

# Five reasons why climate change may see more of us turn to alcohol and other drugs

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Climate change will affect every aspect of our [health and well-being](#). But its potential harms go beyond the body's ability to handle extreme heat, important as this is.

Extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts, storms, and wildfires, are becoming more frequent and severe. These affect our [mental health](#) in a multitude of [ways](#).

Coping with [climate change](#) can be overwhelming. Sometimes, the best someone can do is to seek refuge in alcohol, tobacco, over-the-counter and prescription drugs, or other [psychoactive substances](#). This is understandable but dangerous and can have serious consequences.

We outline [five ways](#) climate change could increase the risk of harmful substance use.

## 1. Mental health is harmed

Perhaps the most obvious way climate change can be linked to harmful substance use is by damaging [mental health](#). This [increases the risk](#) of new or worsened substance use.

People with a [mental disorder](#) are [at high risk](#) of also having a [substance-use disorder](#). This often precedes their mental health problems. Climate change-related increases in the number and nature of extreme events, in turn, are escalating risks to mental health.

For example, extreme heat is linked to increased [distress](#) across the whole population. In [extreme heat](#), more people go to the [emergency department](#) for psychiatric problems, including for [alcohol](#) and [substance use](#) generally. This is even true for [a single very hot day](#).

Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and [other mental health](#) problems are [common](#) at the time of [extreme weather events](#) and can persist for months, even years afterward, especially if people are exposed to [multiple events](#). This can [increase](#) the likelihood of using substances as a way to cope.

## 2. Worry increases

With [increasing public awareness](#) of how climate change is endangering well-being, people are [increasingly worried](#) about what will happen if it remains unchecked.

Worrying isn't the same as meeting the criteria for a mental disorder. But [surveys](#) show climate change generates complex emotional responses, [especially in children](#). As well as feelings of worry, there is anxiety, fear, guilt, anger, grief and helplessness.

Some [emotional states](#), such as [sadness](#), are linked with long-term tobacco use and also make substance use [relapse](#) more likely.

## 3. Physical injuries hurt us in many ways

Physical injuries caused by extreme weather events—such as [smoke inhalation](#), burns, and flood-related cuts and infections—increase the risk of harmful substance use. That's partly because they [increase](#) the risk of psychological distress. If injuries cause long-term illness or disability, consequent feelings of hopelessness and depression can cause some people to self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs.

Substance use itself can also generate long-term physiological harm, disabilities, or other chronic health problems. These are [linked with](#) higher rates of harmful substance use.

## 4. Our day-to-day lives change

A single catastrophic event, such as a storm or flood, can devastate lives overnight and change the way we live. So, too, can the more subtle changes in climate and day-to-day weather. Both can disrupt behavior

and routines in ways that risk new or worsened substance use, for example, using stimulants to cope with fatigue.

Take, for example, hotter temperatures, which disrupt [sleep](#), undermine [academic performance](#), [reduce physical activity](#), and promote [hostile language](#) and [violent behavior](#).

## 5. It destabilizes communities

Finally, climate change is destabilizing the socioeconomic, natural, built and geopolitical [systems](#) on which human well-being—indeed survival—depends.

Damaged infrastructure, agricultural losses, school closures, homelessness and displacement are significant [sources of psychosocial distress](#) that prompt acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term) stress responses.

[Stress](#), in turn, can [increase](#) the risk of [harmful substance use](#) and make people more likely to relapse.

## Why are we so concerned?

Substance-use disorders are economically and socially [very costly](#). Risky substance use that doesn't meet the criteria for a formal diagnosis [can also harm](#).

Aside from its direct physical harm, harmful substance use disrupts [education](#) and [employment](#). It increases the risk of [accidents](#) and [crime](#), and it undermines social relationships, intimate [partnerships](#) and [family functioning](#).

## Politicians take note

As we head towards the [COP28 global climate talks](#) in Dubai, climate change is set to hit the headlines once more. Politicians know climate change is undermining human health and well-being. It's well past time to insist they act.

As we have seen for populations as a whole, there are multiple possible ways for climate change to cause a rise in harmful substance use. This means multidimensional [prevention strategies](#) are needed. As well as addressing climate change more broadly, we need strategies including:

- supporting vulnerable individuals, especially [young people](#), and marginalized communities, who are [hit hardest](#) by extreme weather-related events
- focusing health-related policies more on broadscale health promotion, for example, healthier eating, active transport and community-led mental health support
- investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, such as heat-proofing buildings and greening cities, to prevent more of the destabilizing effects and stress we know contributes to [mental health problems](#) and harmful substance use.

There is now [no credible pathway](#) to avoiding dangerous climate change. However, if [increasing rates](#) of climate protests are anything to go by, the world may finally be ready for radical change—and perhaps for reduced harmful substance use.

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