

COP26 Citizens' Forum

Mental Health and Climate Change – A Summary of the Evidence



Introduction

The 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) will bring together representatives from countries around the world to find shared solutions for addressing the climate crisis. One consequence of climate change which is attracting more and more interest, is the impact it is having on our mental health and wellbeing. As a research-based organisation, the Mental Health Foundation has a longstanding interest in reducing mental health inequalities and addressing the root causes of mental health problems.

In this community participation event, we will provide an overview of the current evidence on the impacts of climate change on mental health. We will also examine how communities and governments should respond to mitigate these effects and ensure our transition to net zero does not exacerbate existing mental health inequalities.

Climate Change and Mental Health

Research from around the world has shown that the climate crisis is damaging the mental health of hundreds of millions of people globally. Three classes of mental health effects resulting from climate change have been identified. These are:

1. Direct Effects

This refers to mental health consequences which occur as a direct result of changes in our climate.

For example, natural disasters, such as floods and wildfires, are known to significantly increase the number of people experiencing mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and addiction issues. It is important to note that the mental health effects of direct changes in our climate are not equally distributed. Women, children, those living in poverty, and those living in low- and middle-income countries are most exposed to these events and their mental health consequences.

2. Indirect Effects

These refer to the indirect mental health consequences caused by observing the impacts of climate change on others and anticipating the effects it may have on oneself.

Some surveys suggest that in the UK, the worsening climate situation has led to a large number of people experiencing 'eco-anxiety', which has been defined as "a chronic fear of environmental doom" caused by "watching the slow and seemingly irrevocable impacts of climate change unfold" combined with "worrying about the future for oneself, children, and later generations". For example, a recent global survey conducted by the University of Bath has indicated that around 4 in 10 young people fear having children as a result of the climate crisis¹.

3. Social Consequences

This refers to how the long-term economic and societal impacts of climate change will affect mental health and wellbeing globally.

1. Clayton, S., Manning, C. M., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. (2017). Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, and ecoAmerica.

Persistent drought, for instance, destroys crops, leaving people without income or food; while deforestation, desertification and rising sea levels result in loss of land and space for people to live and work. In addition, the loss of land and livelihoods as a result of climate change is likely to substantially increase conflict, displacement and forced migration, leading to an increasing number of 'climate refugees'. These consequences will disproportionately affect those who are already disadvantaged.

For example, the World Bank estimates that over the next 10 years climate change will push more than 100 million people into poverty if urgent action is not taken². The effects of this on people's mental health must not be underestimated. Poverty, displacement and their consequences can have a corrosive impact on people's mental wellbeing and are among the biggest drivers of mental ill-health worldwide.

However, despite the recent growth of research in this area, much remains unknown.

In particular, while some small-scale surveys have been conducted, only a limited number of studies have addressed the indirect effects of climate on mental wellbeing in the United Kingdom. Remaining questions therefore include:

- How many people across the UK are affected by eco-anxiety?
- What are the other indirect mental health effects of climate change in the UK?
- Which demographic groups and geographical areas in the UK are likely to be the worst affected?
- How should the mental health effects of climate change in the UK be mitigated against?

A just transition

In order to stabilise climate change, CO₂ emissions need to fall to net zero.

As such, in line with the Paris Agreement, the UK Government, as well as all devolved governments, have now committed to achieving net zero emissions in the next 30 years.

Yet, while achieving net zero is clearly necessary, it is also complex given the livelihoods of a significant proportion of the population are tied to polluting industries.

In an effort to support the creation of good quality jobs and decent livelihoods when polluting industries decline, the 'Just Transition' framework was developed. Put simply, a 'just transition' is about moving to an environmentally sustainable economy without leaving workers in polluting industries behind.

However, concerns remain surrounding the potential for our transition to net zero carbon emissions to exacerbate existing social, economic and health inequalities.

For example, to date there has been little consideration of the potential impact the growth in green jobs will have on women's labour market equality. In addition, some have highlighted that inadequate consideration has been given to how policies which aim to reduce emissions could impact consumer bills in ways that are unfair to lower income households.

Summary

- By bringing together mental health practitioners, policy makers, academics, activists and individuals from affected communities at the Mental Health Foundation's COP26 Citizen's Forum on Climate Change and Mental Health, we hope to identify areas of common understanding on this complex issue and seek ideas on where understanding is limited and needs to be developed.
- This is an opportunity to share the most recent research findings from Scotland and around the world, and to engage in discussion from a variety of perspectives on approaches to this pressing issue.

2. The World Bank (2021). Climate Change. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/climatechange/overview>

