

## **The Psychological Impact of Climate Change**

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People experience climate change in two forms: sudden catastrophic events and gradual changes in their immediate environment. The psychological impacts of sudden events such as heat waves, water shortages, grass fires and forest fires are immediate and traumatic. Such impacts involve losses, such as crops, homes, and livelihood. Imagine living on a farm your family has owned for generations when your well goes dry. You can't access water for your home or your crops. You may have to move or find other employment. Trauma symptoms in such cases include sleep disruption, panic, grief, and anger, followed by intrusive memories of the event and a deep sense of loss.

Gradual changes in climate include rising temperatures, highly variable weather, an increase in insect infestations, unusual diseases, changes in agricultural conditions and landscapes, increasing air pollution, and recurring water shortages. Because people are more sensitive to immediate consequences than to gradual change, we don't immediately notice gradual changes in our environment, including the effects of climate change. To see what I mean, try this experiment. Step outside your house and look around you. Use all your senses. Look at the landscape, the plants and animals, and types of structures in your neighborhood. Listen to the sounds, natural and human, smell the air, feel the temperature. Now try to imagine what you would have experienced standing in this same place 10, 20 or 30 years ago. What would you have seen, heard, smelled, or felt in the air then? Looking at photos of your neighborhood from those earlier times may help you realize how much has changed without your awareness.

The psychological effects of gradual climate change will likely be felt before climate change itself is recognized. Imagine Pendleton summers with gradually more days of 100+ degrees, restrictions on water use at home or in agriculture. Imagine several years of crop failures in our region, or more frequent and intense fires during the summer that cumulatively change the landscapes you used to enjoy. Imagine increasingly smoky air, perhaps for several months at a time. While none of these events is catastrophic by itself, the cumulative effects over time will wear people down, especially as conditions grow worse over time.

The psychological effects of such scenarios have been studied in Australia, which has undergone drought for over a decade. That drought resulted in the breakdown of trust among neighbors and a collapse of community cooperation. Rural areas were especially hit hard as wealthier families found employment elsewhere and moved away. Small towns lost many of their young people. School enrollment declined. Those youth left behind started engaging in more risk taking behavior, including getting into trouble with the law. Those communities also saw increased rates of psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

Climate change, particularly global warming, will have other psychological consequences. Acting out behaviors, such as fighting and stealing, increase during extended heat waves.

People who already have psychiatric symptoms become worse. Water and food insecurity can result in anxiety disorders for people who didn't have them before. Especially vulnerable are the elderly, children, and the poor. Such symptoms tend to last several years and eventually impact physical as well as mental health. Moving away brings its own form of stress, disrupting social relationships and creating job insecurity.

Ecologists speak about the loss of habitat which occurs when land and resources that support a species gradually disappear. Climate change, specifically global warming, may well lead to a gradual loss of habitat for people living in Eastern Oregon. Our towns, countryside, and climate are likely going to be harsher environments for our grandchildren to inhabit. That prospect alone may cause people to feel helpless and fatalistic. Or it may lead to denial, as people stubbornly try to go on with their lives as if nothing has changed. Unfortunately denial is only a short-term coping mechanism. Eventually harsh environments become more difficult to ignore, and denial breaks down as a coping mechanism, leading to serious mental health problems such as anger, despair and a profound sense of loss. Communities will likely survive in some capacity, but the loss of habitat will be felt by all.

*Further information about the psychological impact of climate change can be found at*

[http://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/eA\\_Beyond\\_Storms\\_and\\_Droughts\\_Psych\\_Impacts\\_of\\_Climate\\_Change.pdf](http://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/eA_Beyond_Storms_and_Droughts_Psych_Impacts_of_Climate_Change.pdf)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.7930/JOR49NQX>