

SYNOPSIS

Review of “Factors Influencing the Mental Health Consequences of Climate Change in Canada”

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One-Minute Summary

- This commentary presents a new assessment of literature included in a global scoping review originally conducted in 2018. Literature included in the original scoping review is reanalyzed to identify psychosocial factors that could influence the capacity to adapt to the mental health consequences of climate change in Canada. The reanalysis identifies interventions and factors at the societal level and provides lessons learned for climate change adaptation in Canada.
- To provide context, three key findings from the original scoping review are summarized: there is a range of mental health risks and impacts from the changing climate; these risks and impacts are unequally distributed due to the social and environmental determinants of health; and there are a range of response initiatives that can support mental wellness in a changing climate.
- From the reanalysis, the authors identify 11 psychosocial factors that either support positive health outcomes, or act as barriers. These include social capital, sense of community, government assistance, financial and physical access to care, community preparedness, intersectoral/transdisciplinary collaboration, vulnerability and adaptation assessments, communication and outreach, mental health literacy, and culturally relevant response interventions.
- Results suggest that climate change adaptation policies could consider the mental health risks associated with climate change, the resources required to reduce those risks, and the key psychosocial factors that can influence mental health outcomes. Health authorities can play a role in these adaptation strategies by conducting vulnerability and adaptation assessments and collaborating with partners to reduce the mental health impacts of climate-related hazards.

Additional Information

The original (2018) scoping review identified and synthesized evidence on risk, impacts and vulnerabilities related to climate change and mental health to explore how mental health indicators can be integrated into climate change and health vulnerability assessments.

In 2019, Hayes et al. re-analyzed the literature included in their original 2018 scoping review, in order to identify psychosocial factors that could influence climate change mitigation. Articles that addressed how a changing climate affects mental health (e.g., risks, impacts, and vulnerabilities) and/or how climate-related impacts to mental health are managed (e.g., responses and response capacity) were included in the 2018 scoping review. The review included global literature published between 2000 and 2017, with the analysis focussed on lessons relevant to a Canadian context.

Descriptive qualitative analysis was used for the new assessment to identify themes pertaining to climate change and mental health adaptation. In addition to the literature analysis, the authors reflected on two disasters in Alberta, Canada: the 2013 Southern Alberta floods and the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfires, in order to provide examples for each psychosocial factor.

A number of psychosocial factors were identified. When present, these psychosocial factors support positive health outcomes; when absent, they act as barriers. The factors were not ranked or prioritized; rather the authors' perspective is that incorporating all of the factors, in combination, into emergency responses would optimize psychosocial adaption in a changing climate.

- **Social capital** describes social relationships that allow people to coordinate community action in order to achieve shared goals. It helps to reduce social isolation, loneliness, and feelings of abandonment. Social capital is a protective factor for mental health and well-being. In the context of climate change mitigation, social capital can support and enhance emergency response and recovery. The authors suggest that supporting and building social capital be at the centre of response strategies.
- **Sense of community** is related to social capital. It refers to feelings of togetherness and belonging. A sense of community, and the social support that one can find in that community, can support resilience in the face of climate change. Rebuilding community networks and forming new social connections can help to mitigate the impacts of disconnection, displacement, and fractured communications that results from disasters. Strong leaders, including in government and community, can help to establish community trust, inclusivity, and foster empowerment.
- Psychosocial wellbeing in a changing climate can be impacted by limited **financial and physical access to mental health care**. Physical access can include infrastructure damage that makes it difficult to access mental health facilities and lack of mental health care in communities (for example in remote communities). Financial access refers to lack of funding for mental health care and the cost of accessing private care. **Government assistance programs** can play a key role in providing/enhancing access to mental health care and treatment, in particular in rural and remote communities. Long-term mental health care needs should be considered, versus short-term post-event supports. For example, following the 2013 Southern Alberta floods, the province established a Chief Mental Health Officer and allocated funds to deploy mental health practitioners to affected areas,¹ although the role was not sustained long-term.²

- **Community preparedness** involves having an emergency management or emergency preparedness plan specific to climate change and mental health. Many preparedness plans do not include mental health and wellness recovery. The authors included examples of plans which do, including the mental health and wellness recovery services guide developed to support Albertans affected by the 2016 wildfires,³ and the Canadian Psychological Associations' list of mental health resources to support communities during and following emergencies, outbreaks and disasters.⁴
- **Intersectoral/transdisciplinary collaboration** is described as people or groups from different disciplines working together to tackle complex issues. In the case of climate change and mental health, these collaborations can promote wellbeing and recovery. Collaborations should involve communities as well as agencies, including front-line mental health workers, emergency preparedness professionals, governments, public health authorities, environmental and health NGOs, and climate and meteorological services.
- **Vulnerability and adaptation assessments** provide information on how climate changes impacts health, describes populations most at risk, and identifies specific actions that can protect human health from climate change. Mental health is not often included in these assessments due to challenges in attributing mental health impacts directly to climate change, and a lack of guidance on measuring and monitoring mental health effects related to climate change.
- The authors outline the importance of **communication and outreach** in supporting psychological wellbeing. Specifically, clear, early warning communication efforts can save lives and support people to assess risks and respond prior to the occurrence of an extreme weather event. Redundancies need to be built into communication systems so that disruptions due to extreme events are minimized. Messages delivered by trusted and local sources can also protect the psychosocial consequences of extreme weather.
- **Mental health literacy** is described as the knowledge and beliefs that individuals have about mental disorders which allow them to recognize, manage, and prevent them. Mental health literacy applies both to those experiencing climate change (for example, community members) and first responders and health care workers working during and following the climate emergency. The main objectives are to broaden awareness that mental health and mental illness exist on a spectrum, to shift the stigma that surrounds mental illness, and to support health-seeking behaviours. The authors listed Psychological First Aid,⁵ and Mental Health First Aid,⁶ as program examples that can enhance mental health literacy.
- **Culturally relevant** response interventions are those which are appropriate to people of all backgrounds and identities. These interventions require that mental health practitioners and first responders are aware of, and understand different cultural backgrounds, identities and experiences of people and groups. The authors note concerns that in Canada there is a lack of cultural empathy when supporting Indigenous communities, as well as a lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge on climate change and health. Recognizing the knowledge and wisdom of traditional knowledge systems and practices can be an asset in adapting to climate change, in particular given that Indigenous communities are among those most at risk, particularly to the mental health impacts of climate change. The authors note the example of specific programs offered by Indigenous Services Canada, aimed at increasing resilience to climate change impacts.⁷

PHO Reviewer's Comments

Some implications for public health practice were outlined by the authors; specifically, actions to enhance mental health literacy, promote cultural relevancy, and strengthen community networks and communication channels. However, strategies for implementation are not reported.

While some aspects of the research methodology were clearly described (e.g., exclusion and inclusion criteria, search strategy), little information about the qualitative analysis process was provided and no conceptual or theoretical framework was reported. Lack of a theoretical framework to guide the new assessment may result in difficulties interpreting, understanding, and contextualizing findings within the existing literature in addition to ensuring that the research is focused and purpose driven.⁸ The absence of theoretical grounding and lack of detail relating to the qualitative data analysis methods used are limitations for those seeking to expand work within this content area.

Strengths of this commentary include its applicability to Canadian context and the provision of examples from two Canadian emergency responses. Several of the psychosocial factors, such as social capital, sense of community, and cultural relevancy highlight assets that can protect wellbeing. Others such as physical and financial access to mental health care, vulnerability and adaptation assessments and community preparedness plans that address mental health, provide directions for governments and agencies as they consider and develop response plans.

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