

Climate change and mental health¹

Gina Martin² and Kiffer Card³

Climate change is a critical threat to the health and well-being of every person on the planet. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the places in which we shelter will all be affected by climate change. Indeed, due to climate change, people across Canada are exposed to new vector-borne diseases (such as those spread through ticks and mosquitoes), stress and injury from extreme weather events, and greater risk for respiratory illnesses as a result of forest fires and reduced air quality.⁴

With all of this in mind, it's perfectly normal to be worried about climate change. Until recently, the impact

of climate change on mental health has been overshadowed by threats to the physical security of individuals and communities. However, counsellors, psychologists, therapists, social workers, policymakers, researchers, educators, and health care providers are beginning to wake up to the impacts that climate change is having on our emotional, cognitive, and psychological well-being. For example, the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment has released a Climate Change Toolkit for Health Professionals.⁵

Similarly, in 2017, the American Psychiatric Association (APA), with Climate for Health and ecoAmerica, published their official report outlining the variety of ways that climate change is chipping away at our mental health. Their report highlights direct effects of anxiety on a host of mental health outcomes, including depression, stress, substance use, loss of identity, relationship strain,

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[2] Assistant Professor, Faculty of Health Disciplines, Athabasca University

[3] Assistant Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University and Director, Mental Health and Climate Change Alliance

[4] World Health Organization, "Climate change and health," 2021, www.who.int/newsroom/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health.

[5] Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, "Climate Change Toolkit for Health Professionals," 2019, cape.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Climate-Change-Toolkit-for-Health-Professionals-Updated-April-2019-2.pdf.



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grief, and post-traumatic stress. People are increasingly experiencing loss of identity and hopelessness as their communities face increasingly dismal outlooks because of climate change.

The impacts of climate change are three-fold:

- Mental health issues that arise from the direct impacts of intensifying acute weather events, such as floods, storms, heat waves, and fires.
- Mental health issues that arise because of indirect impacts of social and economic challenges, such as forced migration and reduced food security.
- Mental health issues that arise from an awareness of climate change and the threat it poses to the planet and the future of humanity. This awareness can cause feelings of anxiety, sadness, and dread—even when people are not directly or indirectly affected by climate-related changes to the environment.

Across Canada, evidence shows that climate change is having impacts on mental health and well-being. For example, the Mental Health and Climate Change Alliance

recently published a study showing that the June 2021 North American heat dome caused a 13% increase in average levels⁶ of climate anxiety among people living in the Canadian province of British Columbia, where over 600 people⁷ and millions of animals died from the heat wave. Experiencing some worry or anxiety about the climate⁸ crisis is a rational response that can be functional in signaling an oncoming threat that motivates action. But for some, an awareness of climate change and its consequences may be overwhelming and interfere with an individual's ability to function.⁹

[6] A. Bratu, et al., "The 2021 Western North America Heat Dome Increased Climate Change Anxiety Among British Columbians: Results from A Natural Experiment," *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, 2022, 100116.

[7] General, P. S. and S. (2022, June 7). Ministers' statement on 619 lives lost during 2021 heat dome | BC Gov News. News.gov.bc.ca. <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2022PSSG0035-000911>

[8] The Unprecedented Pacific Northwest Heatwave of June 2021. (2022, April 26). [www.researchsquare.com](http://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-1520351/v1). <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-1520351/v1>

9. G. Martin, et al., "The impact of climate change awareness on children's mental well-being and negative emotions—a scoping review," *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 27(1), 2022, p. 59–72.



IMAGE: INFOBAE

Impacts on children and youth

Children and youth are more susceptible to the health impacts of climate change.¹⁰ This increased vulnerability arises both from their psychological development and dependence on adults, and because they are often not empowered by their communities to manage the threats of climate change. Further, children and youth are increasingly exposed to information about climate change. In fact, between 2007 to 2017 media coverage of climate change has increased by 78%.¹¹ As a result, teachers are called upon to play an increasingly important role in educating children and youth, to help them better understand climate change and climate related information

Supporting children and youth

Helping youth manage their emotions and reactions to climate change is important to their healthy development. This is especially true given that climate change and worries about climate change

10. *Ibid*

11. K. Hayes, et al., “Climate change and mental health: Risks, impacts and priority actions,” *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 12, 2018, p. 1–12.

may influence children and youth’s behaviours, limit their ability to function, and influence the decisions they make about life.¹² More work is needed to supply evidence on how to best support children and youth mental health as they face the climate crisis.¹³ However, there are some ways that you can support children and youth today.

Taking action

First, because children and youth will experience the greatest consequences of climate change, adults must honour their duties and responsibilities to protect the environment for future generations.¹⁴ This may come in many forms, including calls for pro-environmental policies at the local, provincial, national, and international levels; making changes to personal behaviours

12. S. Clayton, et al., “Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance,” *American Psychological Association*, Washington DC, 2017, www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf.

13. . G. Martin, et al., “The impact of climate change awareness on children’s mental well-being and negative emotions—a scoping review,” *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 27(1), 2022, p. 59–72.

14. J. Nguyen, “Intergenerational Justice and the Paris Agreement,” *E-International Relations*, 2020, www.e-ir.info/2020/05/11/intergenerational-justice-and-the-parisagreement/. A. Sanson, et al., “Responding to the impacts of the

that affect climate change (such as biking, walking, or taking the bus rather than driving your car); and starting climate friendly initiatives at your school (such as food waste reduction programs).

Listening to concerns

The concerns that children and youth experience are founded in the undeniable scientific evidence that climate change is happening and that it will have dramatic impacts on individuals now and in the future. It is important not to dismiss their concerns but rather support them in building self-efficacy (the belief that they can contribute) and collective efficacy (that through working together, people can make a difference) to build hope that is rooted in reality. It may be helpful to highlight other points in history when large societal shifts took place through collective action (such as women's suffrage).¹⁵

Empowering their intentions

It is important that children and youth feel empowered to engage in healthy coping behaviours and to undertake activities that are within their spheres of influence. These actions can help them develop a sense of purpose, control, and security. Children and youth are powerful messengers for climate justice. For example, children and youth have led large demonstrations and school strikes all over the globe (such as the Fridays for Future movement). In some countries, children and youth have also filed lawsuits against governments for their inaction related to climate change. For many children and youth, taking action may aid in alleviating some of the mental health issues that stem from the climate crisis.¹⁶ However, it is important that children and youth are supported in ways that prevent burnout or feelings of being overwhelmed. Adults can help youth by sharing responsibility for climate action and facilitating healthy coping strategies.



15. A. Sanson, et al., "Responding to the impacts of the climate crisis on children and youth," *Child Development Perspectives*, 13(4), 2019, p. 201–207.

PHOTO: FAD YOUTH FOUNDATION

16. *Ibid*