



Sage Reference

The Sage Encyclopedia of Multicultural Counseling, Social Justice, and Advocacy

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Climate Crisis and Mental Health

Climate crisis refers to the impacts caused by climate change. Rising sea levels, natural disasters, drought, heat waves, wildfires, and other environmental catastrophes brought on by climate change can have devastating and ongoing impacts, jeopardizing all aspects of life, including but not limited to threatening social, physical, psychological, cultural, and economic well-being. The negative influences of the climate crisis on mental health can also have long-term impacts on individuals and the communities in which they reside. Individuals may experience anxiety, depression, heightened stress, posttraumatic stress disorder responses, increased community violence and conflict, abuse, fear related to food and water insecurity, and increased substance abuse, to name just a few.

The impact of the climate crisis on mental health has been well-documented in a number of key reports, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (Human Health, Chapter 8), the U.S. National Climate Report, the U.S. Global Change Research Program, and ecoAmerica's Mental Health and Our Changing Climate. Researchers predict a sharp rise in mental health issues resulting from the climate crisis in the coming years. These issues include depression and anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, suicide, and outbreaks of violence. Those identified as being among the most psychologically vulnerable are elderly individuals, those experiencing poverty, and children.

Vulnerable Populations

As the climate changes, families, communities, and lives are impacted. As is true with many other aspects of change, those most vulnerable are disproportionately negatively impacted. This includes individuals with low income; rural, poverty-stricken areas; some communities of color; individuals with limited English proficiency; immigrant groups; Indigenous peoples, children; older adults; persons who are pregnant; persons with disabilities; and persons with preexisting or chronic medical conditions.

Another dynamic that is emerging is growing population movements within and across borders. People displaced by forced migration are already at high risk for mental health concerns. Factors such as increasing intensity of extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and acceleration of environmental degradation are predicted to lead to a substantial rise in the scale of migration and displacement. Climate migration to the United States is already happening and is expected to increase as climate-influenced weather events and conditions such as drought and sea-level rise make some places uninhabitable. Losing one's home is not only about the loss of a physical home but also the emotional toll and cultural losses that can accompany this process.

Psychological Impact

Mental health issues may arise or become exacerbated from three possible directions. First, thinking about or considering the magnitude of the climate crisis may result in eco-anxiety, ecological grief, or general despair and hopelessness. Second, preexisting mental health vulnerabilities, such as depression and suicidality, may become more complicated by the climate crisis and/or climate-related events, geographic changes, or disasters. Third, climate-related events such as fire, flood, drought, high temperatures, and en mass displacement may result in mental health issues.

Climate crisis and earth-related mental health conditions have also been referred to as *psychoterratic syndromes*, a result of chronic environmental change. Other terms have emerged to capture how climate change is impacting mental health. These include but are not limited to eco-grief, solastagia, climate trauma, and cultural trauma as it relates to environmental changes.

Eco-grief can be experienced as an existential pain associated with losses and perceived losses related to climate change. This can include the slow death of coral reefs, extinction of plants and animals, destruction of certain places (e.g., the Arctic, a place ravaged by wildfire, beach erosion related to rising sea levels). Eco-grief also includes an anticipatory grief reaction in response to fears about impending losses related to climate disasters, extinction, and other climate crisis concerns. Eco-grief may also emerge with the realization that leaders are not proactively responding to the threat of climate disasters to save the planet before it is too late. This can cause an existential angst and a grief response in some individuals.

Solastalgia emerges when a beloved place and the deep attachment to that place is harmed and or threatened. This can occur as a result of environmental disasters that totally destroy an area or a slow erosion of the place as it has been previously known.

Climate trauma is a unique type of trauma that not only inflicts itself at times of disaster but also pervades many circumstances of individual, family, or community life. Viewing the climate crisis as a chronic trauma allows for the conceptualization of the cumulative as well as the speculative nature of its impact. It also is interwoven in generational trauma, personal trauma, and cultural trauma. Climate trauma differs from disasters of the past such as heat waves, fires, and hurricanes in that they were one-time events typically followed by disaster response and recovery. With climate trauma, rather than communities being able to regain balance, hope, and connection, the climate crisis evokes a destabilizing experience. Oftentimes, there is not a significant recovery time to rebuild or use social support to stabilize the community. Instead, permanent dislocation

may occur or one disaster after another may become the norm. This type of climate devastation can result in a loss of culture and the possibility of the permanent displacement of an entire community.

Cultural trauma is a pervasive process that imprints an enduring and traumatic mark on the cultural consciousness of a group, causing irrevocable changes in cohesion, identity, and the capacity of future meaning-making. Climate-induced cultural trauma may result from the sometimes slow, evanescence-like destruction of cultural anchors, rituals, geographical identity, metaphors and communication, and an inability to live in a place, rebuild, or feel safe.

Understanding the emotional impact of the climate crisis on individuals and communities includes recognizing and validating experiences and stories related to a sense of place and place attachment, nature deficit, existential fears, trauma from disasters, eco-anxiety, depression, traumatic responses, and other mental health concerns. Research has supported a trauma-informed approach, rooted in ecotherapy, and inclusive of eco-wellness, nature connectedness, and resilience to foster coping, adaptation, and well-being.

See also [ACA Advocacy Competencies](#); [Cultural Competency Curriculum for Disaster Preparedness and Crisis Response](#); [Disaster Counseling](#); [Environmental Inequality and Injustice](#); [Human Rights](#)

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