

Climate Change is a Mental Health Emergency

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Introduction

Climate change is no longer a distant threat looming on the horizon; it's a pressing reality with immediate and far-reaching consequences. The World Health Organization recognises climate change as the greatest threat to human health in the 21st century. Extreme weather events, exacerbated by climate change, wreak havoc on individuals and communities alike. Recent data from the Climate Council revealed that 80% of Australians have experienced some form of extreme weather disaster since 2019, leading to physical and psychological impacts. According to the Black Dog Institute, for every person physically injured in a natural hazard, 40 experience psychological impacts such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, sleep disruption, and suicidal ideation. In the aftermath of climate-related disasters, accessing mental health support becomes crucial. Priority populations, including rural and remote communities, First Nations peoples, individuals with existing health and mental health issues, older people, children, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and those in sea-level geographical locations, are disproportionately impacted. Additionally, there's a documented increase in family violence post-disaster, exacerbating the need for timely intervention and support.

Mental health support is crucial not only in providing treatment to individuals but also for timely intervention and prevention of violence. Consulting with psychiatrists and mental health professionals is essential for the development of strategies aimed at building resilience, prevention, and effective treatments for those who have experienced these events. In December 2022, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) established the Climate

and Sustainability Steering Group. This group was tasked with recommending a possible framework for future College action on climate and sustainability during 2024 and 2025. Broadly, the Steering Group has identified three priority areas: member resources and education; disaster recovery and preparedness; and advocacy and partnerships. Addressing workforce shortages and providing specialised training for mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, to effectively respond to the mental health challenges posed by climate change is a key area identified by the group. RANZCP's focus extends beyond advocacy to practical measures aimed at bolstering mental health services, particularly in disaster-prone areas. However, these efforts cannot be achieved without government will and intervention.

It is imperative that all governments work together to develop a comprehensive strategy on climate, health, and well-being. Without this, as the severity and frequency of natural disasters increase, and as global temperatures rise, the mental health of the community will continue to pay the price. In its submission to the Department of Health and Aged Care National Health and Climate Strategy, RANZCP outlined immediate priorities for Australia. These include prioritising mental health, widening objectives to comprehensively address climate change impacts on health, enhancing data collection and monitoring, providing resources for training and implementation of strategies, increasing health workforce funding, prioritising vulnerable communities, and involving Indigenous and rural communities in strategy design. The climate crisis is not just an environmental issue; it's a mental health emergency. Together, we must prioritise prevention, support, and resilience-building efforts to ensure that climate-related disasters do not leave a lasting legacy of mental health challenges and violence.

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