# Climate Change and Mental Health

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Main source: *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance,* created under the auspices of the American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica, March 2017.

**MENTAL HEALTH**
The ability to process information and make decisions without being disabled by extreme emotional responses is threatened by climate change. Some emotional response is normal, and even negative emotions are a necessary part of a fulfilling life. In the extreme case, however, they can interfere with our ability to think rationally, plan our behavior, and consider alternative actions.

## Effects of Climate Change on Mental Health

- Impacts on Individuals
  - Trauma and shock
    - Climate change–induced disasters have a high potential for immediate and severe psychological trauma from personal injury, injury or death of a loved one, damage to or loss of personal property (e.g., home) and pets, and disruption in or loss of livelihood. **General anxiety** was the type of psychopathology with the highest prevalence rate, followed by phobic, somatic, and alcohol impairment, and then depression and drug impairment, which were all elevated relative to prevalence in the general population
  - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
    - Many continue to experience problems as PTSD manifests as a chronic disorder. PTSD, depression, general anxiety, and suicide all tend to increase after a disaster.
  - Strains on social relationships
    - A review of research on the impacts of natural disasters identified problems with family and interpersonal relations, as well as social disruption, concerns about the wider community, and feelings of obligation to provide support to others
  - Aggression and violence
    - As the temperature goes up, so does aggression. The relationship between heat and violence may be due to the impacts of heat on *arousal*, which results in decreases in attention and *self-regulation*, as well as an increase in the availability of negative and hostile thoughts
  - Mental health emergencies increasing
    - There is evidence that increases in mean temperature are associated with increased use of emergency mental health services.
  - Loss of personally important places (solastalgia)

- - - This psychological phenomenon is characterized by a sense of desolation and loss similar to that experienced by people forced to migrate from their home environment.
    - Loss of autonomy and control
      - Climate change will intensify certain daily life inconveniences, which can have psychological impacts on individuals' sense of autonomy and control. The desire to be able to accomplish basic tasks independently is a core psychological need, central to human well-being and basic services may be threatened due to dangerous conditions.
    - Loss of personal and occupational identity
      - Losing treasured objects when a home is damaged or destroyed is one way in which climate change can significantly impair an individual's sense of self and identity. This is because objects help provide a continuing sense of who we are, particularly objects that represent important moments in life (e.g., journals), relationships (e.g., gifts or photographs), or personal/family history (e.g., family heirlooms);
    - Helplessness, depression, fear, fatalism, resignation and eco-anxiety
      - Gradual, long-term changes in climate can also surface a number of different emotions, including fear, anger, feelings of powerlessness, or exhaustion
- Impacts on Society with eco-migration and environmental refugees
    - Disrupted sense of cohesion, continuity and belonging
      - Inuit community: As a result of altered interactions with the environment, community members reported food insecurity, sadness, anger, increased family stress, and a belief that their sense of self-worth and community cohesion had decreased. Elders expressed specific concern for the preservation of Inuit language and culture as they directly influence mental well-being and social cohesion
    - Increased interpersonal violence and aggression
      - Aggression can be exacerbated by higher temperatures and decreased access to stress-reducing green spaces and supportive social networks. Rising levels of frustration in society consequently lead to interpersonal aggression (such as domestic violence, assault, and rape).
    - Increased intergroup aggression
      - Violence may increase when competition for scarce natural resources increases or when *ecomigration* brings formerly separate communities into contact and they compete for resources, like jobs and land. There is evidence that climate change can contribute to the frequency of intergroup violence. For example, in Houston, Texas, crime rates increased significantly following Hurricane Katrina.

## Best Practices for Supporting Mental Health

To support individuals in becoming resilient:
- Build the belief in one's own resilience
- Foster optimism

- Cultivate active coping and self-regulation
- Find a source of personal meaning ex: climate change activism
- Boost personal preparedness
- Support social networks
- Encourage connection to parents, family and other role models
- Uphold the connection to place
- Maintain connections to one's culture

To support communities to become well-equipped for the potential mental health impacts:
- Assess and expand the community mental health infrastructure
- Facilitate cooperation and social cohesion
- Train people who will serve the community during a disaster
- Pay special attention to vulnerable populations
- Provide opportunities for meaningful action

What individuals can do:
- Have household emergency plans that have been practiced
- Understand family medications
- Learn resilience interventions
- Connect with family, friends, neighbors and other groups to build strong social networks

## Resources for Mental Health and Climate Change

- *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance,* created under the auspices of the American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica, March 2017.
- *The Psychological Effects of Global Warming on the United States: And Why the U.S. Mental Health Care System Is Not Adequately Prepared,* by Kevin J. Coyle, JD and Lise Van Susteren, MD, National Wildlife Federation, National Forum and Research Report, February 2012.
- *The Impacts of Climate Change on Human Health in the United States, a Scientific Assessment*, Chapter 8. Mental Health and Well-Being, US Global Change Research Program, Washington, DC, http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7930/J0oPoWXS.
- *Climate change activism reducing mental health symptoms among young people* by Eleanor Busby, The Independent. November 28, 2019. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/climate-change-school-strikes-mental-health-students-children-a9225081.html