



## For Mental Health Professionals

### How Climate Intersects with Mental Health Counseling

Climate change is usually described in terms of carbon emissions in the atmosphere and the resulting threats to our society and environment through events like sea level rise, species extinction, and escalating natural disasters such as wildfires and floods. Little attention has been paid to the tremendous mental health impacts of climate change. In 2012, the Executive Summary of the Psychological Effects of Global Warming on the United States warned that, “Global warming...in the coming years...will foster public trauma, depression, violence, alienation, substance abuse, suicide, psychotic episodes, post-traumatic stress disorders and many other mental health-related conditions.” ([NWF](#)). Communities worldwide are already experiencing losses through extreme climate events with a steady rise in eco-anxiety and grief. For many, worries about the future have grown into persistent existential dread.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has had a task force on the interface between psychology and global climate change for more than a decade. A December 2019 Harris Poll sponsored by the [APA](#) found that 68% of adults experience some anxiety about climate change, and 47% of those aged 18 – 34 report their feelings about climate change affect their daily lives. The National Institutes of Health found that nearly one in three teens ages 13 to 18 experience an anxiety disorder with climate themes being a primary trigger.

Despite its lack of inclusion in our DSM-5, emerging mental health terminology offers definitions for a range of experiences from the impacts of climate change:

- *Eco-anxiety*: An experience of dread, helplessness, and/or existential anxiety triggered by the seemingly irrevocable impacts of climate change.
- *Solastalgia*: The feeling of longing or being “homesick” as your familiar environment changes around you.

- *Pre-traumatic stress disorder*: Extreme anticipatory anxiety about climate disasters that are projected to occur in the future.
- *Ecological grief*: Intense feelings of grief as people suffer climate-related losses of ecosystems, landscapes, and human and animal life.

While these terms have yet to be widely incorporated into our professional vernacular, the emotional states they describe are pervasive.

### **Role of Mental Health Counselors in the Climate Era**

The mental health field has evolved tremendously, and our professional commitment includes periodically re-evaluating how and what we treat in order to keep pace with the issues and develop new clinical approaches. Developing core competencies in which all providers are equipped as climate-aware counselors is essential. The emotional distress triggered by climate change is already showing up in our practices and will only increase in the coming years.

A growing chorus of leaders in the field are making a powerful case for the mental health field to treat the climate crisis as a mental health crisis.

[Psychiatrist Lise Van Sustreren](#) states, *“Mental health professionals vigorously endorse requirements to report cases of child abuse. It is a legal obligation, but it is also a moral one. Is it any less compelling a moral obligation, in the name of all children now and in the future, to report that we are on track to hand over a planet that may be destroyed for generations to come? I respectfully request that we, as mental health professionals, make a unified stand in support of actions to reduce the threat of catastrophic climate change.”*

An article in [American Psychologist](#) points out that , *“Psychologists have an ethical obligation to take immediate steps to minimize the psychological harm associated with climate change, to help to reduce global disparities in climate impacts, and to continually improve their climate related interventions through coordinated programs of research and practice that draw on the rich diversity of psychologists’ skills and training.”*



This contribution goes beyond working with the feelings generated by climate distress. It underscores the need for professionals to join social and organizational efforts, being part of an interdisciplinary effort that brings emotional intelligence perspectives, child and lifespan development, family and community resilience, and lifestyle/social changes - in order, to mitigate and slow the progression of climate chaos. The field of psychology is rooted in powerful research and methodologies that have tremendous applications to address climate change:

- targeting the emotional underpinnings of denial and disavowal.
- understanding nuanced motivation for how people and cultures change.
- identifying the most effective communication strategies.
- bringing awareness to social justice issues that impact the well-being of individuals, groups and communities.
- building resiliency when individuals and communities are faced with immediate and long term problems that provoke trauma, grief, anxiety, and depression.
- promoting the therapeutic benefits of empowered participation and engagements in creative solutions.

Mental health practitioners have an invaluable role to play at this pivotal time in human history.

### **Talking About Climate with Clients and Colleagues**

Climate scientist Dr. Katharine Hayhoe states that talking about climate change may be the most important thing we can do, and yet it's one of those topics many people avoid or find challenging to navigate. Whether speaking with friends/family, colleagues, or clients, we can use our clinical knowledge and experience to guide fruitful conversations. As clinicians we know that being talked at, shamed, or patronized shut down the possibility for building connection. Especially with contentious or controversial issues, we recognize how important it is that each person is received, witnessed, validated, and that the best conversations start with listening.

With climate change, listen for the other person's areas of concern. Find common ground - what is something you can agree on? How is climate change affecting what you both already care about, whether that's children, health impacts from community pollution, changes to the place you live, etc. Conversations can occur in the context of ultimately holding



the aim for positive, constructive responses to address climate change and are rooted in shared values. The conversation may naturally tac back and forth, from the broad effects to the concrete and even local issues.

Look for natural openings in conversation, such as extreme weather or the elections, as a gentle transition into a focus on climate change. Approach the dialogue with a knowledge-gaining mindset, rather than a goal to persuade. Ask questions about what climate change means to them personally or professionally, then listen.

Behavioral health research tells us that most lifestyle and social choices are heavily influenced by emotionally-charged and cognitively-biased beliefs ([Davenport](#)). When a person's belief is challenged, they can feel threatened, and their views on climate change can become a rigid defense of their own security and psychological well-being: Emotional and cognitive empathy are essential to navigate this terrain. Being compassionate truth-tellers is most effective when there is rapport.

With clients, the incorporation of climate-related issues isn't intended to dominate the therapeutic focus, but rather to be appropriately integrated into our theories and interventions. When clients come into our practices with a constellation of symptoms like insomnia, depression or anxiety, we look for a history of abuse, factor in family-of-origin patterns, and examine current stressors at work and at home. But clients may also be having a visceral response to the unsettling changes experienced as a result of climate change impacts. Assessment entails discerning sources of distress in order to help clients "connect the dots," process their emotions, and develop healthy patterns and relationships. We can start by creating space for clients to bring their fear and disenfranchised climate distress out into the open with compassionate validation.

## Five Actions You Can Take

1. Educate yourself about climate change and the mental health impacts including climate anxiety and eco-grief. Here are a few good resources to get started:
  - [American Psychological Association \(APA\)](#)
  - [Climate and Mind](#)
  - [Climate Psychology Alliance](#)
  - [Climate Psychology \(Leslie Davenport\)](#)
  - [Project InsideOut](#)
  - [Talk Climate: Mental Health](#)
2. Explore your own views and feelings. As with all types of psychotherapy and counseling, integrity and effectiveness come from doing our own work. Do your personal and civic justice actions align with your understanding of climate issues? Do you have self-care and emotional resiliency practices for this deep and challenging work?
3. Join or create a professional community of colleagues exploring the intersection of climate and mental health. Many of these groups are forming, or you could put out an announcement to see if others are interested in creating one if there is not an existing forum. With the availability of remote participation, you also would not need to limit the search to your immediate area.
4. Advocate within your mental health association by requesting training that builds competency for becoming a climate-aware therapist. If your professional association is not offering climate-related trainings, advocate for it. We can all be part of asking each licensing board to require climate competencies in their educational requirements.
5. Add a climate change question to your intake form. Consider questions such as , “When you hear about what’s happening in the world, including climate change, how does it affect you?” The client will know that the topic is welcome in the consultation room and helps you as the clinician to incorporate this likely source of stress into your treatment approach.

**Created May 2021**

### **Contributors:**

Leslie Davenport, MA, MS, LMFT

Daniel Masler, PsyD, MLIS

Megan Slade, LMHC

Heather Price, PhD

Andrew Bryant, LICSW

