

# Climate Change

## Climate Change: Impact on Mental Health in the Workplace

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### What are the impacts of climate change?

Climate change is a long-term shift in weather conditions measured by changes in temperature, precipitation, wind, and snow cover. The impacts of climate change include [extreme heat](#) and [cold](#) events, [wildland fires and smoke](#), [floods](#), heavy rain and snow, [high winds](#), hurricanes, [tornadoes](#), air pollution and smog, and other extreme weather events. These events could damage critical infrastructure, cause loss of power and utilities, and lead to the unintentional release and mixing of hazardous chemicals.

[Climate Change – Impact on Process Safety](#) contains more examples of climate-related hazards.

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### What is mental health in the workplace?

Mental health is a state of well-being in which a person understands their abilities, can cope with the everyday stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can contribute to their community. Worker mental health is affected by and can affect the workplace. A mentally healthy workplace promotes workers' mental well-being and does not harm workers' mental health through negligent, reckless or intentional actions. For example, a mentally healthy and safe workplace could be free of excessive fear or chronic anxiety.

More information about this topic can be found in the [Mental Health Fact Sheets](#).

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## How could climate change impact mental health?

Climate change is recognized not only as an environmental crisis but also as a cause of mental health challenges. Experiences can range from concern or uncertainty about the future to direct psychological trauma from experiencing an extreme weather event.

The psychological effects of climate change may include:

- Immediate, acute effects of exposure to extreme events such as natural disasters, including post-traumatic stress injuries, distress, depression, and problematic substance or alcohol use
  - Chronic concern and uncertainty about the future from observing or experiencing more gradual and prolonged effects of the changing climate, such as temperature increase or more frequent extreme weather events
  - Emotional toll from experiencing consequences of weather changes, such as migration, forced displacements, food insecurities, climate-related conflicts, and post-disaster adjustments
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## What is eco-anxiety?

Eco-anxiety is a term used to describe fear and worry caused by climate change and its effects. Individuals may experience stress caused by watching the slow and seemingly unchangeable impacts of climate change unfold and worrying about the future for themselves and future generations.

Eco-anxiety can be experienced by both individuals who are directly affected by the changing climate and those who are not currently affected but are concerned about this topic.

High levels of eco-anxiety are associated with adverse mental health experiences, including sadness, fear, anger, helplessness, frustration, fatigue, insomnia, and depression. At the same time, low and moderate levels of eco-anxiety could lead to positive stress and encourage individuals to find relevant information, prioritize resource conservation, and become involved in addressing the causes of climate change.

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# How could climate change impact workplace mental health?

## Extreme weather events

The mental health of workers who respond to extreme events or who experience extreme events, such as emergency services or disaster relief, may be negatively impacted by traumatic exposures. Their mental health can be worsened by experiencing or witnessing injury, death, destruction of habitat and property, or significant changes to their job when responding to the crisis. Individuals, including workers involved in relief and recovery efforts after natural disasters, could also experience post-traumatic growth, such as a renewed sense of purpose and appreciation. Research suggests this growth could lead to positive work-related outcomes, such as more job satisfaction and strengthened workplace relationships.

Extreme weather events can also indirectly affect workplace psychological health and safety. For example, absences caused by local extreme weather events could result in more work for co-workers, increasing the risk for physical and mental fatigue and adding to stress and strain. In other words, workers who can attend work during the weather event may have too much work and insufficient time, equipment, or support. Experiencing weather-related harm to loved ones or damage to personal property can also affect workers' ability to concentrate and work safely. Additionally, any stress caused by periods of extreme weather will be felt at work, as it may be challenging to manage our reactions to these events.

## Gradual and prolonged weather changes

The changing climate's more gradual and prolonged effects could stress businesses' ability to adapt to temperature and rainfall changes, extreme heat, new pests and diseases, drought, or wildland fires. Outdoor workers, including those in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, infrastructure, and construction, are especially vulnerable to these effects, in some cases adding to already high levels of mental strain. Gradual weather changes can also directly affect workers' experience of job security by changing their work hours or the amount or type of work due to extreme temperatures. In cases where there is a temporary or permanent loss of work due to weather changes, the resulting loss of income would also likely cause stress.

For example, warming temperatures could require air-conditioned public facilities to operate for longer periods, potentially impacting workers' work-life balance. Outdoor workers may also need to adjust working hours to avoid the hottest period of the day. However, working at dusk and dawn could increase their chance of contracting vector-borne illnesses from mosquitoes, and non-continuous work hours could impact their work-life balance.

Ethical dilemmas may also occur. For example, the agriculture industry both affects and is affected by the changing climate. For instance, agricultural businesses are affected by changes in rainfall. A reduction in rainfall may result in the need to use pumps (powered by gasoline or diesel fuels) to bring water to crops or increase the use of pesticides and fertilizers to maximize crop yield. The increased use of fuel, pesticides, and fertilizers further increases costs and affects the environment and climate. However, the crop may still yield less than expected amounts. Reduced profit means the business cannot upgrade to more energy-efficient equipment or methods that rely less on pesticides or fertilizers to help lower their climate impact.

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## How could pre-existing vulnerabilities affect the mental health impacts of climate change?

The impact of climate change on health and safety can be experienced differently due to various personal, environmental, and social factors. For example, migrant workers and day labourers have a higher chance of experiencing inadequate housing or other social and economic constraints, making the adverse health effects of exposure to climate-related hazards worse through being exposed to similar hazards outside of work.

Studies have found that climate change can exacerbate mental health issues among vulnerable groups, including indigenous groups, low-income populations, individuals living in coastal or rural regions, people living with pre-existing health conditions, and those who have limited healthcare access. Generally, groups that have limited resources tend to have higher exposure to climate-related hazards while also having a tougher time adapting to new climate realities because of the same resource limitations, leading to heightened mental distress.

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## What can employers do?

Employers can address the workplace impacts of climate change, including mental health impacts, by identifying the hazards, assessing the existing and anticipated risks, implementing controls, evaluating the controls used, and continuously monitoring the situation. In addition to reviewing your organization's psychological health and safety program to make sure it reflects current practices, employers can:

- Foster trust in the workplace and encourage social and managerial support to reduce the negative mental health impact of any weather events or changes.
- Identify potential workplace psychosocial hazards related to climate change and implement control measures to reduce potential harm.

- Consider how decisions and new practices made in response to the changing climate can impact your workers and their mental health, and take steps to reduce negative impacts, such as timely and regular communication about the new practice and inviting questions and feedback.
  - Review your emergency response plans to ensure they consider the potential mental impact on workers and implement steps to reduce this impact.
  - Ensure business continuity planning addresses the resources needed when weather-related events impact your workforce.
  - Find and create opportunities for your organization to actively reduce its environmental impacts, which could reduce everyone's experience of eco-anxiety.
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## What can workers do?

Everyone plays a role in workplace health and safety, including workplace mental health. You may:

- Participate in your organization's emergency response drills and exercises.
  - Speak with your supervisor or manager if you have any health and safety concerns, including concerns about the mental health impacts of workplace adjustments due to climate change.
  - Participate in education and training to build resiliency and coping skills, such as mindfulness and stress-reduction.
  - Contact your organization's employee assistance program (EAP) for assistance, where available.
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## Where can I find more information?

Please see the following OSH Answers for more information:

- [Mental Health - Introduction](#)
- [Mental Health - Dealing with Stress in the Workplace](#)
- [Mental Health - How to Address and Support](#)
- [Mental Health - Recognizing and Addressing Stigma at Work](#)
- [Mental Health - Psychosocial Risk Factors in the Workplace](#)
- [Psychological Health and Safety Program - Assessing Psychosocial Hazards](#)
- [Psychological Health and Safety Program - Controlling Psychosocial Hazards](#)

- [Psychological Health and Safety Program - Evaluation and Continuous Improvement](#)
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