Understanding Climate Anxiety and the Need for Inclusive Healthcare Policy

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Abstract:
The world is facing an unprecedented crisis due to anthropogenic climate change. Its effects on physical and mental health are becoming increasingly evident. This paper examines the impact of climate change on mental health, focusing on the consequences of natural disasters and slow-onset climate changes. The concept of ‘climate anxiety’ emerges as a significant concern, affecting individuals and communities globally. It involves a fear of uncertain future impacts, and grief over ecological losses. Climate justice becomes paramount in addressing the disproportionate impact on different populations, which in this case includes a focus on healthcare policy taking into consideration the ‘psychoterratic illnesses.’

Keywords: Climate anxiety, Anthropocene, Climate Change, Solastalgia

Introduction:
Anthropogenic climate change presents an unparalleled crisis with extensive implications on the well-being of humans. UNFCCC defines Climate Change as a change of climate, which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods. It is significant to note that these alterations in the climate of the planet are due to human interference. The implications of this changing climate affect all aspects of life, especially physical and mental well-being of human beings. It endangers the health & comprehensive welfare by impacting weather patterns, ecosystems, and human systems. The existential nature of such obstacles confronting humanity especially takes a toll on mental health. Anthropogenic climate change ultimately poses a challenge to the question of life itself and hence has a very deep and profound impact on the mental health of individuals. It triggers existential anxiety which unlike fear is not a result of some specific tangible event but it revolves around uncertainty of human existence itself. Existential anxiety can be categorized into three domains of apprehensions i.e. fate & death emptiness and meaninglessness guilt & condemnation. Since both the increased occurrences of extreme weather events and slow-onset disasters might cause a loss of life and property at a larger scale endangering the existence of human beings it has the potential of pushing individuals towards both an apprehension related to the awareness of their mortality as well as an increased sense of meaninglessness in everyday notions of life. It is important to note that existential anxiety is established to be associated with depression and anxiety disorders due to a sparse mindset formed about the self, world and the future of it. Further the terror
management theory suggests that a failure to distract oneself from the knowledge of one’s mortality leads to psychological challenges amongst individuals. The focus of academic work around climate change has mostly been on its social, political and cultural impacts. However, recently the arena of healthcare has gained attention of the policy makers. The Covid-19 pandemic has showcased the fragility and in capabilities of the health care systems across the world to deal with global level health crises. As a result, it has reshaped the interconnection between foreign policy and healthcare. The Covid-19 pandemic coherently concludes that health threats are not confined to a single state rather it transcends across borders. A multidisciplinary approach from a perspective of public health, economics, law, international relations, and management is advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO). Consequently, The Lancet Countdown report is published annually to monitor the health profile of climate change. This paper highlights that there is a need to develop universal and accessible healthcare in accordance with climate adaptation and mitigation measures.

**Impacts of Climate Change on Mental Health:**

A significant proportion of research work has been done on the impacts of natural disasters on the mental health of the affected people. These disasters lead to disturbances by causing harm to properties, physical harm, loss of life, emotional suffering, psychological distress, relocation of families, and extended disruption to a wide range of services that the communities rely upon. The socio economic distress caused by these natural disasters results in an overwhelming level of psychological stress amongst its victims. The unpredictability of such calamities creates a state of shock for the sufferers further driving them into denial which becomes a source of stress & anxiety. The natural calamities that unfold within seconds (earthquakes, hurricanes, Tsunami) or slow occurring prolonged weather events (drought, heat-stress) results in various mental health related challenges like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, anxiety, mood disorders, insomnia, suicidal tendency and depression amongst the victims. The severity of such psychological challenges depends on various factors like the scale of natural disaster, loss and damage in terms of property and life, and the pre-existing physical and mental health condition of the suffering individuals. Furthermore, some individuals and communities are more vulnerable to these impacts due to various factors. It is important to note that climate change is altogether increasing the occurrences of such extreme weather events which would overburden the existing fragile system of healthcare worldwide. Climate scientists reiterate that these weather events are the most visible manifestation of the climate crisis. When populations frequently encounter such calamities, it is evident that they face an increased loss in terms of property, mortality and mental illnesses which would be exacerbated by an already fragile and overwhelmed system of healthcare. An increment in the occurrence of these calamities and the gradual change in the climate of the planet have a major impact on the agricultural output across the world. There are projections of increase in hunger and malnutrition due to a decrease in crop yield potential. On the other hand, a warming ocean and rising sea levels also disrupts marine food security. This food crisis could be dramatically exacerbated by frequent occurring long-term droughts. Further, the rising temperature takes away work opportunities from persons
specially working outdoors. Heat waves have decreased the ability to labour as well as increased the mortality rate. Heat waves are known to exacerbate underlying mental illnesses and behavioural disorders contributing to higher rates of morbidity, mortality and hospitalizations among individuals with these conditions, especially among those with dementia, schizophrenia, and substance use disorders frequently occurring wildfires have left people with more cardiovascular issues. On the other hand, the changing patterns of rainfall and floods have resulted in an increase in waterborne diseases. The constant rise in sea level and storms increasing because of warming of the ocean like in the Arabian sea would create displacement and violence. Migration can be highly stressful, especially when it involves crossing borders. The journey itself is uncertain and the process of adjusting to a new home is difficult especially when people are not welcomed by the existing residents. Political and social chaos which would not be easy to deal with. These changes threaten the physical as well as mental health of individuals. Although policy makers have considered the after effects of a disaster, the enormous scale at which these changes will cause a mental health crisis needs to be taken in cognizance and policies and health care. Especially in connection with climate adaptation and mitigation measures. For a better understanding of the significance of these impacts, this literature must be placed in the broader context of global climate change. Furthermore, the slow onset long term effects of climate change on mental well-being have not caught the attention of the academicians and policy makers so far. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on the effects of long term slow occurring climate change on mental health.

**Climate Anxiety Vs Ecological Grief:**

The Human Index Report 2021/2022 has been themed as uncertainty as people around the world have become more insecure than ever before after the Covid-19 pandemic followed by Russia-Ukraine war and the constantly changing climate of the planet. The HDI reports of 2019 and 2020 were about inequalities and the Anthropocene respectively. The 2021-2022 Human Development Report unites and extends these discussions under the theme of uncertainty how it is changing, what it means for human development. In recent years’ anthropogenic climate change is increasingly becoming more visible with changing patterns in weather and ecosystems. Anyone who knows about climate change in other words given the reach of communications technology almost everyone could be affected by climate anxiety regardless of their own personal vulnerability or relative safety. Climate anxiety in itself is not yet intense enough to be categorized as a serious mental illness but coupled with other pre-existing conditions and space to deal with it can develop it into a challenge. A person requires

a) enough time and space to deal with their emotions and

b) enough constructive activity to help mitigate climate change.

According to Albrecht the polluted ecosystems cause somaterratic illnesses (soma meaning body terratic meaning earth-related) which threatens the physical well-being of individuals. While the disturbed relationship between individuals and their home/territory invites psychoterratic illnesses i.e. mental illness based on emotions related to earth. He further develops the concept of Solastalgia to properly define the
stress caused by changes in an individual’s physical environment. He was concerned about the people affected by coal-mining in the Upper Hunter region of NSW and realized that the residents were going through stress and anxiety about their changing environment and the helplessness to protect it. The affected people experienced homesickness even though they were not forced out of their territory. It is a result of the transformation that their ecosystem goes through. Similarly, in such cases individuals lose their familiarity and feel alienated in their own home. It is the loss of knowledge of one’s own homeland and the incapability to prevent it that makes them feel powerless. However, Solastalgia is similar to the feeling of nostalgia yet different because nostalgia is experienced by people who are physically away from home and pine to go back. Albrecht defines Solastalgia as the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment. Solastalgia exists when there is the lived experience of the physical desolation of home but presently climate change has also been linked to forced displacement of people due to the effects of climate change. Climate change has emerged as a major factor that directly or its effects indirectly results in voluntary or involuntary movement of people. Hence, understanding climate anxiety solely with the concept of Solastalgia is no longer adequate in all cases. Another important evolving concept is that of ecological grief described as the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change. Scholars (Cunsolo, A., & Ellis, N. R., 2018) have identified three arenas in which ecological grief can be situated i.e. (1) Loss or degradation of physical environment due to an extreme weather event or gradual changes in the ecosystems. (2) Loss of ancient/indigenous knowledge of one’s own environment as it affects individuals economically dependent on nature or specifically has a lifestyle based on traditional wisdom. (3) Future projection of loss due to anthropogenic climate change. The third category of futuristic apprehensions seems to be the worst-case scenario. Even though climate science has advanced to a great capacity in recent years its future predictions cannot be absolutely accurate. Hence, the unforeseen challenges of the future causes’ anxiety to a great extent. A special feature of climate anxiety is that it is undefinable and reaches everywhere: because climate change affects so many things its impact is considerable and yet obscure at the same time Climate anxiety can be perceived as holding both positive and negative aspects. If felt at a mild level it can be a motivating factor both at individual and global levels to take actions against climate change. At global level it can create pressure groups to bring around concrete changes at policy level and implementation. But an extreme or severe level may result in inaction and ignorance as a coping mechanism. Climate change threatens the younger generation to a greater extent than the older population as they are at a higher risk of going through the consequences of global climate change. As some marginalized people bear the consequences of climate change more than others it is significant to mention that children and young generations also constitute a part of these vulnerable populations.
Conclusion:
In conclusion, anthropogenic climate change is not just a threat to the physical environment but also poses a significant risk to mental health. Climate anxiety is a growing concern fuelled by uncertainty about the future and a sense of helplessness in the face of environmental changes. Addressing the mental health impacts of climate change requires a holistic approach that integrates public health, environmental policies, and community resilience. Efforts to mitigate climate change should also prioritize mental health support and resilience-building strategies. Only through a comprehensive and inclusive approach can we effectively address the mental health challenges posed by anthropogenic climate change and work towards a sustainable future for all.

References: