Submission to the Inquiry into Climate Resilience by the Legislative Council of Victoria

By: Psychology for a Safe Climate

> *"Recognising that emotions are often what leads people to act, it is possible that feelings of ecological anxiety and grief, although uncomfortable, are in fact the crucible through which humanity must pass to harness the energy and conviction that are needed for the lifesaving changes now required".*
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> Cunsolo, A et al. Ecological grief and anxiety: the start of a healthy response to climate change. (2020) Lancet Planetary Health. (10)

About Psychology for a Safe Climate

Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC) is a not for profit Health Promotion charity. Our mission is *Supporting People Emotionally in Facing the Climate Reality*. PSC has been a leading organisation, nationally and internationally, in the emerging field of Climate Psychology since our formation in 2010. Our activities range across the continuum of mental health and wellbeing, from promoting social and emotional wellbeing, to mental illness prevention.

For more details about our work in fostering emotional resilience - see the **Appendix 1**.

PSC has already been involved in writing a submission to the National Health and Climate Strategy and was involved in the National Climate Risk Assessment. PSC made a Submission Re: Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023 and were invited to and attended the subsequent public hearing. We also made a submission into the National Climate Adaptation issues paper in April this year.

We believe that the **Inquiry into Climate Resilience** by the Legislative Council of Victoria, with its focus on risks to the built environment and infrastructure, and on mitigating these risks, **does not address:**

- **the vital inclusion of psychological and social adaptation** to physical climate impacts,
- the complexities and benefits of supporting the development of **psychological, and social resilience to climate impacts and disasters as we tend to the built environments and infrastructure.**

Background: The need for a psychological and compassionate approach for all adaptation and resilience.

A key issue for any person or group - communities, organisations or government is to accept that there is a need for adaptation, and the level of adaptation needed.

While many people now accept the reality of climate change, many do not accept the full implications of the climate crisis, what is called *implicatory denial*. In implicatory denial the fact of climate change is not denied, but the scientific, psychological, social, moral and political implications are denied[1]. This can be expressed as minimising the seriousness of the crisis, or by seeing the impending crisis as - not here, not now, not us. This includes denial of the need for, and scale of adaptation needed.

Denial can also be a response to unwanted feelings or ideas. Denial can be an understandable response to intense fear about an uncertain future, and lack of necessary leadership and government action.

When people want an immediate response to current infrastructure impacts, they can be in denial about the increasing severity and complexity of the unfolding climate crisis (e.g. some coastal infrastructure such as sea walls). This can create a collusion between the impacted community and the relevant infrastructure agency, creating a short term, costly and temporary solution. Rather than opening to the possibility of deeper transformation, people will need support and compassion to comprehend the possibility of their landscapes changing and what this means for their livelihoods.

Denial can also be present when communities are faced with loss. Increasingly there will be a need for relinquishment or upgrading of some built environments as they become unsafe (e.g. very fire prone areas) or unsustainable (e.g. areas of prolonged drought). This can lead to denial of this painful need, and lead to anger, unless managed in a psychologically informed way.

In other words, it is vital that communities and individuals are supported emotionally in facing the climate reality.

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[1] Cohen.S.(2001) States of Denial. Polity Press.

Reflections: Victorian Government Inquiry into Climate Resilience.

Communities critically need support and resources to prepare for and adapt to the climate impacts threatening their lives, livelihoods, and built environments.

To build resilience to climate disasters in our communities, we must put the needs of those most at risk at the forefront of our preparation, plans and response. This means strong community consultation and involvement in decision-making, prioritising Indigenous leadership, those with lived and living experience of climate disasters, and groups who are disproportionately impacted by climate change, such as those living with a mental health condition, disability, culturally and linguistically diverse people.

Emotional resilience and adaptation

In using the term ***resilience,*** we mean helping people become more effective in dealing with and alleviating climate induced disruption and adversity by learning how to care for themselves and find meaning, direction and hope in their lives while helping other people, and improving the condition of the natural world and climate[2]. Emotional resilience requires deep compassion and care, for self and others (including animals, plants and landscapes), while managing the emotional challenges of a new and ever changing reality. Resilience is not a stoic acceptance of the situation, or a return to the previous 'normal', but requires and allows for "learning, adaptation and transformation[3]". It also will be a time of immense anger, grief and sadness that will need support.

Emotional adaptation gives us the capacity to be present to the climate reality. It includes understanding the context and reality of the climate crisis, acknowledgement and sharing of the often overwhelming and highly intense feelings aroused. It includes the challenge of finding purpose, hope and meaning within the crisis.

The current climate reality indicates humanity is in a perilous state and that scientists' most pessimistic predictions are being exceeded which are creating a frightening reality[4].

Climate change is having significant emotional and mental health impacts[5] on people due to factors like extreme weather events, mass extinction, and the systemic cultural causes of extraction and exploitation. As awareness grows about our ecological/social reality and lack of preparedness for disruption and disasters, the community distress, trauma, and associated mental health issues will escalate dramatically[6].

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[2] Doppelt, B (2016) Transformational Resilience-how building human resilience to climate disruption can safeguard society and increase wellbeing, Routledge, New York
[3] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2022) 'Summary for Policymakers'
[4] Australian Security Leaders Climate Group, Canberra ACT (2024) Too Hot to Handle Report. Admiral Chris Barrie AC (Retd), Air Vice-Marshal John Blackburn AO (Retd), Colonel Neil Greet (Retd),Cheryl Durrant, Major Michael Thomas (Retd), Ian Dunlop & Jane Holloway
[5] Bradshaw, S et al (2023). Climate trauma: the growing toll of climate change on the mental health of Australians
[6] Fiona Charlson et al (2021) Climate Change and Mental Health: A scoping review. Int J Environ Res Public Health

Understanding how heatwaves and other disasters will impact Victorians will be essential in planning resilience. One report from RMIT has begun to understand how climate change is impacting the Victorian workforce. Across 1165 Australian workers in Victoria, 75% indicated physical health impacts, and 43% indicated mental health impacts[7].

Specific mental health problems expected to rise include anxiety, depression, PTSD, complicated grief, increased suicidality, compassion fatigue, hopelessness, and helplessness. Harmful coping behaviours like substance abuse, violence, and extremism will also multiply if not prevented.

A major concern is the increase in "climate distress" - the distressing emotional responses to the real and perceived threats of the climate crisis on humans, the environment and interconnected systems across generations. Expressions of this include eco-anxiety and ecological grief[8].

A special focus needs to be on young people and their high burden of existential risk. Many young people are very distressed by the climate crisis (climate anxiety)[9], while also challenged by the housing crisis, lack of job security, education debts, mental health challenges and decisions about their future, such as whether to have children in a climate changed world.

Facing these existential realities can be done in thoughtful and compassionate ways minimising additional harm and enhancing benefits of truth telling (such as self-determination and empowerment)[10]. It is more emotionally and psychologically healthy to face a difficult reality and find healthy ways to respond, than to avoid it or minimise it.

Individual mental health services cannot adequately address the scale of this looming mental health and wellbeing crisis[11]. As the crisis deepens, health practitioners, climate movement and communities will require extensive support to cope emotionally with climate disasters and adapt services.

A public health approach focused on prevention by strengthening community resilience factors like social connections, skills training, and peer-led healing is needed. Here, the development of places and spaces is crucial in enabling a sense of social connectivity and safety. Indeed we know that structures, buildings, places and spaces are more than neutral objects or scenes, They play a significant psychological, emotional and social role.

There is thus a need for investment in infrastructure that brings people together to create strong

[7] Todd Denham Lauren Rickards (2022) Climate Impacts at Work Supporting a climate ready workforce

[8] Emma Lawrence 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

[9] Hickman C. et al, 2021 Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. *Lancet Planetary Health* 2021 Dec;5(12):e863-e873. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(21)00278-3/fulltext

[10] Jasmine Kleft (2021) published a literature review on The Responsibility of Communicating Difficult Truths About Climate Influenced Societal Disruption and Collapse.

[11] Doppelt, B (2023) Preventing and Healing Climate Traumas- A guide to building resilience and hope in communities, Routledge, New York

community connections, and where people can come together to be safe and cared for during climate impact events, such as heatwaves and after disasters, especially those disproportionately impacted, e.g. neighbourhood houses, parks, cool safe spaces, resilience hubs etc. This can help to enable and foster emotional resilience, self-determination, and empowerment, and enable the visioning and creation of a resilient community. Urban space regeneration initiatives can also improve community connection and quality of life.

In implementing structural adaptation and resilience, there is a need to focus more attention both on developing skilfulness among actors working on these issues, and to focus on the ''how'' things are done, not just ''what'' is done. Here, growing emotional resilience by processing one's own climate reality is crucial for those aiming to support others[12].

There is a need for a community ''life-affirming'' response to resilience

A public health and justice approach prioritises preventing the occurrence of health and mental health conditions, not merely treating them after they appear, and integrates group and community-minded peer-led methods into the design and delivery of solutions for all people, with a special focus on higher-risk and disproportionately affected groups.

As society continues to design, plan, consult and implement climate solutions and adaptation measures, applying a health and justice lens is accomplished by engaging people in strengthening existing local "protective factors"— social connections, trauma-informed and resilience-focused information and skills, local resources etc.—and forming additional capacity that buffer them from stresses and acute shocks, help heal them when they are traumatised, and remain mentally well and resilient during adversities[13].

PSC policy recommendations to foster emotional resilience

1. Align and connect the dots between climate resilience and the Victorian Wellbeing Action Plan (2023-2027).
2. Be guided by expert reports such as ACOSS Fair, Fast and Inclusive; CAHA Healthy, Regenerative and Just, and Australia Remade Care through Disaster.
3. Fund local and place based communities and organisations so they can engage, coordinate, educate and support their community/groups to adapt to the psychological impacts of climate change.

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[12] Gillespie et al (2023) Becoming a climate aware counsellor: Supporting ourselves, clients and communities. Counselling Australia
[13] The International Transformational Resilience Coalition
https://itrcoalition.org/current-events-and-news/ Doppelt, B (2023) Preventing and Healing Climate Traumas- A guide to building resilience and hope in communities, Routledge, New York. Doppelt, B (2016) Transformational Resilience-how building human resilience to climate disruption can safeguard society and increase wellbeing, Routledge, New York

4. Support a national and local network of Climate Aware Practitioners in climate distress management and psychological resilience[14].
5. Focus on high risk workforce groups, such as those working in the climate movement, community sector and healthcare.
6. Be climate emotion and trauma informed in all consultation, planning, design and implementation.

Appendix 1

About the work of Psychology for a Safe Climate

PSC's Vision

Our vision is for Australians to embody the inner strength and community connection required to address the climate crisis, at the scope and pace the science and justice demand.

Our Goal

Provide psychological understanding and support to the climate movement, mental health sector and wider community, so that people can build the internal and social resources needed to navigate the climate crisis.

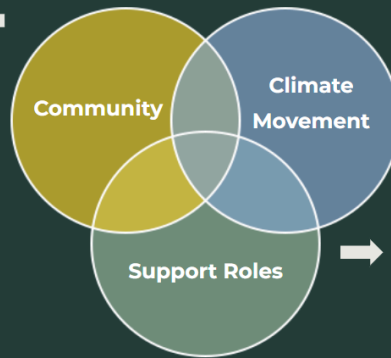Three core pillars underpin the work that we do:

1. **Promotion of climate wellbeing:** through leadership, communications, education and advocacy.
2. **Prevention of climate distress:** through addressing underlying drivers of harm and distress; and
3. **Responding to climate emotions**: with peer support, recovery strategies and resources.

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[14] Gillespie, S, Ride, C, Wilson, C. (2023) Becoming a Climate-Aware Counsellor: Supporting ourselves, clients and communities. Counselling Australia.

The Psychological basis of the work we offer in building resilience:

Psychology for a Safe Climate is aware of the need for community resilience based on our own experience and from the model we have created. PSC has more than one decade of expertise in program design and delivery to help build emotional and psychological resilience in communities. Our support model does this by:

- Being aware of the reality of the climate crisis, its social and political context and the psycho-social impact it will have on ourselves, our health service and communities' quality of life.
- Being aware of one's vulnerability and emotional response to the climate reality, by recognising the psychological distress, discomfort and uncertainty it causes, and learning how to acknowledge and manage one's emotional response
- Being able to witness and express emotional responses in the presence of others as climate awareness and events increase.
- Developing and fostering a sense of purpose and engagement, creating active hope - where one invests in what is needed without knowing the outcome.
- Practising self-care and compassion for oneself and others.
- Appreciating how building human resilience to climate disruption can safeguard and increase wellbeing.