

# Major impacts of climate change expected on mental health

December 3 2009

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Leading mental health researchers are warning that some of the most important health consequences of climate change will be on mental health, yet this issue is unlikely to be given much attention at the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen next week.

Dr Lisa Page and Dr Louise Howard from the Institute of Psychiatry (IoP) at King's College London reviewed a range of recent research by scientists into the potential [mental health](#) impacts of [climate change](#).

In an article published in *Psychological Medicine* online, the two mental health experts conclude that climate change has the potential to have significant negative effects on global mental health. These effects will be felt most by those with pre-existing serious mental illness, but that there is also likely to be an increase in the overall burden of mental disorder worldwide.

The scientists urge for the lack of research into the mechanisms that cause the effects of climate change on mental disorder to be addressed, so that mental health policy makers can plan for the significant impacts of climate change on mental health that are to be expected.

Dr Page, lead author of the article and Clinical Lecturer in Liaison Psychiatry at the IoP, comments: 'Climate change is assuming centre stage with the upcoming UN conference in Copenhagen. While delegates will discuss the effects of climate change and possible responses by the international governments, we fear that the effects of climate change on

mental health will be largely ignored, posing a tremendous risk to the mental health of millions of people in the not-too-distant future.'

Dr Page and Dr Howard identified the following ways in which climate change is likely to impact mental health:

- [Natural disasters](#), such as floods, cyclones and droughts, are predicted to increase as a consequence of climate change. Adverse psychiatric outcomes are well documented in the aftermaths of natural disasters and include post-traumatic stress disorder, major [depression](#) and somatoform disorders.
- The needs of people with chronic mental illness have often been overlooked following disaster in favour of trauma-focused psychological interventions and yet the mentally ill occupy multiply vulnerabilities for increased mortality and morbidity at such times.
- As global temperatures increase, people with mental illness are particularly vulnerable to heat-related death. Contributing risk factors such as psychotropic medication, pre-existing respiratory and cardiovascular disease and substance misuse, are all highly prevalent in people with serious mental illness. In addition, maladaptive coping mechanisms and poor quality housing are likely to further increase vulnerability, and death by suicide may also increase above a certain temperature threshold.
- Adverse impacts such as psychological distress, anxiety and traumatic stress resulting from emerging infectious disease outbreaks are also likely to increase if the predicted outbreaks of serious infectious diseases become reality.

- Coastal change and increased flooding is expected to lead to forced mass migration and displacement, which will undoubtedly lead to more [mental illness](#) in affected population.
- Urbanisation, a phenomenon which will be partially beneficial, for example by increasing opportunities for work and better access to health services, is associated with an increased incidence of schizophrenia in developed countries. In many low- and middle-income countries, mental health provision is already hugely inadequate and is unlikely to be prioritised should further economic collapse occur secondary to climate change.
- The knowledge of man-made climate change could in itself have adverse effects on individual psychological well-being.

More information: L. Page and L. Howard, 'The impact of climate change on mental health (but will mental health be discussed at Copenhagen)?', 30 November 2009. *Psychological Medicine* online.

Source: King's College London ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Major impacts of climate change expected on mental health (2009, December 3) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-12-major-impacts-climate-mental-health.html>

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