

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Climate change is the primary challenge of our era. Urgent action is required, and psychological science can provide answers on how to mitigate and adapt to its consequences.

Psychology can help individuals, communities, and nations mitigate and adapt to climate change in many ways:

- Educating and communicating with the public about climate change;
- Preventing and treating mental health problems stemming from climate change;
- Enhancing individual and community resilience in the face of natural disasters;
- Planning for, and adjusting to, migrations and population displacements;
- Facilitating rapid transitions to new forms of energy, transportation, and agriculture;

Details on all these areas and more are available upon request. This document will focus on three topics.

1. Psychology tells us how to educate and communicate with the public about climate change.

Psychological science identifies many of the drivers of climate skepticism and inaction: Climate change impacts are perceived as distant, uncertain, and complex, which can lead to inactionⁱ and a desire to uphold established ways of life.ⁱⁱ Additionally, confronting climate change requires prioritizing long-term well-being over short term costs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Psychological science also offers tools to address these challenges.^{iv}

- Information about climate change must be **clear and straightforward**, repeatedly delivered by **trusted messengers**, and **discussed within communities** in order to speak to personal needs and realities.^v
- We must stress **actionable, relevant solutions that foster efficacy and empowerment**.^{vi}
- We must draw on people's need to belong^{vii} in order to **create a shared vision for action** and a set of social norms that guide behavior.^{viii}

2. Psychology tells us how to prevent and treat mental health problems stemming from climate change at individual and community levels

Extreme weather events can damage health, homes, and communities, resulting in dire mental health outcomes such as **trauma, depression, and anxiety** that last long beyond the events that caused them.^{ix} Climate change can also contribute to **long-term economic stress**, social instability, and loss of control, all of which undermine psychological well-being.^x These impacts and stresses **hit disadvantaged communities the hardest**, exacerbating health disparities and other societal inequalities.^{xi} Climate resilience will require anticipating and preparing for such impacts to prevent mental health deterioration around the globe, for example building resilience before disaster strikes and integrating mental health considerations into emergency response efforts.

3. Psychology tells us how to plan for and adjust to climate-caused migration and instability

Climate change, including the loss of arable land, can contribute to **forced migration** and other forms of social and economic instability. This instability can activate people's need to protect their groups and ideologies,^{xii} contributing to **prejudice, discrimination, and violence**^{xiii} and political polarization and radicalization.^{xiv} These effects of climate change have already contributed to wide-scale unrest around the globe. We must understand and address these psychological dynamics in order to prevent further harm.

Psychological science and practice can contribute to the success of climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts and help respond effectively to climate impacts on individuals and societies.

Please contact Amanda Clinton, PhD (aclinton@apa.org) for links to scientific experts and other information.

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