

Climate change and mental illness: Another pandemic post coronavirus disease 2019?

Rijal R¹  

¹Rika Rijal, Consultant Psychiatrist, Rhythm Neuropsychiatry Hospital and Research Centre Private Limited, Ekantakuna, Lalitpur, Nepal.

The emergence of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a pandemic was a stressful situation for all of us. With the limitation of social contact and shift in our work modality, many things changed and it became the new normal.¹ While some found opportunities even in such situation, many became crippled to another silent pandemic of mental illness.² After the widespread use of vaccine, things have started to return to normal, or have they?

An issue that has often been overlooked in the past, but is gaining momentum now more than ever is about the climate change. Scientists have stated that this winter would be the warmest in recorded history. This signifies a consistent trend in global warming and climate change.³ Have we ever thought how this change in the environment can affect our mental health? We intend to briefly discuss the complex yet inseparable link between these two.

Climate change and its impact on mental health includes evidence that extreme weather events can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, anxiety, complicated grief, survivor's guilt, substance abuse, etc. Studies have also shown relationship between increased temperatures and number of suicides.^{4,5} The news about extreme weather events, the loss of biodiversity, and the impending climate crisis can lead to a range of emotional responses. On the other hand, people suffering from underlying mental illness are often vulnerable to the effects of frequent, intense, and complex changes in the climate.^{4,6} It also threatens to disrupt the provision of care and exacerbates underlying mental distress. This holds true even for individuals who are not directly affected by this change. One of the common examples of this is the eco-anxiety.⁷ The American Psychology Association (APA) describes eco-anxiety as the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one's future and that of next generations.⁷

Despite all this, a 2021 World Health Organisation survey of ninety five countries found that only nine have thus far included mental health and psychosocial support in their national health and climate change plans.⁸ Children from developing countries in particular are among the most vulnerable to the resulting health risks and will be exposed longer to the health consequences. The health effects are also expected to be more severe for elderly people and people with medical comorbidities.^{5,8}

Nepal is one of the climate change prone countries in the world. According to Climate Change Atlas 2010, despite negligible emission of global greenhouse gases, it was ranked fourth most vulnerable country to global climate change.⁹ Over the past few years, climate change has caused enormous negative impacts in almost all aspects of our country and the temperature is warming at even faster rate than that of the global average. This can be attributed to the fact that vulnerability of Nepal is exacerbated by fragile ecosystem, uneven topography,

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Address for correspondence

Dr. Rika Rijal
Consultant Psychiatrist,
Rhythm Neuropsychiatry Hospital and Research Centre Private Limited,
Ekantakuna, Lalitpur, Nepal.
E-mail: rikarjl@gmail.com



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high dependency on agriculture, hydroelectricity, and low gross domestic product (GPD). Lack of adequate fund for adaptation makes Nepal vulnerable to climate change and its effects even more. There are evidence from the past that natural disasters due to climate change have invited different mental health issues in our country.⁹

Looking at all the facts, this is the right time that we all start preparing for this next pandemic of climate change before it gets out of the hand. Because in a country like ours where the health infrastructure is lagging behind in many aspects, we will be the least able to cope without assistance to prepare and respond. It is a high time that we address the hidden emotional burden of environmental stressors and start exploring newer coping strategies like eco-therapy. By doing so, we can work towards a sustainable environment and mentally healthy future.

For an overall change, it is important to address the mental health impacts of climate change. This includes integrating climate considerations with mental health programmes, incorporating mental health support with climate action, building upon global commitments, developing community-based approaches to reduce gap that exists for mental health and psychosocial support. Addressing the complex nature of connection between climate change and mental health also involves working together to reduce greenhouse gas and protect natural habitats. By doing so, we not only address the root causes of eco-anxiety but also create a healthier and a safer future for us and the generations that follow.

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