



Physicians for  
Social Responsibility



United States Affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War

## Health Implications of Global Warming: Be Mindful of Mental Health

Global warming is acknowledged by scientists around the world to be a reality and to be caused primarily by human activity, especially the burning of fossil fuels. As the earth warms, the delicate balance of climate, weather events and life is disrupted. Consequences emerge that threaten human health and, ultimately, survival.

This is one of several fact sheets produced by Physicians for Social Responsibility that examine recent scientific evidence of global warming's impact on health.

### **All of the specific health risks of global warming have associated mental health risks.<sup>i</sup>**

- Heat waves contribute to more alcohol and substance abuse.<sup>ii</sup>
- Just an increase of 1 degree F (0.5 C) seems to increase the risk of violent behavior, especially in warm climates and the inner city.<sup>iii</sup>
- Food and water shortages threaten our basic sense of security and therefore are associated with increases in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health problems.<sup>iv</sup>
- The chronic drought in the outback of Australia is causing a new and dangerous variation of grief, solastalgia, which is a kind of distress about environmental losses in one's homeland.<sup>v</sup>
- Perceptions of poor air quality results in increased anxiety, especially in children, along with increased family violence.<sup>vi</sup>
- Individual panic and group hysteria are risks of vector-borne or waterborne diseases. Recent harbingers of this possibility were seen in the SARS epidemic.<sup>vii</sup>
- People with schizophrenia are of particular risk health-wise as they tend to ignore health risks and tend not to take necessary precautions. One study links increased air pollution, specifically from motor vehicles, with an increased risk for schizophrenia. If duplicated, this would be an important finding with implications in regard to climate change.<sup>viii</sup>
- When viewed in the totality of its impacts, global warming creates the potential for large-scale human conflict, as a result of displacement from climate-scarred lands and/or disputes over increasingly scarce resources.

### **The direct mental health risks of global warming have some unusual variations.**

- The mental health implications will vary with the type, suddenness, and scale of climate change damage, as well as the social, historical, and cultural context. All of this will be filtered through the resilience of each individual.<sup>ix</sup>
- In certain isolated locales, the climate change of global warming can be desirous and beneficial to human life, at least temporarily. In these environments, mental wellbeing can improve.

- Under-recognized background anxiety exists in communities prone to undesired climate change and the associated natural disasters.<sup>x</sup>
- Children who feel they are growing up in a threatened future tend to be more troubled than their parents or grandparents. A survey of Australian children indicated that a quarter of the children fear the world will come to an end before they grow up.<sup>xi</sup>
- If the perception is that people are causing climate change, rather than it being mainly a natural phenomena, the risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder will increase following climate-related disasters. Whenever there is a perception that more could have been done to avert, mitigate or respond to disasters, the mental health toll will be higher. Such was the case with Hurricane Katrina.<sup>xii</sup>
- People who have to move from climate-ravaged environments, such as flooded Bangladesh, have come to be known as “climate refugees.” Stress Disorders are common in such situations and complicated by “cultural bereavement.”<sup>xiii</sup>

## Resources for providing mental healthcare related to global warming are inadequately developed

- More people are likely to be vulnerable to the mental health implications of climate change than physical health impairments. Yet for general mental healthcare in most countries, insurance and resources are inadequate compared with general healthcare.
- Disaster Response Teams are prepared for responding to acute disasters, but not to the more chronic and slowly developing mental health problems related to global warming.
- Even with adequate resources, people with mental illness often receive inadequate care.<sup>xiv</sup>

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