

Event Report

Our World, Our Wellbeing

Exploring the impact of climate change on mental health.

Wednesday 10th November 2021, 10.00 am – 12.00 pm, via Microsoft Teams.



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1) Introduction:

Mental Health and Climate Change

Climate change is unfolding around us. We are currently living through floods, wildfires, heatwaves, and the loss of sea ice. Emerging global research is showing that these events have impacts on population mental health in the form of trauma, depression, suicide, substance misuse, domestic abuse, and child abuse. They also threaten to disrupt care for people with mental health problems.

Looking at the UK specifically, a recent survey by Bath University showed that **75% of young people say that the “future is frightening”**, with two-thirds of respondents feeling sad, afraid, and anxious. The Royal College of Psychiatrists also showed that **more than four-fifths (84%) of the UK public think that climate and ecological emergencies will affect mental health in a decade as much as unemployment (83%) and COVID-19 (84%)**.

Evidence also demonstrates that climate change and mental health are linked to social inequality. Populations with pre-existing chronic health conditions, low socioeconomic status, children, older people, and ethnic minority groups are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. When faced with environmental hazards or stress, certain populations can often lack the financial, social, or community resilience that is needed to cope, manage and recover.

In light of this emerging picture, the mental health field has turned its attention to climate change. It is looking to understand the relationship between climate change and mental health and to find sustainable ways to support people who are experiencing its impacts. As part of this, questions are being raised around whether the healthcare system is built to cope with a world where populations live in a constant state of anxiety and are regularly traumatised by climate events.

COP26 being held in Glasgow in November 2021 provided the opportunity for colleagues across Greater Glasgow and Clyde to come together to take this agenda forward. It is within this context that the Mental Health Improvement Team at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde organised the “Our World, Our Wellbeing” event on Wednesday 10th November 2021.

2) Event Aims and Outcomes

This event aimed to bring together stakeholders from across Greater Glasgow and Clyde to discuss the mental health and climate change agenda.

Outcomes:

- Improved understanding of best practice examples of mental health and climate change work that is being undertaken across Greater Glasgow and Clyde.
- Increased awareness of which groups are most impacted by climate change and how they are affected.
- Greater confidence in identifying what role stakeholders can play in helping to tackle climate change and promote positive mental health.
- Better understanding of how we can best support people who are experiencing mental health difficulties as a result of climate change.

3) Programme

Introduction

Dr. Trevor Lakey, Health Improvement and Inequalities Manager (Mental Health, Alcohol and Drugs)

Keynote speakers

Gregor Yates, Public Health Research Specialist, Glasgow Centre for Population Health

Allison McKenna-Breen, Health Improvement Senior, Glasgow City HSCP

Catherine Tearne, Health Improvement Senior, Inverclyde HSCP

Workshop Facilitators

Laura Andre, Health Improvement Senior, Mental Health

Dr. Trevor Lakey, Health Improvement and Inequalities Manager, Mental Health, Alcohol and Drugs

Vibha Gaikwad, Health Improvement Senior, Mental Health

Michelle Guthrie, Health Improvement Senior, Mental Health

Heather Sloan, Health Improvement Lead, Mental Health

Closing conclusions

Heather Sloan, Health Improvement Lead, Mental Health

4) Attendance

A total of 46 people attended the event. NHS Health Improvement was well represented, specifically from NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Also in attendance were representatives from third sector support organisations, community groups, academia, and professional bodies including the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

5) Key notes from speakers

Presentation 1: Dr. Trevor Lakey, Health Improvement and Inequalities Manager (Mental Health, Alcohol and Drugs, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

Key points:

- There's emerging evidence that climate change is impacting our mental health, from increased distress following extreme weather events, a relationship between increases in temperature and number of suicides, potential disruptions to mental health care, and exacerbating existing mental health distress.
- We need to better understand this link and consider how we can support collective mental wellbeing as we grapple with the challenges ahead.
- Feelings of hopelessness can be countered with activism – local examples of climate change work were given, including oyster rewilding in Scotland.



A summary of some of the emotional impacts of climate change.

Presentation 2: Gregor Yates, Public Health Research Specialist, Glasgow Centre for Population Health

Key points:

- The Glasgow Centre for Population Health's small grant scheme supported local projects exploring children and young people's views on the relationship between climate change and health and wellbeing.
- Schools, non-profit organisations, and community groups were awarded £2,500 to develop a climate change project with young people.
- Eight creative projects were funded, including videos showing the impact of climate change on health and wellbeing, digital magazines, and art and craft projects.
- Key outcomes include that young people engaged positively and benefitted from involvement. They were provided with a sense of purpose, hope for the future, and were encouraged to get involved in climate-related projects afterward.



Presentation 3: Allison McKenna-Breen, Health Improvement Senior, Glasgow City HSCP

Key points:

- Humans are co-dependent, our happiness and health depend on connections and relationships that help us thrive, including our relationship with the world.
- Urban Roots and the Health Improvement team at Glasgow City HSCP have been working to develop therapeutic gardening, growing, and greenspace activity within East Pollokshields since 2015.
- The project focuses on connecting green spaces, people, and activity in the form of green social prescribing.

Presentation 4: Catherine Tearne, Health Improvement Senior, Inverclyde HSCP

Key points:

Cycle Scheme: In partnership with The Bothy and Parklea Branching Out, Inverclyde HSCP launched a local bike scheme. As part of this, they purchased various cycles including e-bikes, 3 wheelers, low cycles, tandem for partially sighted people with a guide, and a wheelchair-accessible bike. The project aims to encourage more people to cycle for part of their everyday journey, improving physical and mental health confidence. The project assists in overcoming barriers to cycling whilst utilising zero carbon transport. After initial successes, more cycles are being purchased for Greenock health centre for patients and staff to develop the project.



Social work staff and Bothy trainer, Keith



Early Years Gardening session

Food Growing: Inverclyde HSCP has also launched a food growing initiative. The aim is to support the local community to have regular contact with the natural environment to improve physical and mental wellbeing. The project brings people together to learn new skills, create connections and increase wellbeing and confidence. A full-time Community Food Worker has been hired to help residents overcome social isolation due to COVID-19 in communities new to food growing.

6) Key notes from breakout rooms

Breakout room discussions were focused on the following four questions: “What are we seeing in terms of the effects of climate change?”, “Which groups are most impacted?”, “What action can key stakeholders take to help tackle climate change and promote positive mental health?”, and “How do we best support people who are experiencing mental health problems as a result of climate change?”. A summary of the main points arising from these conversations is provided below.

6.1 What are we seeing in terms of the effects of climate change?

Attendees described how climate change can impact mental health in a multitude of ways, which can be grouped into either direct or indirect effects:

- **Direct:** In terms of direct impacts, there are those with first-hand experience of a climate change-related natural disaster, like the recent wildfires in Australia, or the floods in Europe. Attendees discussed how experiencing the effects of climate change first-hand in this way has been shown to raise the risk of experiencing bereavement-like grief, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression or low mood, and extreme distress.
- **Indirect:** For those not yet directly affected, participants described how awareness of the climate crisis and the anticipation of changes to come can exacerbate mental and emotional distress. There is a growing awareness that things are changing, resulting in feelings of grief, sadness, fear, or resignation due to the losses involved. This could be the loss of human, animal, plant life, or a loss of lifestyles. Attendees described how these feelings are made worse by the barrage of increasingly worse environmental news, combined with the knowledge that the actions we have taken so far haven't been enough.

As a result, we are starting to see climate grief and eco-anxiety presenting in our communities. Some third-sector organisations in attendance reported an increase in phone support for climate anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. For others, eco-anxiety or climate grief often doesn't initially come up in conversations with people. Instead, their clients have come to them as a result of other issues, like work stress or depression, but climate concerns arise in the course of their support. Available evidence and on the ground reporting, therefore, suggest that climate change has a significant and multi-faceted impact on mental health and emotional wellbeing.

6.2 Which groups are most impacted by climate change?

- **Young people:** Those in attendance reported that we are seeing the effects most clearly amongst young people who experience high levels of anxiety about climate change. Across University campuses, students are raising concerns around the future of our planet. Social media and our news feeds are often flooded with images of young climate strikers holding signs that say “Why should I study for a future I won’t have?” and “You’ll die from old age. We’ll die from climate change”. This feeling of anxiety is often combined with a sense of frustration that older generations are apathetic to climate change, or that people are choosing to defer dealing with the crisis to future generations.
- **Those experiencing inequalities:** Climate change and mental health are also both linked to social inequality. The group noted how initial inequality results in disadvantaged groups suffering disproportionately from the adverse effects of climate change, resulting in further inequality. An example was given where those living in poorer housing might be more likely to be flooded, yet less likely to have insurance. Despite being at greater risk, these groups are also less likely to engage in climate change issues as it may not be top of their concerns. Instead, they may be more focused on immediate needs like heating their homes or feeding their families. These groups are therefore most likely to feel the impact of climate change, yet be less likely to have access to the support and resources to mitigate against the emotional impact of it.
- **People with mental health problems:** Discussions were had around how climate change increases mental health needs and will therefore have an impact on mental health systems in the future. There already are waiting lists for mental health services, which could become further stretched as a result. Therefore, attendees felt there is a need to proactively build resilience in mental health systems and to strengthen community mental health support to respond to predicted increases.

Other groups who are likely to be most impacted that were mentioned include women, particularly those who are pregnant or postnatal, ethnic minority groups, and people with less social support.

6.3 What action can key stakeholders take to help tackle climate change and promote positive mental health?

“We must turn the greatest collective challenge facing humankind today, climate change, into the greatest opportunity for common progress towards a sustainable future” – Ban Ki-Moon

Across the board, the group stressed the need for cross-organisational and cross-sector collaborations to take this agenda forward. This includes developing interventions and best practices that support those experiencing mental health difficulties due to both direct and indirect impacts of climate change.

A summary of actions the group felt individual stakeholders can take has been outlined below:

Individuals

- **Develop a sense of agency through action:** The group talked about actions that individuals can take that will benefit both their mental health and help tackle climate change. These individual actions, like recycling or choosing active travel options, can provide individuals with a greater sense of agency and control, increase feelings of meaning and empowerment, and provide social support through connection with other like-minded people.
- **However, there are barriers to be overcome for meaningful involvement:** It was noted that there are certain barriers to individuals taking action against climate change. For example, difficulties with recycling, a lack of access to green spaces, limited infrastructure to support active travel options, or costly green transport.

Third sector and community organisations

- **Drive community engagement:** Due to their strong community ties, third-sector organisations have a role to play in engaging with their communities and empowering them to take action against climate change. This could be facilitated by starting conversations about climate change or signposting people to appropriate information, such as where to find recycling points or local green initiatives.
- **Develop collective knowledge:** For widespread action, the group stressed the importance of collective knowledge on the impact of climate change and mental health. Third sector organisations are essential in helping to raise awareness of both the mental health impacts and protective factors. Crucial to this is ensuring that the voices of people with lived experience are included, and the use of clear and consistent messaging.

Healthcare systems

- **Build sustainable healthcare systems:** The group discussed the role of healthcare systems in the fight against climate change. They highlighted the necessity to build sustainable, climate-resilient healthcare systems to meet the anticipated growing need for mental health support.
- **Offer climate change training for mental health professionals:** To help facilitate conversations around climate change, attendees noted the importance of increasing the training for mental health professionals on the topic. This will help them manage and speak out about the impacts on mental health and advocate for further initiatives to address climate change.
- **Raise awareness among the general public:** Healthcare systems also have a role to play in raising awareness of the mental health impacts of climate change among the general public. This includes both reactive and proactive public health campaigns. These campaigns should focus on increasing individuals' ability to recognise these impacts on themselves and their communities and to know where to turn to for support.

Policymakers

- **Incorporate mental health priorities into national plans for emission reductions:** The voices of those who are particularly vulnerable to, or who have lived experience of climate change impacts, should be included in the development of any policies that are related to climate change and mental health. These policies must look to address social and economic inequalities.
- **Support communities in creating 'green' and 'blue' spaces:** Incorporate plants and water into local spaces and improve the provision of cycling and walking facilities. It was noted that currently in Glasgow over 60% of the population live within 500 metres of vacant and derelict land. By improving these spaces and opening up the opportunity to deliver nature-based solutions, we can improve the mental health and wellbeing of those nearby, and provide a greater sense of connection with nature. Care should be taken to be mindful of inequalities in access to these spaces.

Researchers and funders

- **Raise awareness of the evidence on the impact of climate change and mental health:** Researchers are vital to raising awareness on the topic among policymakers and the general public to inform and motivate action.
- **Conduct robust, interdisciplinary research:** Focusing on topics such as; how the climate crisis impacts people's mental health, who is most affected/identify at-risk groups, protective factors, and how it threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities. As with other stakeholders, including the voices of those with lived experience of climate change, or those most vulnerable to its impacts is paramount. This will help us to better understand their needs, coping mechanisms, and how to build resilience in our communities.

6.4 How do we best support people who are experiencing mental health problems as a result of climate change?

“Burnt-out people aren’t equipped to serve a burning planet ... [so] the well-being of our hearts and souls must be reestablished.” – Susi Moser, All We Can Save

- **Build emotional literacy and resilience:** Negative emotions are being displayed in our communities, and there is a need for emotional literacy support, as well as resilience building. As part of this, more vocabulary is required to help us voice the various forms of climate grief and anxiety we are feeling, including feelings of eco-anger, climate rage, burnout, or depression.
- **Use the arts to process climate anxiety and grief:** Artistic projects have long been used in the mental health field as a means to tap into feelings that are hard to communicate. These could be used to help us process what is happening to the planet around us, find purpose in how we respond to it, and determine how we can live meaningfully.
- **Utilise green initiatives and projects to help people connect with nature and reduce the burden on mental health systems:** These projects can support people to tune in to a different pace and rhythm, help people ground themselves in the present moment, and create a stronger relationship with nature. This could involve access to food-growing projects, green gym activities, and community groups.
- **Take learnings from existing literature, such as grief theory, and apply it to climate grief:** The group felt there are a lot of parallels with existing bodies of work, such as work done in relation to grief. Grief is about helping people to adjust to a new environment after something has been lost or is in the process of being lost, including the world around us.
- **Hold peer support groups:** A peer support mechanism is required to help individuals and communities build resilience by creating spaces for social and emotional support. In these groups, people can process their feelings about the world and be supported to take meaningful action. Learnings can be taken from groups like the [Good Grief Network](#), a peer support network based on Alcoholics Anonymous.
- **Have a network of climate-aware healthcare professionals:** Event attendees felt that staff need to be aware and equipped to have conversations about the impact the climate crisis can have on an individual’s mental health and wellbeing. This could be achieved through training and professional development. In the UK, there is also a directory of climate-aware therapists, [the Climate Psychology Alliance](#), who help people cope with the emotions that arise from the climate crisis.

- **Avoid treating eco-anxiety as a pathology:** Eco-anxiety is not listed as a condition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Instead, when supporting people who are experiencing eco-anxiety or grief, event attendees felt that it should be treated as a natural response to a real threat. These feelings should be normalised, and individuals should be supported in embracing these complex emotions, living with them, and ultimately channelling them into meaningful action.
- **Further develop mental health professionals' relationships with the communities they serve:** Health systems, grassroots organisations, and others have a role to play in mobilising and empowering communities to bolster their resilience and mental health.

7) Learning Points and Future Developments

There is a great desire and passion from colleagues to advance this agenda. The event has highlighted that pockets of good practice are happening across Greater Glasgow and Clyde and that there are opportunities for increased cross-sector collaboration.

“Fantastic opportunity to start an important discussion and get everyone thinking about how they can take this agenda forward” – Participant evaluation form

“We have an opportunity to harness the knowledge, aspiration and actions to mitigate climate change, doing so will have mental health benefits for everyone.” – Participant evaluation form

Evaluation feedback suggested there was a real appetite from participants for future events and in particular to have more time to explore the range of issues.

Colleagues also voiced an interest in having a more focussed discussion on strategic national work regarding how to manage public emotions towards climate change. An initial action following the event, therefore, is for a GGC-wide group to be established to determine how we can take the agenda forward and shape mental health services around people who are already vulnerable to climate change and its impact.

8) Supporting Information

8.1 Resources

- **BBC Bitesize**: offer a range of resources for primary and secondary on climate change and information on Climate anxiety: How to turn your worries into action.
- **Eco-Schools Scotland**: the whole school, pupil-led approach to Learning for Sustainability.
- **Keep Scotland Beautiful**: a selection of interactive teaching and training sessions for Climate Action Week to support COP26.
- **Mental Health Foundation**: How to look after your mental health using mindfulness, free to download.
- **Save the Children**: A guide for parents and other adults around how to talk to children about the climate crisis.
- **STEM**: Climate Change Primary and Secondary resources offer the opportunity to explore and try new things, increasing young people's enthusiasm for climate change.
- **The British Council (The Climate Change Challenge)**: a free interactive resource that is designed for teachers of / and pupils aged 7-19.
- **Worldwide Fund for Nature**: Climate Change resources for schools to help pupils explore the issues of climate change in an engaging and motivating way.
- **Young Upstart**: A hub of information for young people working together to save the planet.

8.2 Available Climate-change specific support

- **Climate-aware therapy**: Information about receiving support from climate-aware mental health professionals is available for people who are affected by the climate crisis through the Climate Psychology Alliance.
- **Climate Awakening**: A series of ongoing sharing and listening sessions that anyone can drop into virtually.
- **Climate cafes**: Meetings where people can have a safe space to express what the climate crisis means to them, their lives, and their loved ones. These can be found by searching online for “your city + climate café” to find a climate café nearby, or by signing up for ongoing virtual series run by the Climate Psychology Alliance.
- **Good Grief Network**: Social and emotional support to people who are feeling overwhelmed by the climate crisis. They offer an in-person or online 10-step program that helps individuals build personal resilience and empowerment and strengthen community ties.

8.3 Further reading

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