



'Supporting people in facing the climate crisis

Submission from Psychology for a Safe Climate: National Preventive Health Strategy Response to Consultation Paper.

The World Health Organization has described climate change as the defining issue for public health in the 21st century.¹ It is an urgent challenge, with implications at the global, national and community levels.

Climate change affects health in many ways; directly by the increased intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as prolonged heatwaves, floods and bushfires; and indirectly through worsening air quality, changes in the spread of infectious and vector-borne diseases, risks to food safety and drinking water quality, and effects on **mental health**.

Climate change is contributing to the collapse of ecosystems and biodiversity, undermining the foundations for health and wellbeing.²

In this submission we are focusing on the **mental health** impacts of climate change.

Recent research on the link between mental health and climate change

There are significant and growing mental health challenges and conditions associated with climate change. Sustainability Victoria³ recently completed a state wide research project looking at the public's awareness of the link between climate change and health. Their project involved a survey among more than 3,000 Victorians and also gathered the views (in a separate survey) of over 600 healthcare professionals.

Their results show the young age group (over 400 respondents from 15-24 years) feel strong negative emotions when thinking about climate change. Over 80% of healthcare professional respondents identified 'mental health' issues as one of the health conditions most likely to become more common over the next 10 years.

Climate change impacts on people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in a number of ways. There is a significant risk of mental health problems following extreme weather events and there is likely to be increased psychiatric morbidity as these events become more frequent and intense with climate change (e.g. increased risk of bushfires, drought, floods, extreme temperatures). Such morbidity includes posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, and substance use problems.

There are also psychological impacts caused by climate change's more gradual impacts on the environment, human systems and infrastructure. These impacts have flow on effects by increasing stress, and negatively affecting family and individual wellbeing, and community health.

Additionally, climate change has a vicarious or existential impact on people's mental health as awareness increases of the threat of climate change now and increasingly dramatically in the future, and as the impacts of climate change become more obvious and ubiquitous.

Ecological grief and eco-anxiety

Ecological grief is defined in a recent Nature Climate Change⁴ article as “The grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.” The American Psychological Association produced a 2017 report⁵ detailing the impacts of climate change on mental health which made reference to *eco-anxiety*. The glossary describes it as a chronic fear of environmental doom.

It is hard not to feel fear on reading the 2018 IPCC report⁶, nor alarm in reading the failure of attention in the National Health Preventative Strategy to even mention climate change as a health risk, implying there is no planning on mental health impacts even contemplated.

Climate change can cause ecological grief and eco-anxiety and can produce a background of insecurity and uncertainty which can be a significant factor in mental health issues. These types of grief and anxiety are likely to increase considerably as the reality and severity of climate change related problems are experienced. The vital importance of Country to our indigenous nations make them particularly vulnerable. This is and will also be the case for younger people, and also for many others who are very concerned about their natural environments and/or the climate and ecological crisis.

It is particularly important that young people have help available to process their feelings and concerns about climate change, and that the education and mental health system work together on this. Children and young people are very concerned about climate change. Not only are young people more likely to be prone to eco-anxiety and ecological grief, but also to other climate change related mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse^{7 8}. This in turn can lead to problems of emotional and cognitive development, and predispose to adult mental disorders.

Climate change the driver of poor community mental health outcomes

Climate change is already a significant driver in many communities subject to prolonged drought, extreme and unpredictable weather conditions, and changed growing seasons, and these impacts will only increase in severity and frequency over time.

Extreme weather event disasters like bushfires and flooding are an obvious driver of mental health problems throughout Australia.

Extreme heat events and humidity have been noted to increase hospital admissions for mental illness, including schizophrenia, mania and neurotic disorders.

Farming communities are also particularly vulnerable to mental health problems caused by or exacerbated by drought. Long term droughts affect the economic and mental wellbeing of land-based workers, mainly through the economic effects from land degradation, and most prominent amongst farmers whose economic livelihoods depend on environmental conditions⁹. Some authors suggest that income insecurity related to drought increases the risk of suicide among farmers.^{10 11}

Suicide Prevention

Suicide is particularly prevalent in some areas which have been impacted by climate change. Of particular note would be drought affected farming communities¹². It is very important not only that mental health specialists are working in those areas, but that they are aware of the realities of climate change. For example, some farmers and psychologists may turn a blind eye to climate change, whereas more realistic solutions may be found if the truth can be faced, such as making farming more adaptable to the climate or moving from farming in the area.

It is important for mental health workers to go beyond treating symptoms to help create communities that are more psychologically resilient in the face of climate change. This would be very likely to lower the suicide rate.

Preparing the mental health workforce

The mental health workforce is underprepared to deal with the health risks associated with climate change. A recent 2015 global survey¹³ reveals that Australia lags behind comparable countries when it comes to protecting its citizens from climate change.

The mental health sector comprises many health and community organizations supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged people. It is a sector which is hardest hit by climate change related extreme weather events and disasters due to increased demand for services for people with a range of mental health and psychosocial problems. Understanding what to do to reduce the threats of climate change (climate change mitigation) and adapt to these threats (adaptation, disaster preparedness), as well as how to care for people who are adversely affected by climate change impacts, are an essential part of mental health practitioners' work.

Mental health policy needs to be developed that supports health and community organisations to prepare adequately for future extreme weather disaster impacts, especially in communities which have experienced traumatic climate change events, or are at high risk of experiencing them in the near future.

About the experience of Psychology for a Safe Climate

Our organisation- Psychology for a Safe Climate <http://psychologyforasafeclimate.org/> has for some years been organising workshops with those particularly concerned about climate change (including young activist groups, various environmental and community climate groups, farmers, bushfire affected communities, council and university departments) and we have listened to much grief and anxiety both about the human world, including the very difficult question about whether to have a child in the age of climate change, and also about the nonhuman world as mentioned above. In our work we have focussed on climate grief and anxiety, burnout related to climate change engagement and action, and also skills for self-care. Feedback from our workshops has been very positive. Being able to share difficult feelings and find new ways to care for oneself have been felt to be very helpful.

We believe that our work is therapeutic and preventative. We do offer referrals for those who need individual psychological help. We believe that work similar to ours could be carried out in the public sector.

In July of this year, an article in The Lancet Planetary Health Journal¹⁴ named the need for recognition of the emotional suffering associated with ecological change indicating that effective responses need to be rooted in health equity approaches that require;

- Increased training for health professionals on climate change and mental health,
- Enhanced clinical assessments and support - coupling clinical support with dedicated energy towards the implementation of climate solutions,
- Harnessing of already-proven individual and group therapy strategies,
- Healthy family-oriented response
- Research to strengthen and support approaches of healing and resilience.

We can only endorse these recommendations and call on the Government to heed this advice in preparing for the escalating threat to our nation's health - and particularly our mental health.

Conclusion

Australia has responded to the Covid-19 threat by listening to scientists and acting on their advice. There are important parallels in the health threat of climate change - which also needs an emergency transformative response for the safety of citizens and our young people into the future. Titled *Corona and the climate: a comparison of two emergencies*,¹⁵ the authors, eminent climate scientists, draw a challenging parallel that deserves our Federal Government's attention, and particularly that of the Department of Health, in heeding the warning of the importance of preventative action.

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- ³ Sustainability Victoria 2020, *Linking Climate Change and Health Impacts: Social research exploring awareness among Victorians and our healthcare professionals of the health effects of climate change*, February 2020 <<https://www.sustainability.vic.gov.au/About-us/Research/Health-and-Climate-Change-Research>>
- ⁴ Nature Climate Change 2018; 8:275-281. Cunsolo A. and Ellis N. Ecological grief as a Mental Health response to climate change-related loss. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0092-2.epdf?author>
- ⁵ 2017 Mental Health and Our Changing Climate. American Psychological Association https://www.apa.org/images/mental-health-climate_tcm7-215704.pdf
- ⁶ 2018. Special report by the IPCC on Global warming of 1.5 degrees https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf
- ⁷ *Curr. Psychiatry Rep.* 2018 Apr 11; 20(5):35. Burke SEL et al. The Psychological Effects of Climate Change on Children.
- ⁸ The impact of climate change on youth depression and mental health. Majeed H and Lee J. www.thelancet.com/planetary-health Vol 1 June 2017
- ⁹ *Int. J. Ment Health Syst* 2018; 12:28. Hayes K., Blashki G. et al. Climate Change and Mental Health: risks, impacts and priority actions.
- ¹⁰ Ellis NR, Albrecht GA. Climate change threats to family farmers' sense of place and mental wellbeing: a case study from the Western Australian wheatbelt. *Soc Sci Med*. 2017; 175:161–8.
- ¹¹ *Med J Aust* 2018; 209 (4):156-157. Austin E. et al. Inequity amplified: climate change, the Australian farmer, and Mental Health. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2018/209/4/inequity-amplified-climate-change-australian-farmer-and-mental-health#3>
- ¹² Ibid
- ¹³ World Federation of Public Health Associations. (2015). Climate Change and Health Policy Assessment Project Report, A Global Survey 2015. Accessed on 26 Sep 2016 at: <http://www.wfpha.org/publications/news/157-wfpha-national-climate-andhealth-policyreport>
- ¹⁴ Cunsolo, A., Harper, S.L., Minor, K., Haytes, K., Williams, K.G., Howard, C. 2020 'Ecological grief and anxiety: the start of a healthy response to climate change?' *The Lancet Planetary Health*, vol. 4 issue 7, July 2020 <[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30144-3/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30144-3/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email)>
- ¹⁵ Kira Vinke, Sabine Gabrysch, Emanuela Paoletti, Johan Rockström and Hans Joachim Schellnhuber Corona and the climate: a comparison of two emergencies *Global Sustainability* 3, e25, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.20>