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## How does climate change affect mental health?

From extreme weather events to TV and social media news stories, the climate change crisis touches everyone's lives in one form or another. How is this affecting our mental well-being? And how can we try to stay positive in an increasingly negative world?

### Climate change as a human health emergency

"Climate change is a human health emergency that is having increasingly frequent, widespread and severe negative impacts on people's physical and mental health," says Sultana Afdhal, CEO of the [World Innovation Summit for Health \(WISH\)](#), Qatar Foundation's global health initiative.

The climate change crisis describes the long-term shifts in weather patterns and temperatures across the globe that threaten to negatively, and perhaps irreversibly, affect the health of both people and the planet.

An increasingly more common topic in our news stories, many of us are familiar with the terrifying statistics and predictions from experts - for example:

- Average global temperatures are estimated to rise by approximately 2° Celsius by 2050<sup>1</sup>.
- Sea levels are expected to rise by 30–50 centimetres by 2050<sup>2</sup>.
- These changes increase the occurrences of dangerous natural events, from wildfires and droughts to more extreme storms and floods<sup>3</sup>.

If reading these figures conjures up feelings of [stress](#) or [depression](#), you're not alone. Human health and environmental health are so inextricably linked that it can touch us all, whether we feel we have felt the direct effects of it or not.

Afdhal highlights that the two broad categories of the climate change impact, outlined in WISH's Health in the Climate Crisis report<sup>3</sup>, include harm as a result of acute events (such as floods, storms, and heatwaves) and long-term **anxiety**, depression, and stress felt indirectly in response to the worsening climate crisis."

Let's take a closer look at climate change and mental health through both of these categories, and how we can also use our environment to give our well-being a much-needed boost.

## The impact of climate change on mental health

### Direct impact on mental health

Extreme weather events are one of the more obvious links between health and climate. The physical health impacts are often immediate, but the mental health outcomes are often longer term and harder to measure.

For example, the 'black summer' of wildfires in Australia between June 2019 and February 2020 resulted in the death of 30 people and breathing problems in 35% of the population of New South Wales during January, but it is also thought that the mental health outcomes could be evident for five years after the fires<sup>4</sup>.

According to Afdhal, high temperatures and other extreme weather events can also harm food and water security and economic stability. In turn, this brings its own set of mental health effects.

"For example, take water scarcity or disruption to optimal temperatures for crop growth," says Afdhal. "It threatens mental health in rural populations, as a result of economic losses from crop failures, humiliation and shame over financial struggles, and social isolation in times of drought.

"Lower agricultural produce due to drought can also lead to malnutrition and hunger which, in turn, can cause anxiety, depression, and even [PTSD](#), due to the constant stress of not knowing when and where the next meal is coming from. Food instability can also result in forced migration, which is also emotionally taxing."

### **Indirect impact on mental health**

Of course, in the UK our contact with extreme weather events usually comes through the news or social media. But this physical distance from such events doesn't necessarily mean we're emotionally detached. Dr Elena Touroni, consultant psychologist and co-founder of [The Chelsea Psychology Clinic](#), explains:

"These kinds of natural disasters are all likely to be triggering, especially for those who already suffer from anxiety day-to-day. Anxiety itself is characterised by a feeling of vulnerability in the world, and so watching natural disasters play out can heighten these fears."

Kendall Roach, mental health therapist at digital healthcare company [Babylon](#), agrees that watching negative climate change media stories can "overwhelm us and create feelings of hopelessness".

## **Managing long-term eco-anxiety**

When it comes to climate change and mental health, it's important to understand that anyone can experience an emotional reaction, not just those with pre-existing mental health struggles or mental illness (although Touroni emphasises that these people are particularly vulnerable).

In fact, this brand of fear has become so widespread that it has been named 'eco-anxiety', which "refers to persistent worries about the climate crisis and the future of the Earth", Touroni explains.

In October 2021, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that<sup>5</sup>:

- 75% of British adults were worried about the impact of climate change.
- 43% reported having been very or somewhat anxious about the future of the environment over the previous month.
- Of those worried, one of the most common fears was for their family's future.

It can be scary to think about the future impact of climate change, but fortunately psychotherapists like Roach have some coping tips: "I often encourage patients to focus on the smaller circle of things within their control, and on the things that they can do personally to effect greater change on a larger scale daily.

"Patients often feel that what they can give or do is so small and insignificant, but I remind them: "If everyone is doing their personal part daily, how much greater will that change be on a global scale?"

## **The link between nature and mental health**

Small personal climate action goals may be one way to help keep you positive but remember that inaction can also be just as important. No, not staying-in-bed-all-day inaction (one can dream!) but rather the relaxing-in-nature type of inaction.

"Immersing ourselves in nature has been shown to have several mental health benefits. In fact, just looking at photos of awe-inspiring views has been shown to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system – the part of our nervous system that helps us feel calm," says Touroni.

Roach highlights several other mental health benefits of spending time in natural settings:

- Vitamin D, which we absorb through the skin from sunlight, is essential to mental health and wellness. Research has proven a direct correlation between low levels of vitamin D and depression.

- Exercise increases healthy endorphins (our 'happy hormones') which also improves our mood.
- Many also believe that the elements can have a soothing effect on our mental state. For example, some people find water very relaxing to listen to or to watch, and it symbolises 'cleansing'. Planting a garden and watching it grow can also be therapeutic and symbolises 'new growth'.

One 2020 study suggested that we may even feel our emotions improving after as little as 10 minutes in a natural setting<sup>6</sup>!

## Practising positivity

When we worry about the future, we can sometimes forget to live in the present. By spending time in nature, you have a better chance of protecting your own health. Touroni also points out that, while these issues can feel scary, in reality the implications of climate change are not fully predictable.

Let's also not forget, mental positivity can be a great driver for positive, real-world change – research repeatedly shows that people with a positive mindset are more productive and successful in their goals than those who bear the burden of negativity and pessimism<sup>7</sup>.

Roach says "practising 'mind over mood', [mindfulness](#), and keeping our mindset on our localised centre of control can help us all stay positively focused and to avoid feeling overwhelmed or hopeless."

Of course, it's important to stay up to date with world events but try to look out for the climate change stories of hope and positive action as well. For example, WISH's global summit on October 4-6 2022, which Afdhal describes as: "A dedicated forum which will investigate the effects of climate change on food security and health (both physical and mental), and outline recommendations for governments to mitigate these effects now and in the future."

## Further reading

1. [Smith and Woodward, Human health: impacts, adaptation, and co-benefits.](#)

2. [Horton et al. Mapping sea-level change in time, space, and probability mapping sea-level change in time.](#)
3. [Roland et al. Health in the climate crisis.](#)
4. Department of health and aged care, Australian Government mental health response to bushfire trauma.
5. Office for National Statistics, Three-quarters of adults in Great Britain worry about climate change.
6. [Spending time in nature reduces stress.](#)
7. [Tenney et al. Does positivity enhance work performance?: Why, when, and what we don't know.](#)

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