Global Climate Change and Trauma

Overview

- ✓ Climate change is defined as significant long-term alterations in average weather patterns (e.g., temperature, precipitation, wind) due to the combination of natural processes and human activity.

- ✓ Climate change is associated with adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing, including trauma.

- ✓ In April 2021, ISTSS released a detailed briefing paper describing the current state of knowledge on climate change and trauma and highlighting gaps to inform public health, policy, clinical, and research initiatives on this topic.

What Are Some Foundational Things to Know About Global Climate Change and Trauma?

- ✓ Climate change puts pressure on several systems that affect physical and mental health, including bodily, socioeconomic, and geopolitical systems.

- ✓ Climate change is likely to increase the incidence of a range of potentially traumatic events, including weather-related disasters, familial and community violence, life-threatening illnesses, and bereavement.

- ✓ The health impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed, with people living in more vulnerable contexts (e.g., lower resource settings, low income countries or neighborhoods) with fewer supports generally experiencing the worst outcomes.

What Research Has Been Completed to Date?

- ✓ Most research on climate change and mental health has focused on acute weather-related extreme events (e.g., hurricanes, floods, heatwaves). These events have been shown to increase risk for a range of mental health problems, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety and worsen pre-existing mental health conditions.

- ✓ Fewer studies have examined how chronic climate change-related exposures (e.g., rising sea levels, melting permafrost, increasing temperatures, chronic drought) relate to mental health, including traumatic stress.

- ✓ Even those with low levels of exposure to weather-related extreme events and chronic climate change-related indicators can experience mental health impacts via vicarious experiences, anticipated stress, and existential threat.

- ✓ Weather-related disasters are often followed by secondary stressors, including financial strain, displacement, and disruptions in social support networks, that can exacerbate mental health risks, especially for individuals and groups with preexisting vulnerabilities or who are highly exposed.

- ✓ Climate change related stressors likely accumulate through the social and environmental determinants of mental health and over the life course.

✓ Researchers are beginning to look at factors that will promote psychosocial adaptation to climate change, resilience, and posttraumatic growth.

✓ Several factors have been identified that influence the capacity to adapt to the mental health impacts of climate change, including social capital; sense of community; government assistance; access to resources; community preparedness; intersectoral/transdisciplinary collaboration; vulnerability and adaptation assessments; communication and outreach; mental health literacy; and culturally relevant resources.

✓ Most research has focused on individual-level characteristics shaping the mental health consequences of climate change, with little consideration of community-level factors.

What Should We Do?

There are many actions needed to address the impact of climate change on trauma-related exposures and symptoms. Below are examples of actions needed by public policy, clinical, and research experts.

Public health and policy action steps:

✓ Develop a framework to categorize the stressors caused by climate change
✓ Support efforts to prevent mental health problems, including traumatic stress, and promote well-being alongside treatment in order to boost resilience to the effects of climate change
✓ Support people in committing to actions they are willing to take to bring about changes in policy and behavior
✓ Engage community leaders and grassroots organizations as partners in the process of initiating and developing efforts to improve traumatic stress in the context of climate change
✓ Initiate networks of care among interdisciplinary health professionals, community leaders, educators, and other disciplines involved in sustainability and ecological efforts to address climate change
✓ Support positive climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies

Clinical action steps:

✓ Deliver mental health and psychosocial support services at multiple levels, including at the community level through community networks
✓ Respect human rights and abide by a do-no-harm approach when addressing mental health needs
✓ Where existing, use evidence-based approaches and follow international guidance (e.g. to address distress and trauma reactions among disaster affected populations and in settings of complex adversity)

Research action steps:

✓ Use systems thinking frameworks and tools.
✓ Explore how climate change impacts the occurrence of traumatic events and trauma related psychopathology.
✓ Develop measures that could be used to assess climate change-related exposures and traumatic stress impacts
✓ Test climate change adaptation and mitigation, including involvement in grassroots social and climate justice projects, as a mechanism through which to prevent traumatic stress and support psychological resilience.

- ✓ Investigate the role of global networks in promoting prosocial action, collective responsibility and collective action aimed at managing resources effectively in improving mental health and wellbeing and preventing traumatic stress. Identify the most effective governance for such networks.
- ✓ Test evidence-based approaches to help people manage persisting uncertainty and precarity about fragile environments in the context of climate change.
- ✓ Evaluate mental health and trauma-focused interventions for their environmental costs as well as economic costs and clinical benefits.

For a comprehensive list of recommendations, see the ISTSS Briefing Paper on Global Climate Change and Trauma.
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