PSYCHOLOGY WORKS Fact Sheet: Climate Change and Mental Health

What is Climate Change?

Climate change refers to long-term changes in average weather patterns that shape local, regional, and global climates.[1] Climate change can affect mental health both directly, through experiences such as extreme weather events, and indirectly, through concerns about environmental change and the future.

People may experience a range of emotional responses to climate change, including worry, fear, grief, anger, sadness, helplessness, and uncertainty. These responses may relate to concerns about the environment, personal and community wellbeing, livelihoods, and the health and safety of current and future generations.

Common Terms

Several terms are used to describe emotional responses to climate change and environmental disruption.

Eco-anxiety and **climate change anxiety** are terms commonly used to describe worry, anxiety, or distress related to environmental and climate change and their consequences.[2] These concerns may include worries about extreme weather, environmental degradation, impacts on communities, and the future. People may also experience **solastalgia**,[3] a sense of distress or sadness associated with environmental changes occurring in places that are important to them.

Climate anger refers to feelings such as frustration, irritation, and anger in response to climate change. These feelings may arise from concerns about climate impacts, perceived injustice, or insufficient action to address climate change.[4]

Worry, grief, anger, and uncertainty about climate change are not necessarily signs of a mental disorder. In many circumstances, these emotions can be understandable responses to significant environmental change.

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[1] NASA Science. (2022, June 15). *What Is Climate Change?* https://science.nasa.gov/climate-change/what-is-climate-change/

[2] Hogg, T. L., Stanley, S. K., O'Brien, L. V., Wilson, M. S., & Watsford, C. R. (2021). The Hogg Eco-Anxiety Scale: Development and validation of a multidimensional scale. *Global Environmental Change*, *71*, Article 102391. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102391

[3] Pihkala, P. (2022). Toward a taxonomy of climate emotions. *Frontiers in Climate*, *3*, Article 738154. https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2021.738154

[4] Gregersen, T., Andersen, G., & Tvinnereim, E. (2023). The strength and content of climate anger. *Global Environmental Change*, *82*, Article 102738. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2023.102738

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How Can Climate Change Impact Mental Health?

Climate change can affect mental health through both direct experiences and indirect exposure to climate-related information and events.[5]

Direct Impacts

Extreme weather events such as wildfires, floods, storms, and heat events can affect people's mental health directly. People may experience loss of homes or belongings, disruption to employment and daily life, displacement, injury, or threats to their own safety and the safety of others.

During or following climate-related events, people may experience acute stress, anxiety, depression, grief, trauma, or post-traumatic stress symptoms. The effects can be particularly difficult when events result in significant or repeated losses or disrupt social and community connections.

Climate-related changes can also affect mental health more gradually. Changes to landscapes, livelihoods, and familiar environments may contribute to grief, distress, or a sense of loss, particularly when places that are personally or culturally important are affected.

Indirect Impacts

People do not need to experience a climate-related event personally to be affected by it. Witnessing or learning about climate-related events, worrying about future impacts, or observing changes in familiar environments can contribute to distress.

Repeated exposure to distressing information about climate change may contribute to worry or anxiety. Similarly, observing changes to places that people value may contribute to feelings of grief or solastalgia.

At the same time, difficult emotions can sometimes motivate people to seek information, connect with others, or participate in efforts to address climate change. Emotional responses therefore do not have a single psychological outcome.

Moving Forward After a Climate-related Event

Recovery after a climate-related event can take time, and there is no single "right" way to respond. Supportive relationships, community connections, and access to appropriate resources can help people regain a sense of safety and stability.

Strategies that may support recovery include:

[5] Lawrance, E. L., Thompson, R., Newberry Le Vay, J., Page, L., & Jennings, N. (2022). The impact of climate change on mental health and emotional wellbeing: A narrative review of current evidence, and its implications. *International Review of Psychiatry, 34*(5), 443-498. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2022.2128725

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- **Reconnect with others.** Spending time with family, friends, and other supportive people can provide a sense of safety and connection.[6,7]
- **Stay connected to your community.** Participating in community recovery efforts or checking in on others can strengthen social connection and resilience.[6,7,8]
- **Focus on what you can control.** Taking small, manageable steps can help restore a sense of confidence and direction.[6,7]
- **Draw on your strengths.** Consider challenges you have managed in the past and the skills, resources, and relationships that helped you cope. [6,7]
- **Take breaks from distressing news.** Staying informed can be useful, but repeated exposure to distressing media coverage may add to stress following a traumatic event.[9]
- **Seek additional support when needed.** If distress becomes difficult to manage or begins to interfere with everyday life, consider reaching out to a mental health professional or community organization. [6,7]

Who is Most Vulnerable?

Climate change does not affect everyone equally. The psychological effects of climate change can depend on factors such as exposure to climate-related events, age, physical and mental health, financial resources, social support, and access to community and mental health resources.[10]

For example:

- Children and young people may be particularly affected by concerns about their future and by direct experiences of climate-related events.
- Older adults and people with pre-existing health conditions may face greater physical risks during some climate-related events, which can also affect psychological wellbeing.
- People with fewer economic resources may have fewer options for preparing for, responding to, and recovering from climate-related events. Housing, employment, access to services, and other social and economic conditions can influence vulnerability.
- People living in areas highly exposed to climate change may experience greater disruption to their homes, livelihoods, communities, and valued environments.

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[6] Gero, A., Winterford, K., & Davila, F. (2024). A Pacific community resilience framework: Exploring a holistic perspective through a strengths-based approach and systems thinking. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint, 65*(3), 308–322. https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12411

[7] Norris, F. H., Stevens, S. P., Pfefferbaum, B., Wyche, K. F., & Pfefferbaum, R. L. (2008). Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 41,* 127-150. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-007-9156-6

[8] Patel, S. S., Rogers, M. B., Amlôt, R., & Rubin, G. J. (2017). What do we mean by "community resilience"? A systematic literature review of how it is defined in the literature. *PLoS Currents, 9.*

[9] Holman, E. A., Garfin, D. R., & Silver, R. C. (2014). Media's role in broadcasting acute stress following the Boston Marathon bombings. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 111,* 93-98. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1316265110

[10] Ojala, M., Cunsolo, A., Ogunbode, C. A., & Middleton, J. (2021). Anxiety, worry, and grief in a time of environmental and climate crisis: A narrative review. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources, 46,* 35-58.

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These factors can overlap. People who experience repeated or severe climate-related disruptions while having limited access to resources and support may face particularly significant challenges.

How Can Psychologists Help?

Psychologists can help people understand and manage emotional responses to climate change and can support individuals, families, communities, and organizations in developing effective ways of coping.

Psychological support may include:

- **Helping people manage climate-related worries.** Psychologists can help people identify unhelpful patterns of thinking and develop more adaptive ways of responding to difficult thoughts and emotions.[11]
- **Supporting problem-solving and collective efficacy.** When people work together on shared challenges, confidence in their group's ability to make a difference can support constructive coping and collective action.[12]
- **Validating difficult emotions.** Worry, grief, anger, and uncertainty can be understandable responses to climate change. Psychologists can help people acknowledge these emotions while identifying ways to cope with them.[3]
- **Supporting children, youth, and young adults.** Psychologists working in schools, colleges, universities, and community settings can support young people experiencing climate-related distress or who have been affected by climate-related events.

Psychological support is not about eliminating all difficult feelings about climate change. Instead, it can help people respond to those feelings in ways that support wellbeing, everyday functioning, and ability to take constructive action.

What Can You Do to Help Combat Climate Change?

Individuals, organizations, communities, and governments all have roles to play in responding to climate change. Psychological science can help us understand how people make decisions, respond to information, change their behaviour, and work together. Individuals may choose to make changes in their everyday lives or participate in collective activities in their communities. Collective action can include participating in community initiatives, environmental organizations, or other forms of civic engagement.

It can be important to contribute to programs, communications, and policies that support pro-environmental behaviour and help address barriers between what people know about climate change and what they do. For people experiencing significant anxiety or other mental health concerns, access to

[11] Mah, A. Y. J., Chapman, D. A., Markowitz, E. M., & Lickel, B. (2020). Coping with climate change: Three insights for research, intervention, and communication to promote adaptive coping to climate change. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders, 75,* Article 102282. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2020.102282

[12] van Zomeren, M., Spears, R., & Leach, C. W. (2010). Experimental evidence for a dual pathway model analysis of coping with the climate crisis. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 30*(4), 339-346. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.02.006

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appropriate mental health services is also an important part of responding to the psychological impacts of climate change.

Knowledge Mobilization

Psychological science can help improve how climate change information is communicated. Effective climate communication should clearly describe both the challenges associated with climate change and possible solutions.

Communication may be more useful when it is clear, credible, relevant to people's local circumstances, and presented in ways that support understanding rather than simply increasing fear or distress.[11] Understanding how people process information, make decisions, and respond emotionally to climate change can help organizations, communities, and governments develop more effective communication and engagement strategies.

You can consult with a registered psychologist to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology may make available a referral list of practicing psychologists that can be searched for appropriate services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the **PSYCHOLOGY WORKS** Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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