



Mental Health  
Australia

# THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH



Climate change poses a threat to the mental health of all Australians and the communities in which we live. We know this because more extreme weather events and natural disasters can have a psychological toll on stress, anxiety and more, especially over prolonged periods. We also know that the lack of clear and decisive action on climate change and strategy from government leads to further climate anxiety, for young Australians in particular.

As a nation we witness time and again the deep resilience, adaptability, strength, and practical optimism of human beings in the face of overwhelming personal and collective

challenges. We can and must bring all these traits and resources to bear in addressing the health threats of climate change. And despite the complex challenges that lay ahead for Australia and the world to address the issue of climate change, there remains hope for both individuals and communities. Responding to disasters and the threat of climate change can inspire individual altruism, compassion, and optimism which strengthens communities and encourages personal growth. We have seen this regularly during national and international disasters and we also know Australians are three times more worried about climate change than they are about COVID-19.

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# THE FACTS

## How does climate change impact our mental health?

Over the last 130 years, the planet has become [approximately 0.85°C warmer](#). The level of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses emitted through human activity since the start of the Industrial Era has led to heat becoming trapped in the lower atmosphere. Human activity has affected the global climate, leading to significant health – including mental health – impacts.

More frequent and extreme weather events will lead to increases in the experience of psychological distress and mental illness, including: post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, complicated grief, survivor guilt, vicarious trauma, recovery fatigue, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation.

The impact of climate change will hit vulnerable Australians harder, exacerbating pre-existing social and economic inequalities. People experiencing financial or social disadvantage are impacted by climate change first, worse, and longest because they have access to fewer resources to cope, adapt and recover.

The impacts of climate change will not be uniformly felt. Rather, it will exacerbate social and economic inequalities that already exist. Those in rural and remote areas will be more likely to face the direct stress and trauma of drought and bushfires. People with existing illnesses may find that heatwaves disproportionately affect their health and mental health.

The threat and complexity of climate change and its effects can lead to despair and hopelessness. The term 'climate-anxiety' describes the experience. The mental health impacts of disasters will be long-term and far more widespread than physical injury impacts.





# WHAT CAN THE GOVERNMENT DO?

*Mental Health Australia is calling on governments to act on climate change. As a nation we need to come together and draw on our collective strength to face the most significant ongoing health challenge of the twenty-first century. There is hope, and opportunity, if we act now.*

*What we need is international collaboration and action on climate change. Governments, businesses, communities, and individuals must act now to address climate change. Without action from governments, communities, and individuals, the adverse impacts of climate change will continue to increase in severity and frequency.*

*All levels of governments must also develop better responses to climate events by developing national response coordination plans, working with affected communities, and increasing the capacity of the mental health workforce (including the lived experience workforce) to meet increasing need.*

*In addition, governments, mental health service providers, researchers, consumers, and carers must take the impact of climate change into account when designing mental health policy, programs, and services.*

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# LOOKING FOR MORE DETAIL OR RESOURCES?

**2021 - Mental Health Australia Position Statement - Climate change and mental health**

[Mental Health Australia Position Statement - Climate change and mental health | Mental Health Australia \(mhaustralia.org\)](#)

**2021 - Australians are 3 times more worried about climate change than COVID. A mental health crisis is looming**

[Australians are 3 times more worried about climate change than COVID. A mental health crisis is looming \(theconversation.com\)](#)

**2021 - Health and Medical Groups call for Prime Minister to scale up climate action to avoid escalating health threats**

[Health and medical groups in call for Prime Minister to scale up climate action to avoid escalating health threats \(caha.org.au\)](#)

**2021- How to cope with anxiety about climate change - Reachout**

<https://au.reachout.com/articles/how-to-cope-with-anxiety-about-climate-change>

**2021- Climate Change Fact Sheet - Headspace**

<https://headspace.org.au/online-and-phone-support/spaces/community/380825/>

**2021 - Australian Council of Social Service**

[Community Sector Climate Change Declaration - ACOSS](#)

**2021 - Sane Australia Fact Sheet**

[Life After Bushfires - Information and Guidance \(sane.org\)](#)

Mental Health Australia would like to thank its member organisations and key stakeholders for contributing to this extensive body of work on how climate change impacts the mental health of all Australians. If you are a member of Mental Health Australia and would like to add to these resources, please contact [info@mhaustralia.org](mailto:info@mhaustralia.org)