

HANDBOOK

A Toolkit for Local Electeds Climate Action

MENTAL HEALTH

A part of [The Adaptation Handbook](#)



Stay tuned for the up-to-date version of this resource!

This document is undergoing fact checks and updates... you will be able to access the new version in September 2025.

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Introduction

Climate change brings both sudden disasters like floods, hurricanes, and wildfires, and long-term challenges such as rising temperatures and sea levels. These events can impact mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. In the aftermath of extreme weather events, [mental health problems can outnumber physical injury cases by 40 to one](#). Displacement and forced migration, often a result of these disasters, can cause profound feelings of [loss of identity, independence, control and culture, which can lead to mental distress, sadness, anger, anxiety and depression](#). Even those not directly affected may struggle with eco-anxiety, eco-grief, or eco-paralysis, feeling overwhelmed by the feeling of powerlessness and the magnitude of the crisis.

Studies show that climate-related mental health issues are on the rise, with significant portions of those affected by natural disasters developing anxiety, mood disorders, or PTSD. The chronic stress of living with the ongoing threat of climate change can further strain mental well-being. For example:

- [Twenty percent of flood victims were diagnosed with depression, and 36 percent of them showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\).](#)
- [One in six survivors of hurricane disasters developed PTSD and one in two developed anxiety or mood disorder](#)

Addressing these challenges requires action at individual, community, and systemic levels. Building resilience, offering support, and promoting coping strategies are crucial steps in mitigating the mental health impacts of climate change. Additionally, engaging in meaningful activities and collective action can help individuals manage climate-related stress and foster a sense of hope and purpose. Ultimately, while the mental health effects of climate change may be less visible than physical disasters, their long-term impact on individuals and communities is significant and must not be underestimated.

[Eco-anxiety](#): Uneasiness, stress, and severe worry about climate change.

[Eco-grief](#): Grief linked to environmental loss and expected future losses related to climate change.

Eco-paralysis: Complex emotions connected with climate change awareness and feeling unable to prevent future hazards.

Local government jurisdiction

- The Public Health Agency of Canada [recommends](#) that public health could address the health impacts of climate change through activities that align with its core functions, including:
 - **Health Promotion:** Working collaboratively with communities and other sectors to understand and improve health through healthy public policy, community-based interventions, public participation, and advocacy or action on determinants of health.
 - **Health Surveillance:** Collecting health data to track diseases, the health status of populations, and determinants of health trends to promote health, prevent and reduce the impact of disease, as well as monitor health inequities.
 - **Health Protection:** Protecting the population from infectious disease, environmental threats, and unsafe food, water, and air.
 - **Population Health Assessment:** Understanding the health of communities, specific populations, and the determinants of health to create better services and policies, as well as research to identify the most effective interventions.
 - **Disease and Injury Prevention:** Promoting safe and healthy lifestyles to prevent illness and injury and reducing the risk of infectious disease outbreaks through investigation and preventive measures.
 - **Emergency Prediction, Preparedness, and Response:** Planning for natural or human-made disasters to minimise serious illness and death, as well as responding to emergencies while minimising societal disruption.

Pushback and Responses

1. Why should we focus on mental health when there are more immediate physical impacts of climate change?

Addressing mental health is important because the psychological effects of climate change can exacerbate physical health problems. [Anxiety, depression, and stress can undermine a community's ability to cope with physical challenges, leading to a vicious cycle of deteriorating health.](#) By tackling

mental health issues, we can build a more resilient population that is better equipped to handle all aspects of climate change. Furthermore, addressing mental health is a vital part of a comprehensive adaptation strategy. Mental health challenges can undermine other adaptation efforts by reducing individuals' and communities' ability to respond effectively to climate threats. By integrating mental health into our adaptation strategies, we ensure that our community is mentally and emotionally prepared to tackle the broader impacts of climate change.

2. Aren't there already enough mental health services available?

While existing services are valuable, they often do not specifically address the unique mental health challenges posed by climate change. By developing targeted programs, we can ensure that individuals affected by climate-related events receive the specialized support they need. Enhancing our mental health services to include climate-related issues will fill this critical gap.

Possible Initiatives

*Resource expertise level:  Green = beginner  Blue = Intermediate
 Black = advanced  Double black = expert

****Climate Caucus has ranked the following initiatives from beginner to expert, based on Complexity to implement, Staff time & expertise and Political capital. Please note, these rankings are our own best judgements.*

Educate the Public

The Basics:

- Raise awareness about the mental health impacts of climate change through public education campaigns, workshops, and community events.
- These initiatives could aim to inform residents about the psychological effects of climate-related events such as extreme weather events, natural disasters, and environmental degradation.

Examples:

- [Mental health and mental illness](#), Durham Region
- [Mental Health in Vulnerability Assessment](#), Waterloo Region
 - In their climate change and health vulnerability assessment, Waterloo Region specifically studied and outlined population groups vulnerable to mental health issues related to climate change.
 - They outlined four general categories: vulnerability due to exposure, vulnerability due to sensitivity, vulnerability due to adaptive capacity, and sex and gender-based vulnerabilities.

◆ Provide Community Support Services

The Basics:

- Local governments may provide or support community-based mental health services and resources to help individuals and communities cope with the psychological stressors associated with climate change.

Examples:

- [Access to green space](#), Haliburton, Kawartha, Pine Ridge District Health Unit
 - To cope with extreme temperatures, HKPRDHU worked with the municipality to enable access to more green space for cooling, with the expectation that such an initiative would also benefit mental health.

See page 7 of the [Extreme Heat Climate Caucus Handbook](#) for more examples under “Set up Community Support Programs for vulnerable populations”

■ Strengthen Disaster Preparedness

The Basics:

- Local governments are responsible for disaster preparedness and response efforts, which can include addressing the mental health needs of affected populations during and after climate-related disasters.
- This could involve coordinating with emergency management agencies, healthcare providers, and mental health professionals to ensure that mental health services are integrated into disaster response plans.

Examples:

- [City of Whitehorse Wildfire Risk Reduction Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2024](#), City of Whitehorse
 - To prepare for wildfire hazards, the city compiled this action plan which details planning, preparation, and adaptation aspects for residents within and outside Whitehorse, risk managers, and decision-makers of various agencies and governments.
- [WT Emergency Response Update](#), Government of Northwest Territories
 - Following the wildfire in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, the community established mental health services and hotlines for evacuees who abandoned their houses to the wildfire.
- [Yellowknife Wildfire Preparedness](#), City of Yellowknife
 - In their media room, Yellowknife updates their recommendations for residents to prepare for any major disaster or hazards, such as wildfire, as well as precautionary measures taken by the city so far.

Climate Change Adaptation Planning

The Basics:

- Local governments play a role in climate change adaptation planning, which can include assessing and addressing the potential mental health impacts of climate change on their communities.
- Check out the [Adaptation Climate Caucus Handbook](#) for more resources.

Examples:

- [Public Engagement in Biological Restoration](#), Waterloo Region
 - To deal with ecoparalysis, Waterloo Region is encouraging people to engage in biological restoration, such as planting trees and gardening, and stewardship to overcome feelings of ecoparalysis.

Green Space and Urban Planning

The Basics

- Local governments can promote mental well-being by prioritising creating and preserving green spaces within urban areas. Access to nature has been shown to have positive effects on mental health.

Examples:

- [Transform TO Net Zero Strategy](#), City of Toronto

- In 2017, *TransformTO* was unanimously approved by the City Council, demonstrating Toronto's commitment to limit global temperature rise in line with international goals. The Strategy presents a set of 2030 interim targets for community-wide emissions, as well as the City of Toronto corporate targets to demonstrate leadership by example. It also presents thirty near-term actions that will be taken to put Toronto on the net zero pathway.
- [Program Pathway H: Focus land use planning to prioritize zero emissions city design](#), City of Calgary
 - The City of Calgary has adopted various policy adjustments to integrate climate considerations into future city planning. In this report, Calgary outlines 13 aspects of updates to its existing plans, which cover topics such as municipal development, industry strategy, energy, and infrastructure.

Collaborate with Partners

The Basics:

- Local governments can collaborate with other levels of government, community organisations, healthcare providers, and mental health professionals to comprehensively address the mental health impacts of climate change. By working together, stakeholders can leverage resources, share expertise, and develop coordinated strategies for supporting mental health resilience.

Examples:

- [Distress Centres of Greater Toronto](#), City of Toronto & Region of Peel
 - Distress Centres of Greater Toronto was established in 1967 and is a service agency dedicated to providing timely emotional support, crisis intervention, and suicide prevention to people in distress. The organisation is independent of the city of Toronto and any municipalities in the region, but they are supported by the Region of Peel and the [City of Toronto](#), as this organisation is referred to as a partner in the reports of the local governments.
- [Existing Public Health and Community Adaptation Strategies](#), Waterloo, Region
 - Region of Waterloo cooperates with community partners in understanding the nature of changes to mental health status across the study area and devise strategies and programs to intervene on a range

of issues related to mental health including, but not limited to urban and transportation planning, health service delivery, affordable housing, built environment, and homelessness initiatives.

Research and Collect Data

The Basics:

- Local municipalities may support research initiatives and data collection efforts to understand better the mental health implications of climate change within their communities.
- This data can inform policy development, resource allocation, and targeted interventions to address specific mental health needs.

Examples:

- [Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale](#), Waterloo Region
 - Public Health Units in the Waterloo Region proactively collect data on mental health status across the region through [adapted surveys](#). In the data collection process, PHUs also incorporate climate change considerations and evidence into mental health program planning, which is also a key adaptive measure for Public Health and community partners.
- [Climate Action Plan: Phase Two](#), City of Charlottetown
 - As a component of Plan creation, various studies have been undertaken to ensure the Climate Action Plan is informed by the most recent and relevant data possible. This has involved the compilation of a Future Climate Projections Report for Charlottetown as well as the completion of an updated Community Greenhouse Gas Inventory. In addition, a Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment is being completed and is anticipated to be released to the public in the coming months.

Additional Resources

- [Climate Change and Mental Health – FAQ](#), Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)
- [Climate Change and Homelessness](#), Climate Caucus Webinar
- [Community Engagement - Climate Caucus Handbook](#), Climate Caucus
- [‘Everybody has a breaking point’: how the climate crisis affects our brains](#), The Guardian
- [Exploring Climate Change and Mental Health](#), AMS Student Society of UBC Vancouver
- [Mental Health and Climate Change: Policy Brief](#), World Health Organisation
- [Mobilizing Public Health Action on Climate Change in Canada](#), Public Health Agency of Canada
- [Positive Mental Health Surveillance Indicator Framework](#), Government of Canada
- [Recovering from disasters and emergencies includes mental health](#), the Canadian Red Cross
- [The heat wave really is making us grumpy and irritable. We need more science to figure out why](#), Toronto Star
- [BC grad student launches toolkit to tackle climate anxiety](#), CTV News
- [Understanding climate change and health implications: A background report to New Brunswick’s climate change and health vulnerability and adaptation assessment project](#), Public Health New Brunswick
- [Unhoused Under Pressure](#), Union Gospel Mission (UGM) and University of British Columbia's Sustainability Hub

Did you know Climate Caucus offers an “Ask Us Anything” service for elected officials in the network?

You could ask questions like “can you help me find this resource?” “Do you know of funding for X?” “Do you have examples of X policy language?” or “can you connect me with an expert in X?”

Send us your questions here!

Climate Caucus Resources:

[Climate Caucus Municipal Grants List](#) - detailed list of relevant municipal grants

[Policies and Resources Library](#) - list of motions, bylaws, council reports and briefing notes