

ACA Task Force

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Fact Sheet

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Introduction

The American Counseling Association and its members stand in solidarity with professional counselors who work to address the mental health and wellness of individuals, families, and communities affected by the current and impending consequences of climate change. As members of a profession focused on fostering healthy development and wellness across the lifespan, counselors are uniquely equipped to empower clients to proactively address the mental health consequences of climate-related crises and the environmental issues related to climate change. This document introduces professional counselors to facts, actions, and resources that can aid them in addressing the diverse climate-change-based needs of clients and communities.

About Climate Crisis

According to NASA, climate change “affects the environment, natural resources, economy and other aspects of life in all nations of the world”. Understanding the fundamentals of climate change can help counselors better conceptualize the impact it is currently having and will continue to have on our clients and communities.

In 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), was established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and World Meteorological Organisation (WMO). The IPCC report (takeaways from IPCC) is one of the most reputable reports on climate change today. As counselors, we can also refer to the US Climate Assessment 2016, The Climate Reality Project, and NASA, just to name a few, to develop our baseline knowledge of climate change and the climate crisis. Additional resources include: The National Climate Assessment 2018 Overview; The Climate Reality Project “Climate 101”; and, also from the Climate Reality Project, five podcasts to inspire your thinking about the climate crisis.

Understanding the terminology around climate change and the climate crisis is also an important building block. We recommend learning about the shift of language to climate crisis (1, 2) as well as climate justice, which is the intersection of environmental justice and social justice as it relates to the climate crisis.

Climate Crisis and Mental Health

The impact of the climate crisis on mental health has been well-documented in a number of key reports, such as the IPCC report (Human Health, Chapter 8), US National Climate Report, the U.S Global Change Research Program, and ecoAmerica’s Mental Health & Our Changing Climate, the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Climate Reality Project, the American Public Health Association, and the Psychological

Impact of Climate Change (see also 1, 2, 3, 4). Researchers predict a sharp rise in mental health issues resulting from the climate crisis in the coming years. These issues include depression and anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, suicide and outbreaks of violence. The elderly, the poor, and children were identified as being among those who will be most psychologically vulnerable.

Mental health issues may arise or become exacerbated from three possible directions. First, thinking about or considering the magnitude of the climate crisis may result in eco-anxiety, ecological grief (1, 2, 3, 4), or general despair and hopelessness. Second, pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities, such as depression and suicidality (1, 2, 3) may become more complicated by the climate crisis and/or climate related events or disasters. And third, it is important to consider the mental health issue caused by fire, flood, drought (1), high temperatures (1) displacement, etc.

Counselors need to be aware of the key resources and what they are saying about the mental health implications. We can also understand that there are many opportunities for counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and local governments to work together to tackle this issue and that such interprofessional collaboration is one of the keys to successful advocacy and resilience. Counselors hold expertise in trauma-informed approaches to resilience, disaster response and recovery, developmental and wellness approaches, and a humanistic connection to the lived experiences of clients. We also have a strong social justice lens that will be helpful in work with clients, our communities, and other professionals.

Climate Crisis and Disaster Mental Health

The American Counseling Association has a long established relationship with the American Red Cross as a model and partner in disaster response. In 2002, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) established the Red Cross / Red Crescent Climate Centre. The Climate Centre supports National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in their work to reduce loss of life and damage to the livelihoods from climate change and extreme-weather events.

Counselors interested in disaster mental health will notice the typical process of “disaster-response-recovery” is changing to one of “disaster-response-recovery-disaster”; meaning that many communities face similar climate-related disasters within a much shorter period of time. Families and communities are also grappling with environmental justice issues that often surface following a disaster. Research shows that the psycho-social impact of climate-related disasters is profound. Counselors can also take a seat at the table and offer a trauma-informed lens to disaster preparedness, community resilience (1) and disaster recovery. Both ACA and the American Red Cross offer resources on disaster mental health for your continued learning.

Impact of Climate Crisis on Vulnerable Populations

As the climate changes, families, communities and lives are impacted. And as is true with so many other aspects of change, our most vulnerable neighbors (1)- individuals with low income, rural poverty, some communities of color, individuals with limited English proficiency and immigrant groups, Indigenous peoples, children, pregnant women, older adults, persons with disabilities, and persons with preexisting or chronic medical conditions - are most vulnerable to its impact (1)and are expected to suffer disproportionately from problems caused by a changing climate. Understanding the issue and engaging in climate advocacy on behalf of the people whose lives depend on a healthy planet is an important role counselors can play. The global climate is interconnected, both environmentally and socially.

What can counselors do? First, the U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit is a comprehensive resource exploring community vulnerabilities and climate resilience efforts. Become familiar with the vulnerabilities in your area. Additionally, counselors should also explore how this vulnerability also intersects with health, social justice and environmental justice (i.e. climate justice) and mental health.

Be aware that people who are socially disadvantaged are at greater risk for negative health outcomes, which can be exacerbated by extreme heat, wildfire smoke and air quality issues, and vector-borne diseases. Counselors can advocate for greater access to emergency support and recovery resources for these communities. Likewise, counselors can advocate for and help vulnerable clients access health insurance and overcome barriers.

Climate Migration and Climate Refugees

Climate change is expected to trigger growing population movements within and across borders. People displaced by forced migration are already at high risk for mental health concerns. Factors such as increasing intensity of extreme weather events, sea-level rise and acceleration of environmental degradation are predicted to lead to a substantial rise in the scale of migration and displacement. Climate refugees and climate migration in the U.S. is already happening and expected to only rise as climate-influenced weather events and conditions such as drought and sea level rise make places uninhabitable. Losing your home is not only about the loss of a physical home, but also about an inability to live in a place, rebuild, or feel safe.

Counselors can help clients and communities work through place-based loss, grief, and trauma by addressing the seven factors of EcoWellness (1, 2, 3), engaging in climate-informed disaster response efforts, and contributing to conversations on community resilience. Particularly, clinicians might aid clients in their healing through maintaining spiritual connection to places lost and empower clients to foster new place-based connections. Counselors can also broaden their awareness of the climate-related factors influencing migration to the U.S. Being prepared to address the factors behind an individual's migrant or refugee status is critical to helping understand their lived experience.

Impact of Climate Crisis on Children

Children and youth are considered one of the vulnerable populations uniquely impacted by the climate crisis. In addition to growing up in a time when the climate crisis is a reality for them, they are also faced with a future that may feel uncertain and will need to be climate informed (1). When children lack access to safe supportive physical and social environments, development and learning are impacted. A recent meta analysis of children's learning confirmed that nature connection has a profound impact. Likewise, exposure to noise, crowding, and a lack of structure after natural disasters has been connected to attention difficulties and diminished relationships with adults. The health of our air, water, extreme weather events, and the resilience of social systems, impact children's health, mental health, development, cognitive functions, and coping (1).

What can counselors do? Know your community: Identify safe, clean green spaces for clients and families to visit and help them develop plans for spending time in them. Foster Ecowellness in families (1, 2). Strengthen families' and children's capacity to cope: Use counseling's strength or place-based approach to help families with children identify resources that can foster resilience in the event of a disaster. Keep resources available to assist parents in helping their children cope (1).

Allow children opportunities for active involvement in the process of recovery after a climate event. Children are not just victims, but persons with unique problem-solving skills that could be an asset after a disaster. For instance, a child's extensive knowledge of their neighborhood could be beneficial when developing plans for rebuilding and modifying community space. Children will sometimes see things that adults will not.

How Counselors Can Foster Coping & Resiliency

Understanding the impact of the climate crisis includes recognizing and validating experiences and stories of sense of place (1, 2, 3, 4) and place attachment, nature deficit (1), solistalgia, existential fears, trauma from disasters, eco-anxiety (1), ecological grief, anxiety and depression, traumatic responses, and other mental health concerns. Research has supported a trauma informed approach, rooted in ecotherapy (1, 2, 3), and inclusive of EcoWellness (1, 2), nature-connectedness (1, 2, 3), and resilience (1) to foster coping, adaptation, and well-being.

Research has also shown that nature access and connection (1, 2) facilitates positive physical, mental, emotional, and social outcomes. Professional counselors can proactively work with clients to include safe nature access and connection with nature as part of promoting health and wellness in treatment planning. Counselors can tap into trauma informed practices as well as resilience and post-traumatic growth. For clients who find strength in faith and spirituality, ecoAmerica offers extensive resources to connect conversations on the climate crisis to communities of faith. Recent headlines have underlined the severity of the climate crisis. It is important to stay attuned to the language and the stories in the media so as to understand and validate your clients' fears.

Counselors working with persons experiencing eco-anxiety can help foster positive nature connection with clients through practices of EcoWellness (1, 2, 3), which include building a sense of environmental agency. For example, professional counselors can help clients get in touch with local environmental groups or agencies for volunteer work, personal resources for recycling, composting, and living a greener lifestyle as part of their treatment plan. Finding one way to make a difference or to establish a sense of hope can be helpful.

Finally, take care of yourself. Counselors are exposed to the climate crisis in the same way as many clients. Be attentive to fostering emotional resiliency and engage in practices that will help mitigate your own climate burnout (1).

What's Next?

The American Counseling Association has numerous resources available to help you find your place in the discussion and action relating to the climate crisis and mental health. See the ACA Advocacy Competencies, the ACA Ethics Codes as they relate to the role of counselor as advocate, the ACA Strategic Plan and Advocacy, and ACA Governing Council Motion on Climate Change, as well as the ACA Voter Voice, because each and every voice matters. And be sure to check out the ACA Advocacy Tips.

What can one person do? Don't be "just one person"! Join others. If you are interested in training, consider becoming a member of the Climate Reality Leadership Corps. Get involved in climate adaptation and climate resilience efforts in your community. Bring mental health, trauma-informed, and disaster response knowledge to the table. Join a County Climate Coalition near you. Utilize U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, a comprehensive resource exploring community vulnerabilities and climate resilience efforts. See what is happening near you!

Consider joining an organization and work toward interdisciplinary solutions. Both Climate Psychology Alliance and International Transformational Resilience Coalition are solid options. Tap into resources, such as ecoAmerica, to help you connect the dots between the personal and professional. And finally, take care of yourself. Climate optimism and radical hope are two concepts that, when sought and integrated personally, help sustain the work. And there's always room for individual and collaborate contributions to research, publications, presentations, education and training.

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