

## MHPSS AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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### PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide includes some suggested activities for workshops exploring the mental health and psychosocial impacts of the climate crisis and implications for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programs and services.

It is not intended to be a comprehensive workshop facilitation manual, rather it offers some suggested activities to prompt thought and discussion on climate change and MHPSS. You can include some of these activities in existing workshops or use the material below to develop your own workshop focused on MHPSS and the climate crisis.

### ACTIVITY OBJECTIVES

The activities in this guide are designed to contribute toward the following objectives:

1. Increase understanding of the direct impacts of the climate crisis on mental health.
2. Increase understanding of the indirect impacts of the climate crisis on mental health.
3. Increase awareness of the climate and extreme weather-related risks in regions participants work.
4. Participants consider who they can work with, and how, to integrate MHPSS into existing work focusing on climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction.



## SUGGESTED PARTICIPANT NUMBERS

12 to 20 participants.

## SUGGESTED MATERIALS

- Hard copy, per participant, of the [Climate change and mental health factsheet](#)
- Hard copy, per participant, of the [WHO Mental health and climate change: policy brief](#)
- IFRC PS Centre, [Well-being Guide](#) or [Well-being Cards](#)

## WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

The following activities are not presented in any particular order, as facilitator you will need to consider the best flow and workshop design to meet your intended purpose and audience.

### Welcome and introductions

*Time needed: 10 minutes*

Do a short introduction of facilitators and participants by going around the room and asking for name, role, organisation and to rate their knowledge of MHPSS and climate change on a scale of 1 to 10. 1 being "I know the terms MHPSS and climate" and 10 being "I have written a PhD in mental health and climate change."

### Find the rainbow

*Time needed: 30 minutes*

1. In pairs, participants are to find and photograph one thing in nature for each colour of the rainbow (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Purple).
2. Give participants 10-15 minutes to walk around outside to find items and take photographs.
3. Return to training room and showcase their photographs. Participants can show the facilitator the photos directly on their phone, or send them to the facilitator, or shared message group (e.g. WhatsApp, Signal) to be shared with the whole group.

Summary:

- a. Research shows that being in nature is good for wellbeing. A study of 20,000 people found that those who spent two hours or more, in 'green spaces' per week were more likely to report good health and psychological wellbeing than those who didn't.
- b. Cultivating curiosity and awe in nature can help us manage our feelings of anxiety and overwhelm in the face of climate change. See: [Wild Embrace](#), [Phosphorescence](#)
- c. Starting with this activity to both connect us to the topic of our climate but also to highlight how the natural environment contributes to our well-being.



### *Some potential 'rules'*

You could choose to tell participants that only colours of nature count (i.e. photos of items in nature that are human made do not count). This will then be more of a mindfulness activity. Or you could leave 'colours in nature' open to interpretation. If participants bring back images of plastic/other human made items, this can be a good discussion on the pervasiveness of human impact on the environment.

### **My favourite season**

*Time needed: 15 – 20 minutes*

1. Divide the group into pairs
2. Ask participants to discuss their favourite season with their partner:
  - a. Why is it their favourite season?
  - b. What memories to they have about this season?
3. Give participants 5 to 10 minutes to discuss.
4. Invite a few groups to share their favourite season and one or two points on why they chose it has their favourite.
5. Ask participant to discuss the following:
  - a. Has their favourite season changed in the course of their lifetime? (do they see the impact of climate change on their favourite season?).
  - b. If yes, what feelings does this change evoke for the present and the future?
6. Summary:
  - a. This activity uses the element of what is lost and the psychosocial meaning of what is lost if the favourite season disappears.
  - b. You can create a direct link from this activity to the session on discussion on evidence and emerging concepts and link the experience of loss to the indirect impacts of the climate crisis as outlined by the emerging research.

### **Short lecture notes on evidence and emerging concepts related to MHPSS/climate change**

*Time needed: 20 – 30 minutes*

1. Evidence is still emerging in relation to the mental health impacts of the climate crisis. On one hand we know a lot about the mental health impacts of extreme weather events and conflict, however our knowledge continues to grow and change around these issues.
2. Our understanding of the direct and indirect impact of climate change on mental health is still emerging.



3. As MHPSS practitioners we need to keep ourselves updated on the evidence as it emerges.

What we know so far is that there are varied direct and indirect impacts of climate change on mental health:

- a. Briefly elicit what participants think these direct and indirect impacts could be. Ask the group: How would you define “direct” vs. “indirect” impact of climate change on mental health? What do you think the difference is? Encourage participants to share examples of direct or indirect impacts.
  - b. Take notes on a flipchart as participants share their thoughts. Alternatively, have participants discuss their thoughts in pairs before providing their thoughts as a whole group.
4. Show the flipcharts/slides with the diagrams from Lawrance et al. 2021. Compare and contrast what participants have shared with what is being shown. Explain the direct and indirect impacts of climate change on health and mental health using (see Reference material):
- a. Flipchart or slide with Illustrative pathways diagram from Lawrance et al. 2021, and/or
  - b. Flipchart or slide with Climate change and mental health impacts from Lawrance et al. 2021.
5. Compare and contrast participants’ examples from earlier of direct impact. ‘Direct impacts’ include trauma, grief and loss, increased suicide rates and cases of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), examples include<sup>1</sup>:
- o Extreme heat, heatwaves – evidence suggests an increase in suicide, mental distress and hospitalization associated with heatwave.
  - o Extreme weather events and mental health – evidence suggested rise in rates of PTSD, depression and anxiety and some evidence to support rise in suicide rates following extreme weather related disasters.
  - o People with existing MH conditions more vulnerable to the direct impacts of climate change.
  - o Climate crisis will disrupt provision of care for people with existing MH conditions and make it more difficult for people with newly emerging mental health problems to access care.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrance, et al. 2021. The impact of climate change on mental health and emotional wellbeing: current evidence and implications for policy and practice. *Grantham Institute, Briefing paper No 36.*



6. Compare and contrast participants' examples from earlier of indirect impact. 'Indirect impacts' are experienced even when not directly exposed to a climate-related disaster include emotional and mental distress, grief, loss, and anxiety that have been termed 'eco-anxiety', 'climate grief' and 'solastalgia'<sup>2</sup>:
- o Climate change exacerbates mental distress among those not directly affected (eco anxiety, etc.).
  - o Can include the following definitions on a flipchart or a slide:
    - Climate anxiety – distress related to worries about the effects of climate change. It is anxiety rooted in uncertainty about the future and alerting us to the dangers of a changing climate. Anxiety about the climate is often accompanied by feelings of grief, anger, guilt, and shame, which in turn can affect mood, behavior, and thinking<sup>3</sup>.
    - Eco-anxiety – general term to describe anxiety associated with the perception of environmental changes<sup>4</sup>.
    - Solastalgia – distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment<sup>5</sup>.
    - Ecological grief – the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change<sup>6</sup>.
    - Climate grief – refers to feelings of sadness, loss, and anxiety in response to climate devastation<sup>7</sup>.
  - o Conflict: increase in resource competition and impact on livelihoods may lead to an increase in conflict. For example, many analysts highlight the drought in Syria being a contributing factor to the unrest that led the devastating civil war that started in 2011. However, others dispute this, reflecting there is still much we don't know about the broader societal effects of climate change.

2 Ibid

3 Collier, S. (2022). If climate change keeps you up at night, here's how to cope. [Harvard Health Publishing. https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/is-climate-change-keeping-you-up-at-night-you-may-have-climate-anxiety-202206132761](https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/is-climate-change-keeping-you-up-at-night-you-may-have-climate-anxiety-202206132761)

4 Augustinavicius, J. L., Lowe, S. R., Massazza, A., Hayes, K., Denckla, C., White, R. G., Cabán-Alemán, C., Clayton, S., Verdelli, L., Berry, H. (2021) Global climate change and trauma: An International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Briefing Paper. Retrieved from: <https://istss.org/public-resources/istss-briefing-papers/briefing-paper-global-climate-change-and-trauma>

5 Albrecht G, Sartore G, Connor L, Higginbotham N, Freeman S, Kelly B, Stain H, Tonna A & Pollard G. Solastalgia: the distress caused by environmental change. *Australas Psychiatry*. 2007; 15 Suppl 1:S95–S98.

6 Cunsolo, A., Ellis, N.R. Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss. *Nature Climate Change* 8, 275–281 (2018). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/10.1038/s41558-018-0092-2>

7 Ellwood, B. (2022) Climate Grief: The Emotional Toll of Climate Change, <https://www.psychom.net/anxiety/coping-climate-grief-anxiety>



## Questions and key points for discussion on implications for practice

*Time needed: 15-30 minutes*

1. Have you seen some of these direct and indirect impacts in your own community?
2. How have you been addressing these impacts in your work?
3. Have these impacts changed the way you do your work, if so how?
4. In humanitarian programming we will be dealing primarily with direct impacts, rather than indirect impacts.
5. Role of community involvement in climate action, potential for good psychosocial outcomes.

## Climate anxiety exercise<sup>8</sup>

*Time needed: approximately 30 minutes*

1. Climate anxiety can leave anyone feel dis-spirited, powerless, and without a clue about what to do. When anxious about climate changes, remember that by identifying and acknowledging a feeling, it is both easier to understand what is happening to you as well as to find ways to become an active agent. When noting any climate anxiety, think for a moment about each thing you can do yourself, with your friends, at work, at school, and as a volunteer to take action against climate change. This is a way to support your well-being.
2. To create a supportive environment, have a group discussion with your peers, colleagues, family members or other social circles using the following questions as a point of departure:
  - a. What are our feelings about and reactions to the issue of climate change?
  - b. What can we do as individuals and as a group to manage our reactions to climate change?
  - c. Which actions can we take as individuals and as a group to mitigate or stop the effects climate change?
  - d. What can we do in our professional roles vs. our personal lives?

## Climate risks in your region individual or group activity

*Time needed: 20 – 30 minutes*

*Note: Participants can do this activity alone, or in small groups with other participants in from their region (or neighbouring regions/countries).*

1. Climate risks vary and the mental health implications of these will vary so it is important to be familiar with the climate and hazard risks<sup>9</sup> in your region/community.

<sup>8</sup> From the IFRC PS Centre Well-being Guide

<sup>9</sup> [Climate risk](#) is the potential for climate change to create adverse consequences for human or ecological systems. This includes impacts on lives, livelihoods, health and wellbeing, economic, social and cultural assets and investments, infrastructure, services provision, ecosystems and species. [A hazard](#) is a dangerous phenomenon, substance, human activity or condition. It may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, loss of livelihoods and services, social and economic disruption, or environmental damage.



2. Write the following questions on a flipchart or have projected on a PowerPoint for participants to discuss:
  - a. What are the climate risks most likely, or already, affecting the region where you work/live?
  - b. Are these direct or indirect impacts?
  - c. What are the impacts in your NS work on issues related to climate change (e.g., Health, DRR, Climate adaptation)? Do you know who works on these projects? How can you work with them to incorporate MHPSS considerations into their activities? Write down their names and make a plan to discuss how MHPSS can be considered in their work? How can you work together?

Helpful sources:

- The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction <https://www.undrr.org/> in particular <https://www.undrr.org/building-risk-knowledge/global-risk-analysis-and-reporting> and <https://www.undrr.org/publications>
- The Red Cross and Red Crescent Climate Centre <https://www.climatecentre.org/>
- <https://resourcewatch.org/> (climate dashboards)
- <https://climateaction.unfccc.int/> Global Climate Action

### Human Layers<sup>10</sup>

*Time needed: 45–60 minutes*

*Note to facilitators: This exercise can be confronting for participants, especially for people with anxiety about our planetary future or fear regarding their current situation. It can bring some people to tears. Before beginning the exercise, provide a warning that this may be distressing for some and that there is no obligation for participants to take part or continue if they feel the need to step out of the activity. For those who choose not to participate or step out of the exercise, provide alternative options to remain engaged, such as observation tasks they could do or having the option to rejoin the activity towards the end. Lastly, it is recommended to do a brief grounding exercise (e.g. body scan) at the end of this activity and a short break before continuing on to any other topics.*

Part One:

1. Begin by standing in an open space in a line facing the same direction. Have some space between you.
2. With your eyes closed, take a step backwards, whilst imaging someone you know and care about from an older generation, such as a parent or a grandparent.
3. Take one more step backwards and image that person as a young adult, picture their life, their thoughts and feelings, their hopes, and struggles.

<sup>10</sup> From The Long Time Project. Created by cultural activists Ella Saltmarsh and Hannah Smith and inspired by the deep ecologist Joanna Macy. Krznaric, R., (2020), The Good Ancestor: How to think long term in a short-term world, pp66-67.



- a. For those with mobility issues, the group could alternatively remain seated with eyes closed and visualize the movement instead.
4. After a minute, take a third step backwards and imagine their fifth birthday – everyone who is there, the looks on their faces, the activities they are engaged in, the emotions in the air, what the furniture and physical environment looks like.
5. Return to your original starting position.

### Part Two:

1. Begin by standing in an open space in a line facing the same direction. Have some space between you.
2. With your eyes closed, imagine a young person in your life who you care about and feel connected to, perhaps a godchild, a nephew, a neighbour's daughter, or one of your own children.
3. Take a step forward and conjure up their face, their voice, their characteristics, the way they laugh, the things they love doing.
4. Take another step forward. You have now travelled 30-years into the future – what is happening in their life? What are their joys and troubles? What is the state of the world around them?
5. Take a final step. It is their ninetieth birthday party. You picture them surrounded by children, grandchildren, family members, friends, neighbours and former work colleagues.
6. They see your photo on the wall and make a speech to the gathered group about the legacy you left them: what they learned from you about how to live and the ways you inspired them.

### Part Three:

1. Take a pen(cil) and a piece of paper. Write out the speech they would give, a memorial to you, their departed ancestor.
2. This speech can be individual work or read-aloud to fellow workshop participants.

## Linking participants to current RCRC Movement projects, resources, materials, etc.

*Time needed: 5 minutes*

- There is a growing suite of materials, resources and projects within the RCRC Movement on climate and MHPSS.
- Using these in your work might help you connect with the latest research or get ideas from the other of other Movement components.
- Some places to start:
  - o Page on PSC website <https://pscentre.org/what-we-do/mhpss-and-climate-change/>
  - o Connecting Climate Minds <https://www.connectingclimateminds.org/>

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**IFRC Psychosocial Centre**  
Hejrevej 30, St.  
2400 Copenhagen NV  
Denmark



[www.pscentre.org](http://www.pscentre.org)  
[psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org](mailto:psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org)  
[facebook.com/Psychosocial.Center](https://facebook.com/Psychosocial.Center)  
[linkedin.com/company/ifrc-ps-centre](https://linkedin.com/company/ifrc-ps-centre)  
[twitter.com/IFRC\\_PS\\_Centre](https://twitter.com/IFRC_PS_Centre)  
[instagram.com/ifrc\\_psychosocialcentre](https://instagram.com/ifrc_psychosocialcentre)

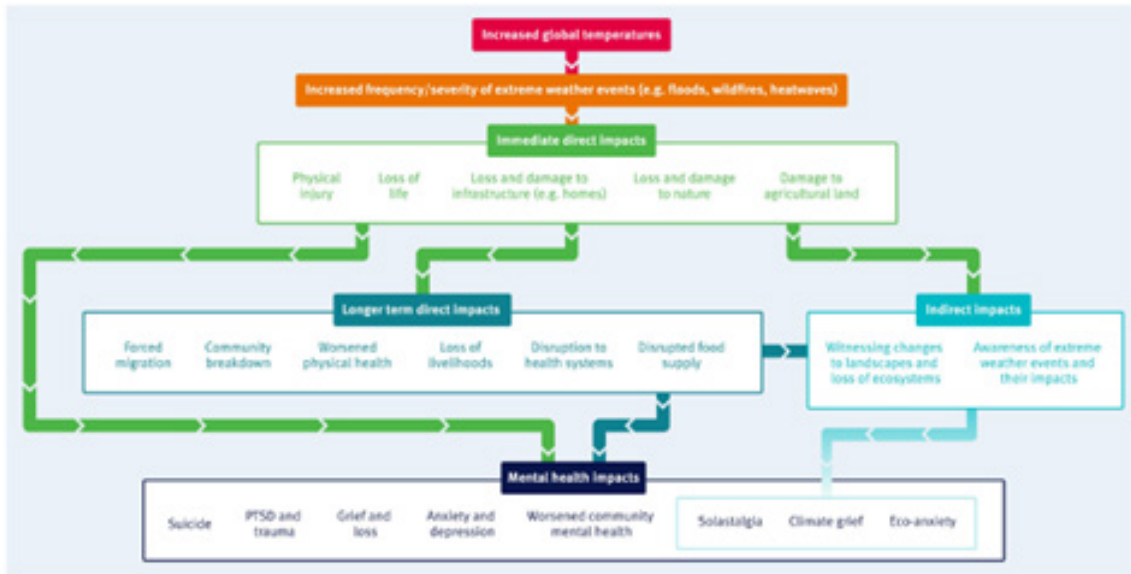


- o Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre <https://www.climatecentre.org/>
- o Global Disaster Preparedness Centre, Teen Prep Kit: <https://preparecenter.org/toolkit/teenprepkit/>



## REFERENCE MATERIAL

1. Illustrative pathways by which extreme weather events impact mental health, with arrows indicating direction from cause to effect (Lawrance et al. 2021).



2. The physical and mental health threats resulting from current and anticipated climate change impacts (Lawrance et al. 2021).



## SUGGESTED FACILITATOR PRE-READING AND RESOURCES

To feel confident facilitating a session using some of these activities, the following papers are suggested as background reading for facilitators. Sharing these with workshop participants will also be useful for those who want to learn more. The list also includes some materials and resources from other organisations that you might find useful to explore.

1. Lawrance et al. 2021. The impact of climate change on mental health and emotional wellbeing: current evidence and implications for policy and practice. Grantham Institute, Briefing paper No 36.
2. Red Cross Climate Centre, IFRC Psychosocial Centre & The Netherlands Red Cross. 2022. Fact sheet: Climate and mental health.
3. World Health Organisation. 2022. Mental health and Climate Change: Policy Brief.
4. The Long Time Academy toolkit: <https://www.thelongtimeacademy.com/toolkit>
5. The Climate Initiative resources: <https://www.theclimateinitiative.org/for-educators/>

