

# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE ERA OF CLIMATE CHANGE: A RISING EMERGENCY FOR PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

Climate change has been clearly manifested over the past few decades. It is no longer a subtle environmental issue but an obvious and immediate existential problem. The Global Climate Risk Index ranks Pakistan in the top ten most climate-vulnerable countries. Heatwaves in Karachi, recurrent droughts in Sindh and Baluchistan, the devastating floods in 2010 and again in 2022 affecting over 33 million people, are manifestations of the change. Since people bear the consequences of these extreme and lesser effects of climate change, there must be psychological impacts on Pakistan's population. These effects are still not well understood, despite the fact that attention is frequently focused on the loss of infrastructure and physical health outcomes. Climate-related issues demand urgent attention to mental health policies and services, which are already under strain.

## KEYWORDS

Climate Change; Droughts; Floods; GeoPsychiatry; Health Policy; Pakistan.

## INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become a clearly appreciable phenomenon over the past few decades. Its consequences and environmental impact that were subtle are now an immediate existential problem. Pakistan, according to the Global Climate Risk Index, ranks in the top ten most climate-vulnerable countries, and its populace has to deal with the consequences of this change.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between climate and psychiatry is gaining recognition within geopsychiatry, a field that investigates the impact of environmental and geopolitical happenings on the mental well-being of populations. In Pakistan, deleterious effects caused by climate change add to pre-existing social factors like unemployment, poverty, rural-urban migration, weak health systems, and political instability are undoubtedly amplifying their impact on the mental health of the people. amplifying their impact on the mental health of the people.<sup>2</sup>

Extreme weather conditions, like sudden flooding in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the reclamation of coastal regions in Sindh by the sea and intense heatwaves in Punjab, not only devastate the homes and livelihoods but also displace communities, disrupt families, and erode cultural connections. These disruptions often create and manifest as acute psychological distress, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and 'eco-anxiety'.<sup>3,4</sup> Persistent exposure to extreme ecological events such as droughts and resultant crop failures with consequent food insecurity results in an intensification of grief, despair, and suicidal ideation.<sup>5</sup>

## CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC HEALTH

There is little doubt that the healthcare system of Pakistan is not equipped to handle the psychological and social impacts of climate change. Primary healthcare systems that most often do not handle the physical health problems that confront them rarely if ever incorporate mental health into any disaster response, affecting survivors of floods, droughts, and heatwaves. The vulnerable population, such as women, children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing mental health disorders, are deprived of psychological first aid or longer-term support<sup>4</sup> and thus face the amplified risks because of the disaster and a poor healthcare system.<sup>5</sup>

Climate change that is causing increasing food and water scarcity, elevating the prevalence of infectious diseases, dengue and malaria, and displacement that is causing loss of livelihoods<sup>8</sup> is directly exacerbating mental health issues by increasing food and water scarcity, elevating the prevalence of infectious diseases like dengue and malaria, and causing loss of livelihoods.<sup>9</sup> These and other factors contribute to chronic stress, prolong cycles of poverty, and strain coping strategies. The outcome is a heightened prevalence of psychiatric conditions, often unrecognised and unrecorded in national disaster data.<sup>10,11</sup>

## POSSIBLE STEPS FOR PAKISTAN

Pakistan requires an urgent climate policy that includes mental health considerations. The way forward should involve:

1. Policy Integration: Adaptation of policies for climate change need to include assessments of mental health impacts.<sup>2</sup>
2. Disaster Preparedness: Incorporating mental health assistance in support of disaster response systems is crucial, which includes training of first responders and community health personnel in the provision of psychological first aid.<sup>4</sup>
3. Community Resilience: After basic physical needs have been met, local efforts such as community discussion groups can create safe environments for addressing eco-anxiety and fostering resilience.
4. Research and Data: It's essential to conduct locally relevant studies to measure the psychological impact of climate-related disasters in Pakistan and recommend and guide culturally appropriate interventions.<sup>6,7</sup>
5. Capacity Development: Psychiatry programmes need to incorporate connections between climate, climate change and mental health, thus preparing future practitioners with the understanding and capacity to respond effectively.<sup>8</sup>
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## CONCLUSION

The mental health community (psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and policymakers) in Pakistan have both a moral and professional responsibility to manage the psychiatric effects of climate change on the population. The 'climate change emergency' is no longer a distant threat; it is a current reality that is altering the lives of millions of individuals nationwide.<sup>1,10</sup> Acknowledging and addressing the effects of climate change on mental health is crucial for building a resilient society. Focusing on mental health as a central theme within initiatives to manage the effects of the changing climate would be essential in allowing the adoption of a comprehensive, compassionate and sustainable approach to one of the most significant challenges confronting Pakistan.

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