

# The rise of 'eco-anxiety': Climate change affects our mental health, too

September 17 2019, by Fiona Charlson

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The Australian Medical Association (AMA) recently declared climate change a [health emergency](#), reflecting similar positions taken by a growing list of peak medical bodies around the world.

The AMA's statement highlights the significant impacts [climate change](#) is having on [physical health](#), including an increase in [climate](#)-related deaths. The World Health Organisation regards [climate change](#) as "the greatest threat to global health in the 21st Century."

But the statement also draws the very important issue of mental health out of the shadows.

Climate change can affect people's mental health in a number of ways, both directly and indirectly.

We know experiencing [extreme weather events](#) is a risk factor for mental illness. And many thousands of people around the world are [displaced from their homes](#) as a result of climate events, putting them at perhaps even higher risk of mental illness.

More generally, people feeling distressed about the state of the planet may find themselves in a spiral of what's been termed "[eco-anxiety](#)".

## **Extreme weather events and psychological distress**

Unprecedented weather events across Australia are already demonstrating clear and devastating impacts on the mental health of Australians, particularly in rural areas which are being hit the hardest by unseasonal drought, fires and floods.

These extreme weather events have resulted in the loss of homes, land and livelihoods. Research has found these experiences are taking a significant psychological toll on Australian farmers, who feel their [sense of place](#) and identities are under threat. Meanwhile, we've seen [increasing rates of suicide](#) among rural communities.

Elsewhere in the world, research similarly shows being affected by

[extreme weather events](#) is a major risk factor for mental illness. This was evident, for example, in the aftermath of [Hurricane Katrina](#) in the United States.

## Climate-related displacement

Long-term [environmental changes](#), including once fertile land turning to desert, erosion of soil and coastlines, and sea level rise, are predicted to result in large-scale displacement, a [major risk factor](#) for mental illness.

Global statistics already estimate that in 2017 the majority of people forced from their homes around the world were displaced as a result of [climate-related disasters](#).

In Australia, low-lying islands such as those in the [Torres Strait](#) are at the forefront of this reality, with relocation plans already under consideration.

At the extremes, the reality of climate-induced social instability is already tangible across numerous countries, and the Asia-Pacific region is considered as high risk.

## The existential dread of climate change

For many Australians, the [existential dread](#) of what the future holds in the face of unmitigated climate change is having documented impacts on their mental health. Australia's youth have been exemplary at [voicing their despair](#) and "eco-anxiety" around the foreseeable deterioration of our planet.

For those too young to have a voice, parents are feeling [anxiety and distress](#) on their behalf. Mums and dads are under pressure to instill

values such as caring for the environment, while worrying about the future of the planet they are leaving their children.

And this emerging narrative of how climate change is impacting people's mental health is not complete. The relationships between climate events and mental health are complex and not always apparent.

Extreme heat has been observed to be harmful to multiple aspects of mental health and well-being. Data from South Australia demonstrates hot days are associated with [increased hospital admissions](#) for mental and behavioral disorders.

Other research has found spikes in temperature were associated with increased suicide rates in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Hobart.

A less obvious impact arises from the strong connection between [nutritional status and mental health](#). Climate-related impacts on agriculture lead to reduced availability of nutritious foods, and poor nutritional intake can affect mental health.

## **So, what can be done?**

The AMA's recent statement has echoed calls from other medical associations for leadership on a [national strategy for health and climate change](#). But what is it we can be doing to protect people from climate change-related mental health challenges?

Doing everything we can to reduce the progression of climate change is one clear way to address this issue.

But with the knowledge the climate crisis is only escalating, some [practical responses](#) will focus on preparing the health system for climate change. This should include increasing awareness of the mental health

effects of climate change across the community, private, and government sectors.

It will also be important to invest in areas where mental health services are under-resourced, which are often the rural areas where the mental health effects of climate change are likely be most severe.

A small but significant consolation is the [public awareness](#) being generated through the tireless work of advocacy groups and purposeful media reporting of farmers' personal stories of distress.

Climate change adaptation strategies are in their infancy, but already we're seeing [some programs](#) aimed at strengthening communities, particularly rural communities [most severely affected by drought](#).

There will be no single solution to address the mental [health](#) impacts of climate change; a broad perspective and a range of actions will be necessary. As the climate crisis continues to unravel in Australia and globally, this will require strong leadership and some innovative thinking.

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