



Psychology for a Safe Climate Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

The members of Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC) are a voluntary group of psychologists, psychiatrists and others working in mental health. Our purpose is to contribute psychological understanding and support within the community, helping people face the difficult climate reality. Some more details of our work are provided at the end of the submission.

Whilst it is beyond our scope to address all questions, we have commented below on areas within our expertise. We highlight climate change as a key threat to mental health and wellbeing, and argue that climate change needs to be a central issue in examining our mental health system. We believe that climate change needs to be factored in to all State policy, and this is even more the case in the mental health system given the substantial body of scientific evidence highlighting these risks, and growing evidence that climate change represents a "health emergency".

Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritize for change

We believe that the Royal Commission must prioritize an awareness of the impact of climate change on people's mental health and wellbeing (1). Climate change is already having and will continue to have a significant negative impact on people's health. It is widely regarded as the biggest health threat of the 21st century (2).

Climate change impacts on people's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in a number of ways. There is a significant risk of mental health problems following extreme weather events and there is likely to be increased psychiatric morbidity as these events become more frequent and intense with climate change (e.g. increased risk of bushfires, drought, floods, extreme temperatures). Such morbidity includes posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, and substance use problems.

There are also psychological impacts caused by climate change's more gradual impacts on the environment, human systems and infrastructure. These impacts have flow on effects by increasing stress, and negatively affecting family and individual wellbeing, and community health.

Additionally, climate change has a vicarious or existential impact on people's mental health as awareness increases of the threat of climate change now and increasingly dramatically in the future, and as the impacts of climate change become more obvious and ubiquitous.

Ecological grief is defined in a recent Nature Climate Change (3) article as "The grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change." The American Psychological Association produced a 2017 report (4) detailing the impacts of climate change on mental health which made reference to *ecoanxiety*. The glossary describes it as a chronic fear of environmental doom.

It is hard not to feel fear on reading the 2018 IPCC report.(5)

Climate change can therefore cause ecological grief and ecoanxiety and can produce a background of insecurity and uncertainty which can be a significant factor in mental health issues. These types of grief and anxiety are likely to increase considerably as the reality and



severity of climate change related problems are experienced. The vital importance of Country to our indigenous nations make them particularly vulnerable. This is and will also be the case for younger people, and also for many others who are very concerned about their natural environments and/or the climate and environmental crisis.

It is particularly important that young people have help available to process their feelings and concerns about climate change, and that the education and mental health system work together on this. Children and young people are very concerned about climate change. Not only are young people more likely to be prone to ecoanxiety and ecological grief, but also to other climate change related mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse (6,7). This in turn can lead to problems of emotional and cognitive development, and predispose to adult mental disorders.

What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

Climate change is already a significant driver in many communities in Victoria due to the prolonged drought, extreme and unpredictable weather conditions, and changed growing seasons, and these impacts will only increase in severity and frequency over time.

Extreme weather event disasters like bushfires and flooding are an obvious driver of mental health problems in Victoria.

Extreme heat events and humidity have been noted to increase hospital admissions for mental illness, including schizophrenia, mania and neurotic disorders.

Farming communities in Victoria are also particularly vulnerable to mental health problems caused by or exacerbated by drought. Long term droughts affect the economic and mental wellbeing of land-based workers, mainly through the economic effects from land degradation, and most prominent amongst farmers whose economic livelihoods depend on environmental conditions(1). Some authors suggest that income insecurity related to drought increases the risk of suicide among farmers (8,9).

What can be done better to prevent suicide?

Suicide is particularly prevalent in some areas which have been impacted by climate change. Of particular note would be drought affected farming communities.(10) It is very important not only that mental health specialists are working in those areas, but that they are aware of the realities of climate change. For example, some farmers and psychologists may turn a blind eye to climate change, whereas more realistic solutions may be found if the truth can be faced, such as making farming more adaptable to the climate or moving from farming in the area.

It is important for mental health workers to go beyond treating symptoms to help creating communities that are more psychologically resilient in the face of climate change. This would be very likely to lower the suicide rate.

What can be done better to support the mental health workforce?

The Victorian mental health workforce is underprepared to deal with the health risks associated with climate change. A recent 2015 global survey (11) reveals that Australia lags behind comparable countries when it comes to protecting its citizens from climate change.

The mental health sector comprises many health and community organizations supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged people. It is a sector which is hardest hit by climate change related extreme weather events and disasters due to increased demand for services for people with a range of mental health and psychosocial problems. Understanding what to do to reduce the threats of climate change (climate change mitigation) and adapt to these

threats (adaptation, disaster preparedness) , as well as how to care for people who are adversely affected by climate change impacts, are an essential part of mental health practitioners' work.

Mental health policy needs to be developed that supports health and community organizations to prepare adequately for future extreme weather disaster impacts, especially in communities which have experienced traumatic climate change events, or are at high risk of experiencing them in the near future.

Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

Both climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation needs to be considered by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

The mental health sector also needs to be considered in terms of potential for emission reductions, as well as support to become a climate resilient mental health sector. Whilst the mental health sector does not make as large a contribution to Australia's emissions as other sectors such as agriculture or transport, there is still scope for the sector to reduce its emissions and make a significant contribution to overall emission reductions in Australia (12).

There is a range of adaptation measures that ought to be considered to support population level mental health in a changing climate. Hayes et al(1) include policy responses (eg building public health systems that fully take into account the profound implications and consequences of the connections between climate change and human health) and planning (e.g. identifying at risk populations, developing action plans for responding to climate hazards to meet the needs of the population). The sector needs to develop alternative and more effective practices to manage the complex issues related to climate change, while continuing to implement their traditional primary, secondary and tertiary models. Experts recognize that the current ways in which the health care sector operates is not fully able to take into account the profound implications and consequences of the connections between climate change and human health.

Psychology for a Safe Climate

Our organization- Psychology for a Safe climate <http://psychologyforasafeclimate.org/> has for some years been organizing workshops with those particularly concerned about climate change (including Australian Youth Climate Coalition, various environmental and climate activist groups, farmers, a bushfire affected community, council and university departments) and we have found much grief and anxiety both about the human world, including the very difficult question about whether to have a child in the age of climate change, and also about the nonhuman world as mentioned above. In our work we have focussed on climate grief and anxiety, burnout related to climate change engagement and action, and also skills for self-care. Feedback from our workshops has been very positive. Being able to share difficult feelings and find new ways to care for oneself have been felt to be very helpful.

We believe that our work is therapeutic and preventative. We do offer referrals for those who need individual psychological help. We believe that work similar to ours could be carried out in the public sector.

We particularly think that there does need to be an emphasis on prevention and in this regard it is important to have mental health programs to increase psychological and community resilience. We have had some connection with a number of such programs. They have relevance not just for communities directly impacted by major climate change impacts e.g. bushfires, drought, but also for other Victorian communities. It is very important to note that we are now in a climate changed world and that this will get worse. It is therefore very important that communities not only come to terms with the present, but also prepare

themselves psychologically for an uncertain and more risky future climate. This has been called “transformative resilience”. (13)

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