Emerging Concepts in Mental Health in the Context of Climate Change

Authors: Sahana Nujella1, Gauri S Mullerpattan1, Prakyath Ravindranath Hegde2, Channaveerachari Naveen Kumar3

❑ **Affiliation:**

1 Psychologist, GS-NIMHANS Mental Health Programme, National Institute of Mental health and Neurosciences, Bangalore.

2 Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, GS-NIMHANS Mental Health Programme, National Institute of Mental health and Neurosciences, Bangalore.

3 Professor of Psychiatry, Head Community Psychiatry at National Institute of Mental health and Neurosciences, Bangalore and the Officer In Charge of COE in Mental Health under the National Program of Climate Change and Human Health, Govt. of India.

Introduction:

The devastating sweep of climate change in recent years has highlighted the urgent need for climate action. Beyond the evident impacts on infrastructure, economy and physical health, climate change has implications for the mental well-being of individuals and communities. Direct impacts of climate change may result from abruptly occurring extreme weather events like floods or gradual environmental changes like a rise in temperature and changing rainfall patterns. These mental health effects include distress as well as clinical disorders like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, increased risk of suicide, and self-harm, among others. Further, climate change is known to have detrimental effects on prenatal and child development that may result in neural deficits and genetic mental disorders. However, it is important to recognize that mental health implications are not restricted to those who directly experience floods or other forms of climate change; it can also result from a sense of connection to the environment and the mere awareness and anticipation of the scale and impact of climate change. Albrecht (2005) noted that changes in the ecosystem and a changing relationship with one's environment are likely to produce stress in humans and termed the range of mental health impacts/syndromes as psychoterratic syndromes. [1] Today, the emotions or mental states one experiences in response to the degradation of the environment have broadly been termed "ecological emotions" or simply "eco-emotions", which comprise experiences of eco-anxiety, ecological grief, solastalgia, eco-guilt and many others.

Some of the commonly discussed concepts are discussed below:

I. Eco-anxiety:

Eco-anxiety, a psychological phenomenon increasingly prevalent in the face of climate change, manifests as distress, fear, and apprehension regarding environmental degradation and its consequences[2]. This anxiety-like response is rooted in the awareness of the enormity of ecological threats and the anticipation of adverse outcomes, reflecting a future orientation of worry and a broader societal unease about the rapidly changing climate[3].

Kurth and Pinkala (2022) conceptualize eco-anxiety as a spectrum of a range of emotions brought and not simply that of typically defined anxiety[4]. Individuals experiencing eco-anxiety harbour a combination of existential, social, and practical anxiety, indicating the pervasive impact on the person's well-being. The broader focus of the literature lies in the nearly pathological and sporadic instances of eco-anxiety, where high levels can result in pathological outcomes like sleep disturbance, rumination, and other features of diagnosable conditions.

More recently, several researchers have noted that eco-anxiety can be a continuous experience that may not always manifest as a pathology and may even be considered a normal response to the ongoing crisis[5][6]. Such an experience can stem from being confronted with unexpected, difficult choices or practical anxiety[4]. While eco-anxiety can lead to feelings of paralysis and disengagement in response to the perceived magnitude of the environmental crisis[2], it may spur individuals to adopt pro-environmental behaviours and advocate for climate action.

II. Solastalgia

Solastalgia, a term coined by Glenn Albrecht in 2005, describes a deep and persistent distress experienced by individuals due to the gradual loss or degradation of their cherished environment or home [1]. The distress is caused by the lived experience of the physical degradation of one's home environment and territory, whether due to climate change consequences, natural events, or human activities. The word originates in the concepts of nostalgia, solace, and desolation. Research by Doherty and Clayton (2011) further explores the psychological impact of solastalgia, highlighting its existential consequences. Unlike nostalgia, where there may be a longing for a past home or environment, solastalgia occurs when the home still exists, but its comforting qualities are diminishing. This existential distress arises from the fading sense of belonging and identity associated with the home environment [7].

While both solastalgia and eco-anxiety involve emotional responses to environmental changes, solastalgia is rooted in the tangible loss of a familiar environment. In contrast, eco-anxiety is characterized by worry and apprehension about the potential consequences of environmental degradation.

III. Ecological Grief

Ecological grief, as conceptualized by Cunsolo and Ellis (2018), refers to the profound emotional response elicited by the anticipated or experienced loss of significant environments, ecosystems, and species due to climate change. This grief can arise from both chronic and acute environmental changes, encompassing various forms of loss. One aspect of ecological grief stems from landscapes and ecosystems' physical deterioration or disappearance, representing a tangible and visible loss [8]. Additionally, the loss of personal and cultural identities intertwined with specific environments can evoke grief, as individuals may mourn the erosion of their connections to these places[9]. Moreover, ecological grief may arise from anticipating future losses, including the potential destruction of ecosystems essential for livelihoods and well-being. These multifaceted experiences of loss contribute to the complex emotional landscape of ecological grief, highlighting the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. As individuals grapple with the reality of environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, the emotional toll of ecological grief underscores the urgent need for action to address climate change and protect ecosystems for future generations.

❑ Intervention

Numerous mental health experts advocate for heightened awareness and training concerning eco-anxiety[10]. Despite the growing need for therapeutic assistance and the recognition that climate change will increasingly impact collective consciousness, there needs to be more literature addressing tailored therapeutic interventions for eco-anxiety. Some professionals and support groups are now providing treatment for those with eco-anxiety and related experiences. They focus on fostering resilience through cognitive, existential, emotion-focused, and self-care interventions[11]. Additionally, helping clients strengthen social connections through support groups, encouraging climate action, and connecting with nature have been identified as therapeutic measures to be implemented. Existing literature thus strongly advocates for increased awareness and implementation of targeted approaches among mental health practitioners and other stakeholders in these times of need.

❑ Future Directions

To effectively address the mental health implications of climate change, stakeholders must prioritize the development and implementation of evidence-based interventions tailored to individuals experiencing eco-anxiety, solastalgia, and ecological grief. This requires investment in research to understand the underlying mechanisms of these phenomena better and identify effective therapeutic modalities. Policymakers must integrate mental health considerations into climate change policies, allocating resources for mental health services and programs aimed at building resilience and fostering community support networks. Additionally, prioritizing climate justice and equity is essential to ensure that vulnerable populations disproportionately affected by climate change receive adequate mental health support. Community stakeholders should collaborate to create safe spaces for individuals to express their eco-emotions, access mental health resources, and participate in collective action. By empowering communities and fostering collaboration across sectors, stakeholders can pave the way for a more resilient and mentally healthy future in the face of environmental uncertainty.

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