

Chapter Six: Climate Change, Health, and You

When you're working to make a difference in your community, it can feel like the weight and future of your community is all on your shoulders. Activities may feel so urgent that you force yourself to keep working until every single problem is resolved. This attitude can lead to complete mental and physical exhaustion known as burnout.

Though climate action is urgent, you can't create positive change if you or your team are not feeling your best! This chapter explores the connections between climate change and health, providing tips on how to avoid burnout and still make a positive impact in your community.

How does climate change affect health?

Climate change impacts our physical, mental, and community health and can take many different forms as seen in Figure 10.

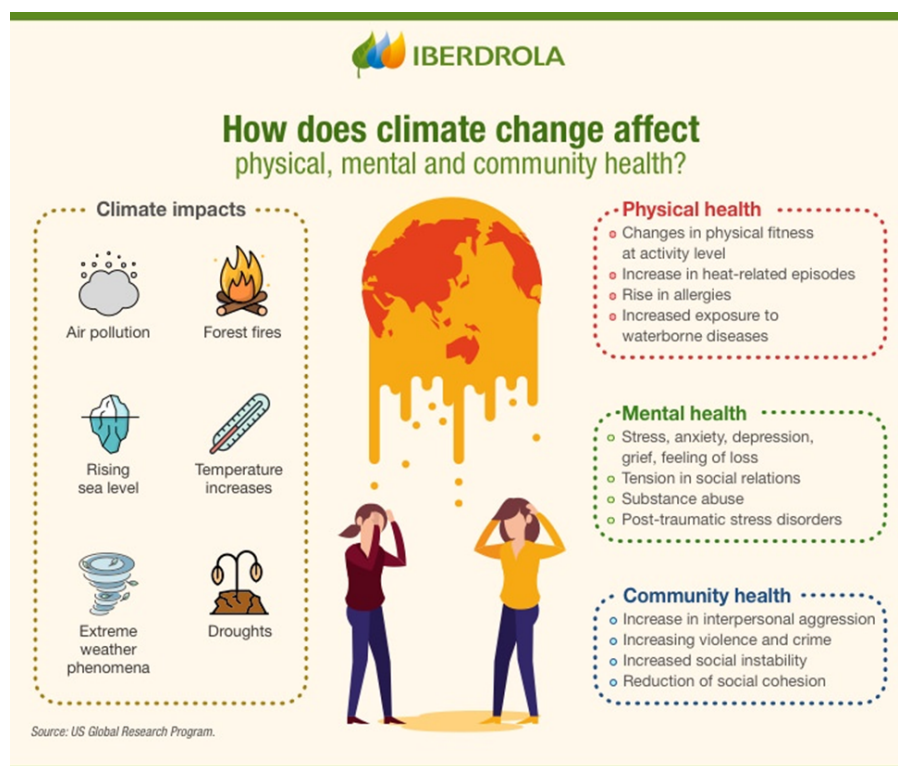


Figure 10: Impacts of climate change on health ([source](#))

Like nature-based impacts of climate change, the health impacts of climate change are also unequally distributed, with certain groups disproportionately affected by it depending on factors such as socioeconomic status, gender and age. For example, between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress. Unfortunately, most of these deaths will be concentrated in communities least responsible for climate change ([source](#)).

Health outcomes are directly linked to how vulnerable someone is to climate impacts. For example, if a community's only highway connecting it to hospitals and emergency services is flooded, then they are more likely to face higher death rates or water-borne diseases compared to a community with an alternative route. Thus, health impacts are not only linked to

demographic data, but also health system capacity and historic investments that support access to community services as seen in Figure 12.

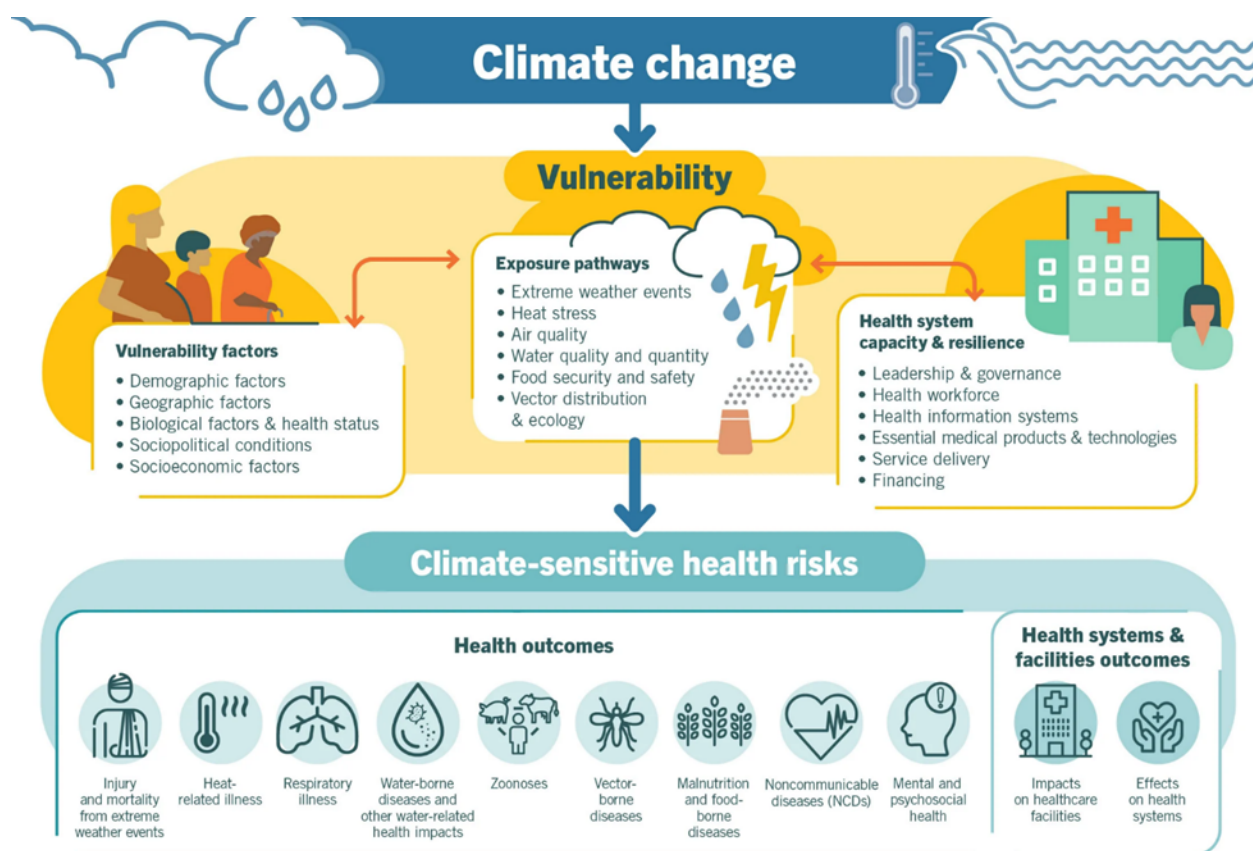


Figure 11: Climate change and health ([WHO](#))

Mental Health Impacts

Though physical impacts are more easily seen and felt, mental health should not be ignored. Climate change can have direct effects on mental health (such as through natural disasters, climate anxiety, or heat) and indirect effects (such as through displacement and food insecurity). For example, events like flooding and prolonged droughts have been associated with elevated levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorders ([source](#)).

Climate Anxiety

Many vulnerable communities and climate activists often find themselves staying up at night thinking about the climate crisis. This can be a clear sign of climate anxiety, which is defined as "distress related to worries about the effects of climate change" or a "chronic fear of environmental doom" ([Collier, 2022](#)). It is important to note that climate anxiety is not a mental illness. Rather it is anxiety that looming over you rooted in uncertainty about the future. Climate change is a real threat, and therefore, it is completely normal to experience worry about the impending consequences.

Climate anxiety can often lead to burnout if not addressed and is often indicated by feelings of grief or anger that may affect mood, thinking, or behavior. Bringing this back to climate justice, those from lower socioeconomic groups are disproportionately affected by climate change due to disparities in infrastructure and health resources, thus, they may also experience higher levels of climate anxiety. Additionally, severe weather events may also damage social support systems and mental health infrastructure, further isolating the most vulnerable and increasing the likelihood of feelings of grief or anger directed at climate change.

Climate Doom and Denial

If climate anxiety goes undetected or unsupported, it can lead to climate doomism. Climate doomism is the belief that the climate crisis can not or will not be solved in time to prevent societal collapse. This phenomenon can be even more dangerous than climate denial, which is the dismissal of the existence of human-induced climate change, because it indicates people have given up on safeguarding our future. Doomism and denial can often be felt in the community. The figure below depicts examples of doomism and denial to look out for in your community.



[Source](#)

Coping with Climate Anxiety, Burnout, and Mental Health Impacts of Climate Change

The best way to cope with mental impacts is to take action! Taking time to pause, process, and reflect on your emotions related to climate change with trusted friends, support groups, or therapists can be immensely healing. You can also make small changes to your lifestyle that are in your control, such as eating less meat, walking instead of driving short distances, enjoying nature on the planet you're working to save, and filtering your social media to bring climate

positive news rather than climate destruction. Starting a climate action club or hosting an event in your community is also a great way to take action and meet like-minded individuals who are probably feeling the same way as you!

At the club level, one of the most important things to remember when planning your climate activities is to prioritize. While it would be great to address all the impacts of climate change, unfortunately, that is a massive systemic undertaking that will require more than one group's efforts. Lean into the activities you feel most empowered to achieve and that you feel will bring your community joy. Additionally, balance serious activities with fun! It's okay for there to be periods of lower motivation or action, for people to take breaks, and incorporate fun activities to keep spirits high.

Sometimes we need a reminder that at the end of the day, we are all humans! If after a program, you realize that you were not able to achieve your set target or goals, you don't need to beat yourself up or take it out on your team, rather identify what jeopardizes your efforts, learn from it, and regroup. Further, if you realize you need a break, simply communicate that to your team!