

How Does Anxiety About the Global Climate Crisis Impact Systemic Change?

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MFT 503: Research in MFT

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March 15, 2022

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The global climate crisis has been described by experts and policymakers alike as the greatest existential threat our living generation faces. For decades, environmental scientists and conservationists have been speaking publicly about the relationship between unmitigated fossil fuel consumption and the “greenhouse effect,” a process by which gasses released into our atmosphere trap the sun’s heat (*What Is the Greenhouse*, 2022). In summary, technological advances since the Industrial Revolution have exponentially increased the volume and rate of greenhouse gasses being released into our atmosphere. Carbon dioxide, one of the most prevalent greenhouse gasses emitted by human activity, can remain in the atmosphere for 300 to 1,000 years. Thus, the rise in Earth’s average global temperature is to be expected. What is instrumental to note, however, is how delicate of a balance Earth’s temperature must be in order to support life. For example, during the Little Ice Age, a period defined by the 1300s – 1800s A.D., the Earth’s temperature experienced only an average drop of 0.6°C, but resulted in significantly colder seasons which impacted agriculture, food systems, and population growth all across the globe (Mann, 2002, p. 504).

The last decade has brought about an increased interest in global warming, including from the psychology field. In 2009, the American Psychological Association created a task force to research the intersections of global climate change and human behavior – from how humans are impacted by the threat of the warming planet, to how humans have contributed to the crisis. This literature review aims to briefly discuss aspects of psychological research which has addressed anxiety over global climate change, often referred to as climate anxiety, and how climate anxiety has in turn impacted systemic action. Systemic action, in this paper, refers to the creation of large-scale solutions, such as the enacting of policy change, in order to mitigate the

impacts of global climate change. Furthermore, this literature review will set the precedent for more research on climate anxiety to be conducted on the systemic level, including the family. For example, how does climate anxiety factor into a couple's decision-making process about having children? And how can families address climate anxiety with their children in order to produce adaptive behaviors, instead of maladaptive ones?

Review of Literature

Viewing Global Climate Change through a Psychological Lens

Swim et al. (2011) shone a light on the complexities of global climate change beyond the concept of global warming. In their narrative investigation, they established why equating global warming to global climate change is too simplistic, and that the causes and consequences of this century's climate crisis must take into account human activities. Since the 1980s, researchers of climate change have been looking into the "second science of climate change" in order to better understand how human systems have indirectly contributed to what was previously considered as "acts of God" in the natural world: the melting of continental glaciers, sea level risings, changes in habitable boundaries for the ecosystem, and extreme weather events (Swim et al., 2011, p. 242).

Psychologists and environmental scientists have created a model which identifies two major systems to illustrate the relationship between climate change and human activity: the environmental climate systems and human systems. Mediators between these two systems cut through a gamut of sociological factors, such as culture, socioeconomic status, and social processes (such as whether it is typical or atypical in one's town to drive a car). Psychological mediators such as a person's awareness of climate change, their affective and emotional responses, and their understanding of climate change consequences further contribute to the

interactional model of human systems and the climate systems. By 2011, psychologists began to leverage the scientific rigor of psychological assessments and interventions, in order to better address the human systems impacting climate change (Swim et al., 2011, p. 243).

The Advent of “Climate Anxiety”

The emotional vocabulary developing around the human response to global climate change is a nascent field. In recent years, the terms “eco-anxiety” and “climate anxiety” have become the most well known: over 330,000 search results were indexed searching for the keyword “climate anxiety”. While it may be easy to write off this as an affective buzzword, it is important to understand that the anxiety being felt by individuals of all ages is an unmitigated concern about the future harm that may come to themselves and their loved ones. Areas like the Pacific Northwest of the United States give us a glimpse into what will become more commonplace in mental health: disaster mental health responses and a person’s associated PTSD from extreme weather events, such as wildfires (which, ironically, have a cooling effect on regional climate, due to the smoke blocking the sun’s rays), which displaces generations of communities. The empirical evidence on the impact of environmental change and its related mental distress is growing, and with it, assessment tools like the environmental distress scale (EDS) have been developed (Clayton, 2020, p. 2).

Climate Emotions and Their Impact on Systemic Action

A new horizon in climate psychology research has been developing, where psychologists are beginning to study the impact of climate emotions on human behavior. That is, we have empirical evidence on the impact of anxiety toward mental health; however, researchers now want to know more about how climate change perceptions and emotions impact human behavior and decision-making. There is early data to indicate that an individual who self-reports distress

over climate change may be more motivated to make behavioral changes that will reduce their contributions to carbon emissions (Brosch, 2021, pp. 15-18). However, the research remains scattered across a variety of scientific disciplines, such as the natural sciences, environmental psychology, behavioral psychology, and social psychology. The variety of scientific bodies that have been drawn to climate psychology research is growing, and there is a need for more collaborative approaches that will synthesize important learnings to the general public.

Systemic action which has resulted directly from experienced climate emotions, such as climate anxiety, still remains an area of uncharted research in the psychological field. As recently as 2020, a study was conducted to determine the impact of how personal stories can alter a population's beliefs and attitudes about climate change (Brosch, 2021, p. 16). However, most climate change studies that have been conducted on the factors contributing to large-scale climate change action have remained in the political sciences and public policy arenas. The psychology field has remained on the responsive side, in which research questions have been asked in order to develop appropriate therapeutic treatments. It remains to be seen how separate research bodies can sensibly, and effectively, come together in order to address climate change on a societal level, such as within the family systems unit.

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