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Climate Changes Mental Health

Editor’s Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column from ecoAmerica whose mission is to build public support and political resolve for climate solutions. NEHA is an official partner of ecoAmerica and works closely with their Climate for Health Program, a coalition of health leaders committed to caring for our climate to care for our health. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA.

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When you think about climate change, how do you feel? If you are overwhelmed with fear or feeling depressed or despondent, you are not alone. In 2020, 67% of people in the U.S. surveyed by the American Psychiatric Association said they were somewhat or extremely anxious about climate change. More than one half said they were anxious about the impact of climate change on their mental health (American Psychiatric Association, 2020).

The chronic fear of environmental doom is termed “eco-anxiety” and it reaches beyond environmental and public health spaces (Clayton et al., 2021). In 2022, eco-anxiety and climate change have been covered in diverse publications, including *Elle*, *The New York Times*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Teen Vogue*. The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has long recognized the mental and environmental health implications of climate change. These implications are synthesized in the ecoAmerica and American Psychological Association report, *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate* (Clayton et al., 2017).

Severe weather, for example, can create personal struggles with mental health, including trauma and shock, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and strains on social relationships. These disaster events that we often think of, such as hurricanes and floods, also impact us on the community level. Weakened community cohesion, increased vulnerability to stress, community displacement, and a threatened sense of belonging can occur as a result of climate change impacts. And, as with the physical impacts, the mental health impacts of climate change most heavily burden people who are oppressed by historical and present power dynamics (Clayton et al., 2021).

Beyond acute impacts of climate change, mental health and well-being are threatened by chronic, long-term changes to our environment. Heat, drought, and declining air quality can lead to mood and anxiety disorders, lower happiness and life satisfaction, and loss of personally important places, to name a few. Impacts on communities include mental distress, diminished self-worth, intergroup hostility, and depression (Clayton et al., 2021).

While it is true that climate change has a myriad of impacts on mental health and well-being, it is also true that solutions are at hand. Environmental health professionals are poised to take meaningful action. Health professionals are highly trusted messengers when it comes to communicating about climate change. In 2021, 68% of people in the U.S. said they trusted health professionals as a source for climate change information. That percentage is up from 57% in 2015 (ecoAmerica, 2021). Equipped with information from NEHA and ecoAmerica’s Climate for Health program, you can make a difference in your organization and community.

Mental Health and Our Changing Climate provides direction for building community resilience to the mental health impacts of climate change and for accelerating climate solutions (Clayton et al., 2021). Some examples include:

- 1. Expanded response and resiliency plans can play a significant role in mitigating mental health concerns.** Environmental health professionals should invite mental health professionals and affected community members into the planning process to incorporate short- and long-term mental health implications of climate change
- 2. Increase and maintain social cohesion.** Following climate disasters and weather-related events, community leaders, including environmental health professionals, should support one another. Social cohesion and social networks provide community members with much-needed support
- 3. Address disparities to advance mental health equity.** Environmental injustices have impacted communities for decades and all other resilience-building actions need to be paired with addressing inequities. A good place to start at the community level

is conducting a vulnerability assessment. The results can then inform preparedness efforts such as prevention of climate disasters, reduction of exposure to disasters, and allocation of resources following a disaster.

You cannot take care of others if you do not take care of yourself. As you bring forth climate solutions and mental health resiliency in your organization and community, remember to also care for yourself. Spend time often with supportive people in your life (Bekkar, 2021). Providing solutions and helping to empower climate change solutions today will help counter distress (Clayton et al., 2021). We are, certainly, in this fight together. 🐾

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“There are some solutions that require our collective action. One of them is acknowledging that there are important mental health impacts [of climate change] and that we have to take that into consideration as we think about this issue.”

Arthur C. Evans, Jr., PhD, Chief Executive Officer, American Psychological Association (ecoAmerica, 2022, 16:03)

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Did You Know?

Thank you to all that attended the NEHA 2022 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition in Spokane, Washington, on June 28–July 1. Over 1,000 people attended either in person or virtually, taking advantage of the all the educational and networking opportunities. A wrap-up of the 2022 AEC will be published in the October *Journal of Environmental Health*.



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