EDITORIAL

Dear Colleagues,

Human interaction with the environment begins at birth and continues until death, often without conscious awareness. Inevitably, humankind is compelled to change and/or adapt in parallel with the transformations of the world. However, forgetting that they are part of nature, humans have throughout history exploited, manipulated, and even destroyed their environment. The extent of this destruction has now reached a level that threatens human health itself. Humankind may, in fact, be on the verge of destroying its own habitat. One of the most critical consequences of such human-driven damage is climate change.

Climate change, broadly defined as the result of global warming and/or cooling, manifests through extreme and unpredictable weather events such as heavy rainfall, floods, glacial melting, rising sea levels, reduced agricultural land, and disruptions in seasonal cycles, all of which have adverse impacts. Beyond posing significant physical threats to the planet and all living beings, climate change has become a global challenge with profound effects on individuals' and societies' mental health, raising concerns of an impending crisis. Research in the literature demonstrates that climate change is associated with large-scale problems such as deforestation, glacier retreat, and desertification, while simultaneously linking acute weather events, rapidly progressing environmental changes, economic and social strain, and mental health problems.[1,2]

The mental health consequences of climate change may be examined in terms of acute effects and those related to traumatic stress. Natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and heatwaves have been associated with an increase in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), acute stress reactions, sleep disturbances, and anxiety attacks. Following such events, healthcare utilization and psychiatric emergency admissions significantly rise.[1]

When considering the chronic and cumulative effects, depression, chronic anxiety, increased substance use, and psychosocial challenges at the community level are noteworthy. Populations that lose their livelihoods, are forced to migrate, or experience weakening of social ties become particularly vulnerable in the face of the climate crisis.[2]

Another important concept in this context is eco-anxiety, defined as the perception of uncertainty and threat concerning the future due to climate change. Eco-anxiety may manifest as worry, fear, anger, grief, hopelessness, guilt, and shame. It is especially prevalent among young people, often accompanied by significant stress, hopelessness, and reduced functionality. Meta-analyses have reported positive correlations between eco-anxiety and psychological distress, depressive symptoms, and anxiety.[2,3]

Risk groups in terms of mental health impact include low-income communities (with limited adaptive capacity), rural and agriculture-dependent populations (at risk of livelihood loss), adolescents and young adults (high sensitivity to climate concerns), older adults and individuals with chronic illnesses (greater vulnerability to physical/psychological stressors), and individuals with a history of mental illness.[2]

As with all crises, immediate mental health interventions (such as Psychological First Aid) and long-term psychosocial support services are of critical importance in climate-related emergencies. Community-based approaches—such as strengthening local support networks, implementing psychoeducational resilience programs, and providing culturally sensitive psychosocial interventions—play a key role. Raising awareness of climate-related stress, ensuring early recognition, and offering psychotherapeutic support may help protect mental health functioning. Importantly, a multidisciplinary team approach is essential in the planning and delivery of services, requiring strengthened coordination among public health and mental health professionals, social workers, and emergency management teams.[1,2]

Furthermore, it is vital to integrate the mental health impacts of climate change into health policies through monitoring, reporting, and resource allocation. Economic and social support should be provided to vulnerable populations, while awareness of climate and mental health should be promoted among both healthcare professionals and the general public. Interventions such as sustainable transportation, the creation and expansion of green spaces, environmentally friendly buildings, and the development of scientific research in this field are areas in which psychiatric nurses can play an active role. Psychiatric nurses should cultivate sensitivity toward reducing ecological footprints at both individual and societal levels, take the lead in incorporating climate-related issues into nursing education and in-service training, act as role models in promoting environmentally responsible lifestyles within society, and actively participate in policy-making processes related to environmental health.

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References

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