

POSITION STATEMENT

MENTAL HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change poses a threat to the mental health of Australians.

More frequent and extreme weather events will lead to increases in the experience of psychological distress and mental illness, including: post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, complicated grief, survivor guilt, vicarious trauma, recovery fatigue, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.

More extreme rainfall events including floods will increase distress, and acute and chronic anxiety.

More frequent droughts will increase stress and mental health challenges amongst rural and remote Australians.

More frequent and widespread bushfires will increase prevalence of trauma, a key factor in triggering and exacerbating mental illness.

More frequent and widespread heatwaves will exacerbate existing illnesses.

The impact of climate change will hit vulnerable Australians harder, exacerbating pre-existing social and economic inequalities. The threat and complexity of climate change and its effects can lead to despair and hopelessness. The term 'climate-anxiety' describes the experience.

The mental health impacts of disasters will be long-term and far more widespread than physical injury impacts.

Despite these complex challenges, there remains hope for both individuals and communities. Responding to disasters and the threat of climate change can also inspire individual altruism, compassion, and optimism which strengthen communities and encourage personal growth. We have seen this regularly during national and international disasters.



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There is hope, and opportunity, if we act now.

Mental Health Australia is calling on the mental health sector, communities, and governments to come together and draw on our collective strength to face the most significant ongoing health challenge of the twenty-first century.

What we need is international collaboration and action on climate change. Governments, businesses, communities, and individuals must act now to address climate change.

Without action from governments, communities, and individuals, the adverse impacts of climate change will continue to increase in severity and frequency.

All levels of governments must also develop better responses to climate events by developing national response coordination plans, working with affected communities, and increasing the capacity of the mental health workforce (including the lived experience workforce) to meet increasing need.

In addition, governments, mental health service providers, researchers, consumers, and carers must take the impact of climate change into account when designing mental health policy, programs, and services.

The mental health sector witnesses time and again the deep resilience, adaptability, strength, and practical optimism of human beings in the face of overwhelming personal and collective challenges. We can and must bring all of these resources to bear to in addressing the health threats of climate change.

REFERENCES

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