CANADIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Addressing Climate Change in Canada: The Importance of Psychological Science

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The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) is the national association for the science, practice, and education of psychology in Canada. The CPA's vision is a society where understanding of diverse human needs, behaviours and aspirations drive legislation, policies and programs for individuals, organizations and communities. We aim to accomplish this by advancing research, knowledge and the application of psychology in the service of society through advocacy, support and collaboration.

The CPA is committed to working with government, and other health and science stakeholders, to advocate for evidence-based policies that best meet the needs of the public it serves. In this position paper, the CPA draws upon the science and practice of psychology, particularly in the areas of mental health, environmental psychology and behaviour change, to inform how Canada responds to climate change threats.

Societal responses to climate change include limiting the degree of climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, mitigating the effects of climate change, and adapting to new conditions. Psychological science is key to the success of these efforts. Research findings in the field of environmental psychology demonstrate how natural and built settings affect human health and wellness and how human behaviour and individual decision-making in turn affect the natural and built environment. An understanding of human behaviour and decision-making must inform government policies that aim to conserve nature, promote energy-efficient building practices, and help Canadians make environmentally sustainable decisions in all their activities.

The Impact of Human Behaviour on the Environment

- Individuals are more likely to take pro-environmental action when they know what to do and believe that they can do it.
- Those who hold more materialistic values have lower wellbeing, and are less likely to hold pro-environmental attitudes and behave eco-consciously. However, individuals who affiliate with others, and have a sense of community, and have greater wellbeing behave in more pro-environmental ways.
- Many individuals tend to justify their behaviours, which can limit good intentions toward the environment. Recognizing this can be important for overcoming barriers to climate action.
- It can be difficult for many people to understand their own carbon footprint. It is also challenging for consumers to identify products that are the least and most environmentally harmful.
- Developing a sense of global identity can motivate people to act in pro-environmental ways.

The Impact of the Natural Environment on Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Natural landscapes increase positive emotions and reduce negative emotions.
- Living near to a natural landscape reduces the risk of depression, anxiety, and stress in the long-term. Children who live near to nature cope better with stress and develop psychological resilience. Those who do not grow up near nature are more likely to be diagnosed with an emotional illness later in life.

- How often one encounters a natural landscape is more important to mental health than how much time is spent in it. Green spaces should be widely distributed in cities and towns, accessible to residents of all ages and abilities.
- Contact with nature increases pro-social behaviours like helpfulness and generosity, and improves attention, working memory, and self-control.
- Successful community-based, culturally-responsive disaster preparedness programs integrate emotional and mental health factors.

The Impact of the Built Environment on Mental health and Wellbeing

- Most people spend most of their time indoors and buildings significantly affect behaviour, health, and well-being. Green buildings (those designed according to the principles of the Green Building movement) enhance satisfaction with the environment and sleep quality, and those who visit, live, or work in them find them more visually and physically pleasing. Some studies suggest that green buildings positively affect job satisfaction and employer-assessed productivity.
- While technologies exist to dramatically reduce building energy use, more research is needed to ensure that interior conditions in buildings that use these technologies support the well-being of those who use them.

Because of these and other key research findings, the CPA recommends that:

1. ***Communications to the public**, by federal, provincial and territorial governments, about human behaviour and the environment should:*

   - Emphasize that climate change, and its many impacts, is happening now everywhere .
   - Increase public literacy about environmental issues so that consumers better understand how the products they use affect the environment.
   - Empower and support, rather than frighten, people into changing their behaviour towards the environment. Use visual images to talk about climate change and ones that are not overtly frightening. Promote hope, not despair.
   - Show the important personal, social, and economic benefits of climate-positive actions.
   - Foster a global identity—the environment depends on the collective action of all the planet's people.
   - Promote the importance of the natural environment to human health and wellbeing.
   - Remind citizens that every climate-positive action helps.

2. ***Climate policy** undertaken by federal, provincial and/or territorial governments must:*

   - Be informed by psychological science so that climate change programs, national building codes, regulations, and incentive programs for energy-efficient technologies, are based on the latest understandings of human behaviour and behaviour change.
   - Preserve and protect natural landscapes and parks in all areas of the country, including those in urban areas. Natural areas significantly benefit mental health and well-being for individuals, families and communities.

- Ensure that energy-efficient indoor settings support health and well-being as defined by the World Health Organization[1], and that such policies be included in the *National Energy Code of Canada for Buildings* and the *National Building Code of Canada*.
- Recognize and reward those individuals and organizations who make extraordinary efforts toward environmental sustainability.
- Ensure that risk management and emergency preparedness plans following a climate event support the displacement and relocation of people, as well as the delivery of mental health and crisis responses services.

3. *Federal, provincial, and territorial governments support research that addresses the relationship between health, wellbeing, human behaviour and climate change with particular attention to:*

- Social norms, pro-environmental attitudes, and environmentally-adaptive behaviours at the individual, community, corporate, and national levels and how these can promote effective programs and policies that reduce carbon-producing behaviours.
- Cross-cultural research on values and factors that can create a stronger culture of nature conservation in Canada.
- Increase our understanding of how to prepare individuals to cope with extreme climate events.
- The complex relationship between climate change and mental health, including how to treat climate-related mental health problems (e.g. eco-anxiety, stress disorders following an environmental event).
- How to increase climate change literacy among Canadians.
- Identifying barriers to pro-environmental behaviour that hinder the pro-climate choices of individuals, organizations, and communities.
- Rigorously evaluating ways in which communities can help individuals and organizations engage in environmentally sustainable behaviour.

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