

“Weathered-out”: Existential Angst Among Adolescents Facing a Global Warming Future



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Introduction

What does it mean to be “Weathered-out” with no place to go? Evidence shows that there are aspects of climate change that until recently have been rarely acknowledged. Young environmental activists are worried about their future after witnessing the increasing natural disasters, such as forest fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, flood water storms.

Objective

This review describes the current evidence-based physiological and psychological effects posed by climate change and the impact on youth depression, particularly, vulnerable populations (children, adolescents, women, elderly, and poor).

Methods

A systematic literature search was conducted through PsychINFO, ProQuest, and EBSCOHost electronic journal databases for studies that were published between 2010-2020 using the following keywords: Youth and mental health, global climate change and mental health, climate change and youth mental distress, PTSD post climate disaster on youth, anxiety and depression on youth post climate change, global warming, climate warming.

Results

Adolescents already prone to anxiety and depression surviving these events can exacerbate an already existing mental health condition. Whereas, elementary-aged children are more prone to suffer from PTSD and anxiety compared to adults. One study reported Caribbean children are among the most vulnerable to climate change. One study of the Inuit community found strong emotional reactions associated with loss of travel and land-based activities, identity, and sense of place, family stress, increase use for ETOH and drugs, and crisis. Additionally, one study elaborates the importance of relationships between sense of place, the environment, and human well-being (biophilia). In contrast, one study found “solastalgia” to be the distress, the loss of solace, caused by degradation of the environment, home and sense of belonging.

Discussion

Overall, the purpose when reviewing the literature was to bring awareness to the physiological and psychological effects posed by climate change and its impact on the mental health of youth.

Based on the information gathered, rescue personnel and mental health professionals should be on alert for youths living in areas where repeated exposure is the lay of the land.

Elementary-aged children are more prone to suffer from PTSD and anxiety.

Nicaraguan adolescents displayed “severe levels of PTSD and depressive reactions” among adolescents who witnessed family members injured.

A 17-year-old diagnosed with depression hospitalized with “climate change delusion” after being affected by drought in Australia.

After Hurricane Andrew, 38% of South Florida children displayed symptoms of PTSD and 10 months later 18% were still experiencing symptoms.

“Pre-traumatic” stress disorder was seen within youths in South Florida following Hurricane Andrew.

One study reported Caribbean children are among the most vulnerable to climate change.

Displaced children in emergency shelters are at-risk for opportunistic diseases such as measles and respiratory infections.

The Inuit community has a history of mental health disparities as a precursor from colonization compounded with relying on the land for sustenance, livelihood, and cultural community activities.

Greta Thunberg, from Sweden has inspired young people to become climate activists. She initiated the School Strike Movement that has spread to other countries.

One study found children appear to be more vulnerable to storm-related PTSD compared to adults.

As the Earth becomes warmer and warmer, we have witnessed and will continue to experience an increase in storms, floods, tornadoes, fires, tropical storms, and cyclones disrupting the fabric and foundation of communities. The majority of these places contain vulnerable populations such as at-risk youths, children, women, oppressed or marginalized groups, and people living in poverty; specifically since they lack the means to rebuild or relocate.

Conclusion

Global climate change is becoming more and more mainstream worldwide. A relationship exists between humans and their environment conditions. The vulnerable populations have more prevalence to have a physiological and psychological effect to natural disasters as result to climate change. Particularly, the youth population is more prone to experience mental health disorders such as PTSD and anxiety from the existential crises of losing one’s home, possessions, family members, pets, livestock, and communities.

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