR WORKSHOP

From climate breakdown and biodiversity extinction to resource scarcity and political/economic instability, humanity is facing a series of interrelated and worsening crises. In this Workshop, **John Sharry** will describe how we can understand and face up to these crises so as to build personal, community and national resilience. The Workshop was divided into two parts:

### Part 1: Understanding our predicament

- "Overshoot" – the cause of crises of climate breakdown, biodiversity extinction and economic instability.
- "Collective Denial and Over-Optimism" – understanding our difficulty in addressing the crises.

### Part 2: Facing up to reality

- Moving towards acceptance and constructive action.
- Managing eco-anxiety and despair through courage, grief and gratitude.
- Building personal, community and national resilience.
- Creating a community of support.

The Workshop was interactive and supportive, allowing time for discussion and sharing of perspectives and ideas. For more information on the content, please see the [discussion paper](#) and the [Changing World, Changing Minds series of articles](#) in *The Irish Times*.

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## ABOUT OUR SPEAKER

### Professor John Sharry



John is a family psychotherapist, adjunct professor at the UCD School of Psychology and author of 25 parenting and mental health books and programmes. He is co-founder of the Parents Plus Charity and an *Irish Times* Health columnist. John has written widely on the psychological factors that inform our collective response to the climate/biodiversity crisis, as well as steps we can take towards action. He also is a member of the [Feasta](#) environmental charity and co-leader of the 'Resilience and Well-Being Group', as well as being interested in regenerative farming and agroforestry, and is a member of the Leitrim Sustainable Farming Group.

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A very engaging and interactive two-hour session was held in the historical environs of Tailors' Hall in Dublin on Thursday 18 January 2024 which attracted a full house, including environmental activists, students, and the eponymous general public. John Sharry delivered a very broad ranging excursion into the 'wicked' problem of climate change and presented a range of psychological responses. Not pulling any punches, he spoke of the necessity of grief and anger, as well as courage and resilience, which need to be deployed by all types of people. Following various exercises, including questions and answer sessions, he strove to inspire the audience towards engaging with the challenges ahead in facing up to our fragile earth.

John spoke of how we need to confront the pain and difficulties of the future with both courage and conviction. Together with a newly minted PhD theology scholar from Trinity College Dublin, Oana Marian, they helped to set up the initial exercise around 'how to positively respond to the mess we are in without going insane'. John remains particularly interested and qualified in articulating the psychological and philosophical factors at play in helping to cope with the climate crisis, affirming without hesitation that there is no longer an 'information deficit' problem alone. Hence the first short exercise strove to get participants to uncover how we might cope with the challenges ahead. The audience were requested to focus on some encounter they had recently in nature that brought them joy.

The following mini-lecture outlined this poly-crisis we are going through, especially with regards to dealing with planetary overshoot(s), and trying to come up with constructive actions in response, while deploying various forms of personal and communal resilience. This so-called 'poly-crisis' involves so many global issues and conflicts, most notably characterised by climate breakdown. While biodiversity collapse appears less visible to the public, he suggests, recalling how by owning a small farm in County Leitrim he has personally witnessed such breakdown with the death of so many ash trees, etc. He evoked the old adage: if there are no bees or insects, then humans simply cannot survive the basic rules of our 'web of life'. Furthermore, noting the abuse of intensive artificial fertilisers across the island, producing an artificially driven 'green' type of industrial farming, which of course is not good for biodiversity, compared to supporting a more diverse organic and brown landscape and grasslands.

It's all so depressing he agreed, hence we need to deploy humour as a coping response and mechanism to address such concerns. But people will do anything to avoid talking about it as it is so difficult, joking that the topic could quickly clear a public house in Clare, on simply raising the issue. Yet most surprisingly, John spoke from his professional psychological experience that facing up to the reality of climate change can be liberating, while having no truck with glib green optimism, not to mention growing forms of greenwashing being deployed by industry and others. Noting with regards to the physical laws of science, it does not matter what people think about the crisis, climatic breakdown happens in any case. Talking of 'peak culture', he suggests that we are now in a steep descent, which has many serious implications for the future. Consequently, we need to acknowledge the scientific reality of our planet's precarious future and not simply try to avoid the situation, as this does not help us cope.

Posing the perennial dilemma around how to avoid denying uncomfortable truths, he continued. Facing up to such a difficult reality by all accounts provokes strong emotion that needs to be taken on board. Yet facing such uncomfortable scientific truths and the pain they induce can be liberating, John affirms, while quoting the renowned Scottish psychiatrist R D Laing: *"the only pain you can avoid in life is the pain caused by trying to avoid it"*. Consequently, we need bravery to accept anxiety and fear, anger and rage, sorrow and depression, not to mention despair, guilt and blame, as we all should strive to actively face up to climate breakdown. We certainly need to tap into the benefits of courage and determination, while always requiring gratitude and appreciation for the fragile planet we live in.

Governments and all aspects of authority appear so worried about telling the public such truths about climatic breakdown, probably for fear of political backlash, not to mention the inherent dangers of infantilising the general public or citizens. Alternatively, he suggested some useful rules-of-thumb responses which include:

- accept the reality in front of you;
- create meaningful goals;
- focus on good things;
- adapt attitudes of courage and determination and never give up;
- focus on adapting and learn to change;
- develop relevant personal skills;
- self-care by looking after yourself.

All of these are certainly needed, including the last, by calling for better forms of exercise, nutrition, maintaining good mental health, etc. Maybe it would have been good to have more practical examples of this and how they might be deployed to address the growing challenges of the climate crisis. In a previous workshop I attended, we discussed nine ways to take climate action: choose a lane, join a community, apply your skills to the cause, keep learning, get your hands dirty, show up wherever you are, tell good stories, make good trouble and play outside. Action is of course the antidote to despair. But in such a wide ranging workshop, not everything can be covered in sufficient detail and more information on many of these topics can be gained from John's writings , as well as the growing academic literature available.

In a break-out discussion on resilience, audiences talked of greater control and resilience while focusing on what activities we can do today to help address the crisis. In a short discussion section, I asked for some more explanation of what is meant by 'courage' and facing up to the 'pain' of this growing catastrophe. John recognised for instance the power of media and the arts generally in telling stories, which can tap into various psychological models of fruitful empathy and active engagement. While I controversially noted that the green agenda is often framed and controlled by the rich middle classes, who want to conserve their precious environment, he alluded to alternatively broadening the debate to all sections of society, which in turn speaks to the power of climate justice for all.

Finally, on raising the benefits of various forms of spirituality to break out of our selfish engagement with our planetary environment, this cued a final exploration and commentary by Oana Marian, who affirmed that the church *per se* does not own the very notion of spirituality, as it belongs to everyone. We need to connect with our planet and our precious environment to bring out the best in us. Referring to the work on 'Active Hope' by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (see <https://www.activehope.info/>), this study remains a good starting point, she suggested, for highlighting potential routes for environmental-spiritual interconnectivity. We are always connected to this earth, she confirmed, and you can see this as also part of our actioning regarding climate change.

By any measure this broad-ranging workshop was both enlightening and engaging in its broad articulation of so many ideas and concepts around the climate crisis. The workshop certainly sparked some interesting discussion and debate which hopefully will continue into the future.

You can [access our video of the talk here](#).

**Pat Brereton, Director  
Green Foundation Ireland**

**29 January 2024**