



Submission regarding the National Climate Adaptation issues paper: Psychology for a Safe Climate

About Psychology for a Safe Climate

Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC) is a not for profit Health Promotion charity. Our vision 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 - see the Appendix 1 below.

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 believe that this document, the National Climate Adaptation Issues Paper, does not adequately stress the importance of psychological and social adaptation, nor the complexities and benefits of supporting the development of psychological, social and emotional resilience.

The need for a psychological approach for all adaptation

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, moral and political implications are denied (12). 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.

This submission focuses on the Health and Social support system segment of the Issues Paper. The Issues Paper specifically emphasises “Risks to health and wellbeing from slow onset and extreme climate impacts” (p13 issues paper). The National Climate Risk Assessment report includes a number of other nationally significant climate risks in the health and social support system which relate to our work, as highlighted below, and which are also discussed in the National Health and Climate Strategy (NHCS):

A. Individuals and communities at risk. “Risks to health and wellbeing of individuals and communities in exposed and vulnerable situations that increase inequity as a result of impacts on the wider determinants of health, and reduce access to health and social support services”

B. Mental Health. “Risks to mental health and wellbeing including post-disaster trauma, climate anxiety, and a lost sense of belonging and connection to Country“

C. Service delivery and workforce. “Risks to delivery of health and social support services and the health workforce that are caused by increased demand, cost and disruptions”.

We are responding to each of those 3 categories of risk in what follows.

A. Individuals and communities at risk.

As PSC advocated in our submission to the NHCS, a new model of individual, community and organisational psychological adaptation and resilience is needed.

We certainly agree there is a need to **“Strengthen resilience and enhance wellbeing”** (p.1 Executive summary, Adaptation Issues Paper), and **“Improving and promoting mental health initiatives** aimed at increasing social community connectedness **to help build longer-term resilience in communities** before, and after, climate-related disasters and extreme weather events”(p38, Issues Paper.)

There is clearly a strong focus in this paper on the wish and need to build and establish resilience by enhancing well being, improving mental health and connectedness and adaptation in communities. **However, while PSC strongly supports such goals, we are concerned at the lack of clarity about how these goals can be achieved in the current and deepening climate crisis.**

PSC's understanding of emotional adaptation and resilience.

(i) Emotional Adaptation

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.

(ii) Emotional Resilience

Emotional resilience necessitates self care and care for others, in addition to emotional adaptation necessary to a new and 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". (Issues Paper, p7)(11)

These definitions add another necessary layer to the definitions in the Issues Paper.

The context: the climate reality

The current climate reality indicates humanity is in a perilous state and that scientists' most pessimistic predictions are being exceeded and are creating a frightening reality. A recent report in the [The Guardian](#) says Australia's land surface has warmed by 1.5C since 1910, according to the Bureau of Meteorology's long-term record of temperatures, and that the warming of Australia's land surface had moved from 1.48C to the new 1.5C mark after another year of data was added.

Facing existential realities like this can be done in thoughtful and compassionate ways that could minimise additional harm and enhance benefits of truth telling (such as self-determination and empowerment). It is more emotionally and psychologically healthy to face a difficult reality and respond in healthy ways, than to avoid it or minimise it.

B. Mental health impacts

There will be a dramatic rise in mental health problems (1) (2) in Australia and worldwide, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, complicated grief, increased suicidality, compassion fatigue, hopelessness, helplessness, and more.

Harmful coping behaviours will also multiply, such as alcohol and substance abuse and addiction, family violence and child abuse, other crime, aggression, violence, and extremism.

In addition to these problems there will be an increase in **climate distress**. **Climate distress**(3) refers to all the distressing emotional responses in relation to the real and perceived threat of the climate crisis and its effects on human beings intergenerationally, and on the natural environment. This is a real and significant issue that affects an individual's mental health and

wellbeing, and will increase dramatically as people can no longer turn a blind eye to or deny the implications of the climate crisis.

There are many expressions of climate distress, some of which have been named as eco/climate anxiety and ecological/climate grief.

A special focus needs to be on young people and their understandable climate distress. Young people are very vulnerable to mental health issues related to climate change and need to be prioritised as they carry a higher burden of existential risk. Their distress is exacerbated by awareness that our response to climate change demonstrates intergenerational inequity.

Young people are acutely aware that they are heading into a highly challenging and unrecognisable future, and report feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness because they are not in a position to mitigate climate change impacts.

See Appendix 2 for more information on climate distress in young people.

C. Service delivery and workforce.

Individual mental health support won't be able to cope

The work of the International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC) (4,5,6) highlights that although they will remain very important, individualised mental health and social services cannot address the scale or scope of today's mental health epidemic. They have no chance of preventing or healing future epidemics of mental health problems generated by accelerating climate change-generated traumatic stresses, disasters, and emergencies.

“Most important is that mental health services are reactive: they assist individuals mostly one at-a-time only after they experience symptoms of pathology and do not proactively prevent the occurrence of widespread mental health conditions.”

There is a need for a community response to build resilience

A public health approach prioritises preventing the occurrence of mental health conditions, not merely treating them after they appear, and integrates group and community-minded peer-led healing methods, such as healing circles, into the prevention strategies. Mental health services would support the community approach, and would not themselves be the primary or dominant focus.

A public health approach to mental wellness and resilience is most effective when implemented at the community level. This is accomplished by actively 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 (4, 5, 6).

We need to build resilience to respond to the crisis, by using the climate disruption as a catalyst to find meaning, purpose and fulfilment in a changed and challenging life. We need to develop and integrate group and community-minded peer-led activities that build caring communities and support for people and nature, into the prevention strategies.

Work is needed to build climate resilient communities and psychologically strengthen our health and community services across Australia.

As the climate crisis deepens, psychology, medical and other helping organisations and communities will need extensive support in coping physically and emotionally with disasters over the coming years. They will also need to adapt their services and develop the capability of their leaders and staff to cope with climate crisis events.

There will be a need to understand the challenges of developing emotional resilience. It is important that those who are wanting to help others to build resilience are first of all aware of their own emotional vulnerability to climate change, and to have begun a journey of processing their own response to the climate reality so that they are more able to think about and support others with whom they work.

Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC) has paved the way in this developing and critical work of responding to climate distress, and understanding and fostering well-being and resilience in a changed world.

PSC engages with those working on climate change, the caring professions, those working on climate solutions and advocacy, and the broader climate concerned community to build and grow mental health and wellbeing, and to foster the need to build *resilience* for the unfolding climate crisis, in their work, organisations, and across the broader community.

PSC policy recommendations to foster emotional resilience

1. Prioritise education and engagement in climate emotions, climate distress and climate related psychological resilience and wellbeing programs. Focus on three key groups: (i) health and support professionals, (ii) people with lived experience of climate distress, mental ill-health and/or climate disasters, (iii) community leaders.
2. Establish a capability framework on climate focused psychological, social and emotional resilience, prevention and psychological skills.
3. Fund communities and organisations so they can engage, coordinate, educate and support their community/groups to adapt to the psychological impacts of climate change.

4. Recognise that *climate distress* is a rational response to the climate crisis and in so doing avoid pathologising this term. (2)

5. Support a national and local network of Climate Aware Practitioners in climate distress management and psychological resilience.(7)

7. Focus on high risk workforce groups, such as those working in the Healthcare and Community Health Sector.

6. Be informed by the work of Psychology for a Safe Climate and the International Transformational Resilience Coalition, along with successful community-based initiatives such as The Work That Reconnects,(8)

Further information about our work see Appendix 1 below.

Appendix 1

About the work of Psychology for a Safe Climate

PSC provides:

- Support for people working on climate change including activists, researchers, policy makers and scientists, who are vulnerable to the emotional impact of the work they do.
- Professional development and networks for mental health professionals in order to build evidence-based capability in social and emotional support in the era of climate crisis. This assists people of all ages, especially young people, to receive appropriate support regarding climate distress.
- Consulting services such as workshops, talks and interactive seminars for the broader community. We respond to requests for support from workplaces, community groups, councils and government to provide guidance, networking and training on various subjects related to mental health and climate change. In doing so, PSC has worked with young people, parents and educators.

PSC's experience with supporting increasing emotional resilience across the community

[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:

- a. 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.
- b. 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
- c. Being able to witness and express emotional responses in the presence of others as climate awareness and events increase.
- d. Developing and fostering a sense of purpose and engagement, creating active hope - where one invests in what is needed without knowing the outcome.
- e. Practising self-care and compassion for oneself and others.
- f. Appreciating how building human resilience to climate disruption can safeguard and increase wellbeing.

PSC's Support Model



Appendix 2

Climate Distress and young people

A Lancet study (9) of young people, showed that common feelings are fear, anxiety, sadness, anger and powerlessness. The 2021 study of 10,000 young people (16-25 years) from 10 countries, found that:

- 56% of surveyed young people said “humanity was doomed” due to climate change (including 50% of Australian respondents)
- 75% said the “future is frightening” because of climate change (76% of Australians).
- 39% said they were “hesitant to have children” (43% of Australians)

This study also reports a correlation between feelings of climate anxiety and government inaction on climate change, with 58% of those surveyed saying that governments are betraying them. They note that climate distress is often grounded in relational factors with children often experiencing “an additional layer of confusion, betrayal, and abandonment because of adult inaction towards climate change”⁶

A recent paper in the Lancet Planetary Health (10) considers ecological grief and anxiety to be a healthy response to climate change. The authors report emotional suffering can be reduced by:

1. Recognising that anxiety and grief due to ecological loss may be understood as emotions that may motivate positive towards climate solutions
2. Using proven group therapy strategies to reduce loneliness, shame and isolation while also offering the benefit of peer interactions and support.
3. Symptoms may be alleviated by prescribing activities that enhance and support the environment, while community based environmental activities enhance social connectedness, while offering mental health benefits .
4. A family oriented approach ‘acknowledging the challenge, encouraging parental insight into young peoples’ responses, empathetic communication with children and youth, validating their feelings of fear and disillusionment, and jointly mobilising hope through meaningful goal-directed activities’.

These are all activities that PSC currently already engages in. PSC already works with young people in groups and also has run groups for parents and educators. We are planning further workshops in this area and we see it as a priority population in terms of risk and vulnerability.

We believe that government should strongly support such work

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