

Introduction

The urgency and uncertainty of climate change is often accompanied by the emotional or behavioural responses of fear, hopelessness, guilt, worry, and/or anger, to name a few, a response that is becoming more commonly referred to as climate anxiety. There are a growing number of terms in addition to climate anxiety, which are not necessarily pathological, or mental health disorders, but justified reactions to climate change impacts. These reactions are typically considered to be appropriate expressions of grief and/or loss; however, unprocessed or coupled with existing mental health diagnoses, climate anxiety can lead to complete climate inaction, impact everyday functioning, and potentially lead to more severe mental health challenges (Ogunbode et al., 2022). How do we support our mental health in a time of climate crisis and continue to take action on climate change?

Climate Anxiety to Climate Action

Climate Change Impacts

Acute Hazards

- Wildfire
- Flood
- Hurricane
- Extreme Heat Events

(Climate Psychology 101, n.d.)
(Hayes, et. al, 2022)

Slow-Onset Hazards

- Drought
- Sea-Level Rise
- Ocean Acidification
- Glacial Retreat

Mental Health Impacts of Climate Change

The impacts of climate change on mental health vary greatly depending on many factors including pre-existing physical health, mental health, community health/community support, socio-economic status, occupation, social inequities, and exposure to acute or slow-onset climate hazards. There is a potential for climate change to either exacerbate existing mental health conditions or cause new-onset mental health conditions. Some examples include post-traumatic stress-disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, suicide ideation or suicide, and/or substance misuse (Hayes, et. al, 2022).

Impacted Populations

- Those who face health inequities or discrimination based on race, culture, gender, age, socio-economic status, ability, and/or geographic location are at a higher risk of increased mental health impacts due to climate change (Hayes, et. al, 2022).
- Stolen land and forced relocation has and continues to result in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples living on land that is more vulnerable to climate change (Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009). Coupled with the lack of culturally relevant health services available, a deep cultural connection to the deteriorating earth, and looming potential of forced relocation due to climate hazards, Indigenous Peoples are at higher risk to the mental health impacts of climate change (Wale, 2020).
- Children and youth are among the highly impacted populations due to the uncertainty of the earth that they are growing up into and more specifically for youth, the limited opportunities for influencing policy and government (Galway & Field, 2023).
- People with low socio-economic status or those experiencing homelessness are also among the highly impacted populations due to greater risk of exposure to climate hazards (Hayes, et. al, 2022).
- People working in primarily outdoor occupations that rely on environmental health, for example, fishers; first responders supporting communities post-climate disaster; resource-based occupations that are experiencing shifts in their industry and livelihood; the public health sector; and climate scientists or any climate-related occupation all face higher risk of the mental health impacts of climate change (Hayes, et. al, 2022).

Climate Emotions Wheel



Climate Emotions Wheel © 2024



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Key Terms

Climate Anxiety: summarizes a negative emotional response to the impact of climate change, mainly characterized by an increase in anxiety (future-oriented concern) but sometimes includes emotions referring to the perception of the existential risk and the potential loss of ontological security related to anthropogenic climate change (Cianconi et al., 2023).

Eco-anxiety: refers to anxiety related to the ecological crisis, a reaction to the changing state of the planetary ecosystem, and/or a chronic fear of environmental doom. The differences between climate anxiety and eco-anxiety become blurred because climate change has an effect on many ecological problems (Agoston et al., 2022).

Climate Burnout or Eco-Burnout: overstimulation and constant exposure to disturbing information about climate change can lead to the feeling of being overwhelmed and anxious. This is often worsened by technology and social media due to the access to information potentially on a constant basis (Cianconi et al., 2023).

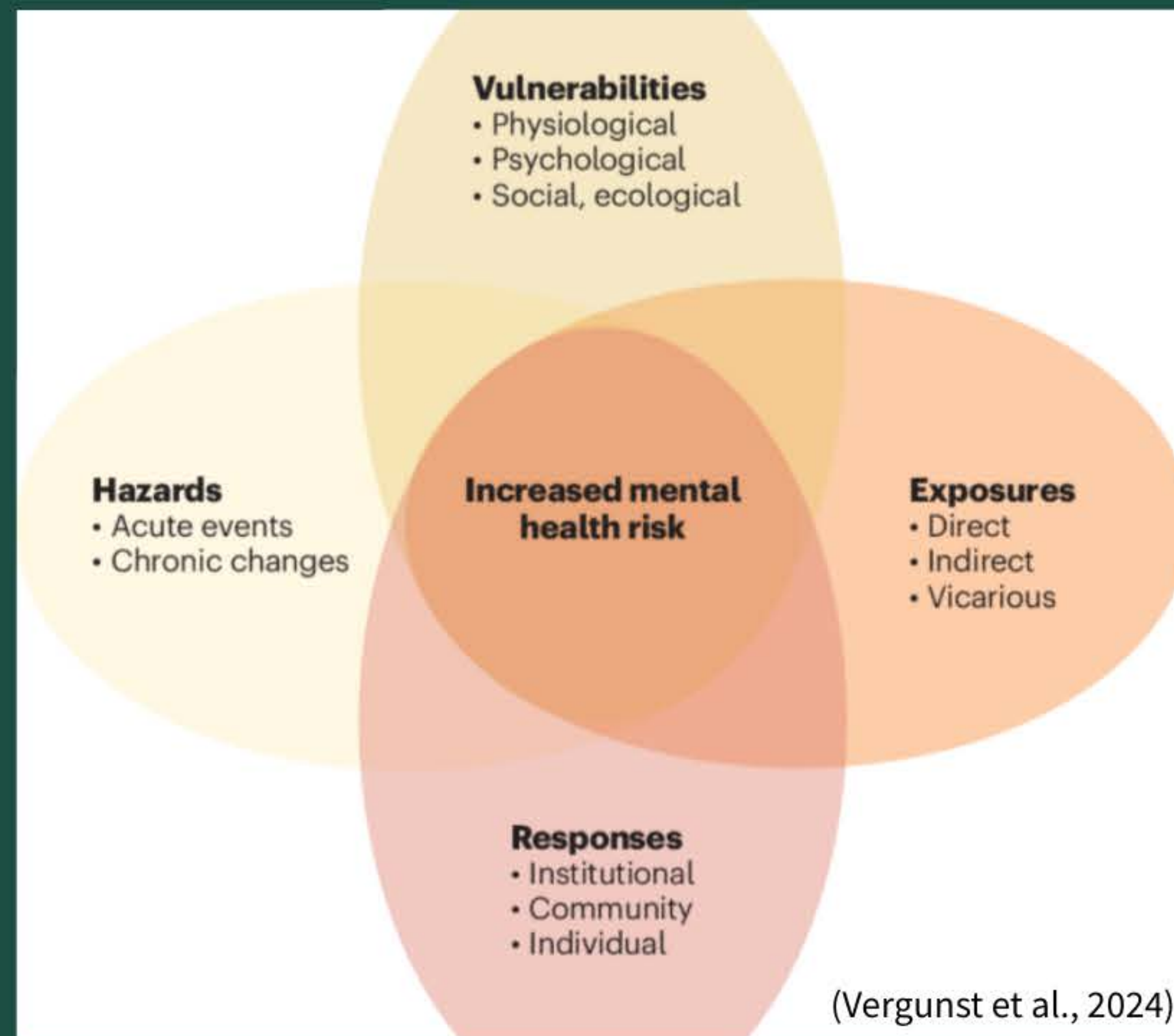
Eco-paralysis: the inability to meaningfully respond to the climatic and ecological challenges either from sudden emotional shock or the cognitive dilemma of having an abundance of, or potentially conflicting avenues to take action (Agoston et al., 2022).

Eco-grief: a response to ecological loss, either after the physical environment has been lost or the anticipation of future losses (Agoston et al., 2022).

Solastalgia: akin to eco-grief, describing the anguish or despair experienced with the chronic deterioration of the natural spaces we are connected to (Agoston et al., 2022).

Eco-nostalgia: when we return to a location after a period of time and it has been transformed either by development or climate change (Agoston et al., 2022).

Eco-guilt: arises when people think about their potentially harmful behavior to the environment and their failure to protect it, because they realize they have violated personal or social standard of behavior (Cianconi et al., 2023).



MACAL Connections

The mental health impacts of climate change have been a thread throughout the MACAL program, from sharing our worries among the cohort, to absorbing information and research in classes and lectures. My background in music therapy with a focus on youth mental health and my personal passion lead me to the portfolio route of the MACAL program. In one of my electives, Psychosocial Interventions for Managing Stress, Trauma, and Loss, we learned about human's innate wiring for resilience post-disaster. In Leading Climate Action in Society Part 1, our group designed an app called Resilience, which worked to turn climate anxiety into climate action through community connection and mindfulness support. In Communications for Climate Action, we experienced the power of a sit-spot and the importance of place-based attachment. Planning Approaches for Climate Resiliency taught more about the impact of social inequities on people's ability to be resilient and how to include these important considerations in climate action planning. Modelling the Business Case for Climate Action included a business proposal for increased adaptation measures in Colwood, BC to protect homeless folks from extreme heat during heatwaves. These are just a few examples of the focus on mental health and climate action throughout the program, a topic which I hope to carry over into my future career.

Interventions

Multiple bodies of research show that acknowledging the reality of climate change and all of the past and future losses that accompany it, is an important step in addressing climate anxiety (Dodds, 2021). It is suggested that experiencing and articulating difficult emotions (loss, grief, fear) in a shared community context allows us to shift from inaction to action (Dodds, 2021). Examples of interventions on a policy and programming level could include: access to culturally relevant mental health supports and the inclusion of psychosocial well-being in climate change resilience plans (Hayes, et. al, 2022). Interventions pertaining to medical practices could include specialized training for community members in Psychosocial First Aid or Mental Health First Aid and specialized ecopsychology training for mental health practitioners (Hayes, et. al, 2022).

Interacting with and connecting to nature is one of the most effective ways to address climate anxiety. The mental and physical health benefits of nature are well known, Robbins states that nature is not only nice to have, but it's a have-to-have for physical health and cognitive function (Robbins, 2020). When connection to nature is combined with environmental stewardship, it can improve one's sense of control and help to overcome feelings of hopelessness (Dodds, 2021). Having a personal emotional connection to the natural environment is shown to motivate climate action from a place of love and protection rather than fear and dread, which allows for more sustainable, long-term action (Dodds, 2021). Setting personal boundaries with climate information by avoiding fear-based messaging and doomscrolling and including the consumption of hopeful climate stories is also shown to lower levels of climate anxiety (Blumberg, 2022). Mindfulness is shown to build individual resilience and improve mental well-being and is often suggested in regards to addressing climate anxiety. The effectiveness with addressing climate anxiety is even higher when mindfulness is paired with a connection to nature, for example, with a practice such as a sit spot, or connection to community, for example, with a yoga or dance class (Blumberg, 2022).

Conclusion

Jayakody, et. al's 2024 study on place-based attachment and climate action shows that strong place-based attachment and connection to nature can still result in climate inaction due to a freeze response (Jayakody, et. al, 2024). Sharing climate emotions, fostering community connections, support at a government and policy level, mindfulness, and environmental stewardship are all effective ways go from climate anxiety to climate action, however; considering factors such as pre-existing mental health conditions, socio-economic status, and discrimination and inequity are deciding factors whether the climate anxiety someone experiences is a reasonable response based on the threat or a more serious and debilitating mental health condition.

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