

EDITORIAL

Toward Equitable Adaptation – Addressing Climate Change
and COVID-19

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The persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant changes in climate leading to an increase of disasters have been a cause of concern. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report warned that society has a narrow window of time left to prevent climate change from spinning out of control. This report has reignited urgent calls for action (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021; Arias et al., 2021), but there is a less recognized dimension of climate change that could make these calls for action more effective, which is the connection between climate change and mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already resulted in several mental health disparities (Ferreira, 2021) and has shown the inequitable mental health crisis that can result when people are forced to alter the behaviors and lifestyles they are accustomed to (Ferreira et al., 2020). Climate change already poses a significant threat due to the prolonged exposure and intensified associated disasters. Given the current crises and associated impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of climate change would be pale in comparison to the mental health crisis that would result from ongoing, worsening climate change over the long term.

COVID-19 and the Climate Impact Nexus

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related impacts seem to be differential, but there are several similarities to be observed. The prolonged exposure and associated uncertainty make it often hard to fully grasp the mental health impacts from these phenomena. The connections concerning climate change and mental health exist on multiple levels in ways both direct and indirect. Evidence exists that links extreme temperatures with detrimental effects on our well-being and decision-making ability. Research indicates that climate change impacts associated with heat increases and droughts can exacerbate compulsive behavior and can even result in an increase of suicide. (Burke et al., 2018) It is often the most vulnerable who are directly impacted by climate change (Ferreira, 2020).

Climate change can also affect physical health in numerous ways. Drought can lead to dehydration, malnutrition, and poor sanitation. The smoke from wildfires linked to climate change causes acute respiratory problems. There can be an increase in infectious diseases, and it is quite possible that we are already seeing a real-life example by way of the COVID-19 pandemic and its tremendous toll on public mental health (Ferreira, 2020; Ferreira et al., 2020).

One of the repercussions of climate change is an increasing number of extreme weather events such as droughts, heat waves, and hydrological disasters. Hurricanes, floods, and wildfires often involve very intense sights, sounds, smells, and sensations that can be traumatic by their very nature. Such events can also cause heavy infrastructural damage and leave people with limited access to basic needs such as food, water, shelter, sanitation, and social support. Disruptive and extreme events can lead to long-term mental health challenges, ultimately altering our behavior.

The mere awareness that climate change is an incontrovertible fact and that it is getting worse can cause mental health symptoms on its own. Accordingly, 67% of Americans are currently experiencing some degree of anxiety about the impact of climate change (Connors, 2021). In fact, mental health challenges associated with climate change are becoming so common that the field of psychology is seeing the emergence of new terms to describe them. Ecoanxiety or climate anxiety describes the growing sense of stress and anxiety in the face of the sheer magnitude of the problem, and solastalgia describes the sense of loss that people experience when the natural environment is no longer a source of solace but rather of distress.

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered our being and behaviors. The sudden change in our daily lives since March 2020 has caused a ripple effect across individuals, households, and communities across the globe. We have seen increases in domestic violence, loneliness, and suicidality (Buttelt & Ferreira, 2020; Czeisler et al., 2020; Killgore et al., 2020).

Equitable Adaptation to Climate Change and COVID-19: Call to Action

Given the nature of these vexing issues on our mental health, now more than ever, we need proactive action and equitable solutions to address resilience disparities. Through this approach, we can adapt

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and lessen the impact of the unknown and impacts of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. This issue of *Traumatology* includes a constellation of articles detailing empirical and theoretical approaches seeking to gain a better understanding of how climate change and the pandemic impacts our overall well-being and what measures should be taken to adapt to these extremes.

Equitable Adaptation to COVID-19 and Climate Change Challenges

Neither the COVID-19 pandemic nor climate change will be going away soon. With inevitability, we will need to adapt to these challenges to ensure our well-being. Because the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change are complex phenomena addressing these requires a multifaceted approach. It is however important that we work toward an equitable approach for addressing root causes of vulnerability to be able to adapt to these challenges (Ferreira & Figley, 2018; Ferreira, 2021).

At the core, we must continue to be part of any comprehensive solution. But although awareness is important, by itself, it is inadequate at mobilizing widespread action. Part of the reason for this might be that the approaches that awareness campaigns used may not be equally effective for everyone. Political leanings, for example, can influence how people receive climate change-related or COVID-19-related messaging. Understanding hesitancy to adapt or be part of the solution may help organizations craft more effective awareness campaigns.

At the policy and legislation level, clearly, it is past the time for governments to bring all excuses to a full stop. Although the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report concludes it is still possible to mitigate the damage being done. If governments do not act now, we will have a global mental health crisis to add to the list of climate change-related crises. These crises will further impact the economy and societal stability, which in turn will further affect public mental health in a vicious cycle.

Grassroots organizations and communities can also act without waiting for action at a national level. Not only can they work directly to mitigate COVID-19 and climate change, but they can also take action that specifically alleviates the toll of these hazards for the most vulnerable and ensure actions are taken for improved community mental health. For example, organizations can devote resources to expedite adaptation. By equipping mental health and social service workers with disaster mental health preparedness training they can provide effective and critical mental health services in the aftermath of disasters and extreme weather events (Ferreira, 2019). Because these events are no longer a one-time event, the effects of the same will likely continue for the foreseeable future. Organizations can also provide mental health workers with crisis counseling strategies that can help people adapt to the anticipated long-term instability.

At the individual level, people who are experiencing COVID-19 and climate anxiety should start by acknowledging their feelings and realizing that several of these feelings are normal. There should be a push to channel our distress into action, which is a reliable strategy for reducing anxiety. Fortunately, there are many examples of both public and private figures who are doing just that. By being proactive and seeking out like-minded others, individuals can discover and be part of communities where they can receive social support,

which is also an important factor of mental health and plays a protective role during times of uncertainty such as the one we are in.

We need to increase adaptation strategies for mental health in the face of climate change and COVID-19 (Ferreira & Figley, 2015; Ferreira, 2020, 2021). It is imperative that adaptation strategies are sustainable and accessible. Although the difficulties we will face from climate change are abstract ideas that we can find challenging to process, the prospect of even more of the mental health struggles we have already been experiencing because of COVID-19 may hit a little closer to home. It is hoped that this issue of *Traumatology* can start the dialogue on effective adaptation strategies to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.

Finally, I want to thank all who have been involved with *Traumatology* during the COVID-19 pandemic. The journal is in a blessed position with the expertise serving on the editorial board. The range of expertise among reviewers ensures that the journal is able to handle the broad range of topics in the manuscripts we publish. As with the rich tradition of the journal, the editorial team provides timely and high-quality reviews to authors.

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