

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Climate change is not only an environmental and economic crisis. It is also a rapidly emerging mental health challenge.

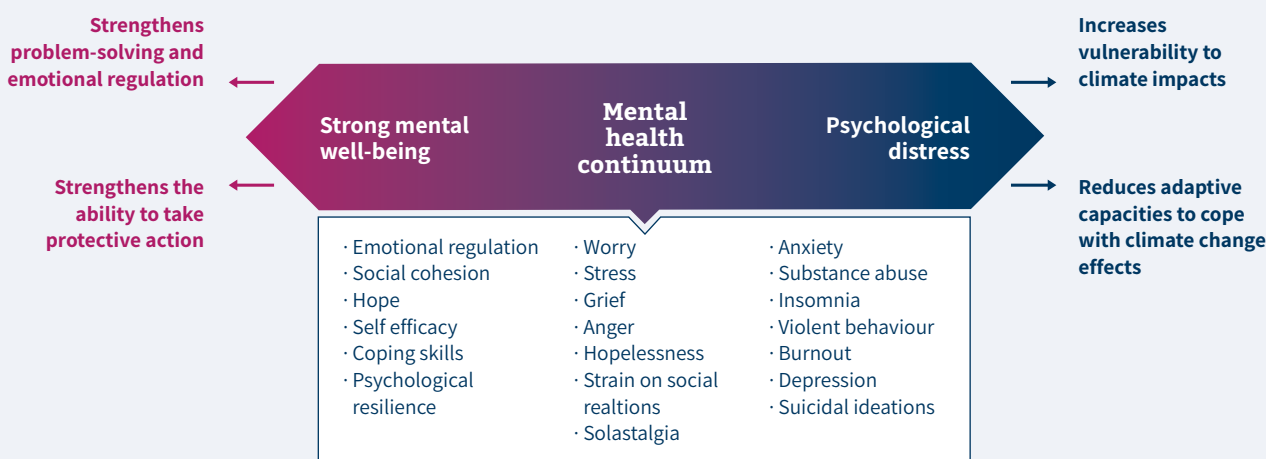
Climate change-related extreme weather events such as floods, wildfires and extreme heat, along with their socio-economic and perceptual repercussions, are taking a toll on people's mental well-being. The result is widespread anxiety, trauma, grief, and chronic stress across individuals and societies.

Mental healthcare systems are already under pressure due to rising incidence rates and persistent service gaps. Climate change poses yet another additional challenge. This issue remains largely absent from climate policy and funding priorities and leaves substantial opportunities for funders to intervene in order to transform climate action into a force for healthier communities.

WHY THIS NEXUS MATTERS

Mental health is both affected by climate change and shaping how societies respond to it

Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness. Rather, it exists on a continuum. At one end are states of strong mental well-being, characterised by resilience, hope, and a sense of agency. At the other end are clinically diagnosable mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, or trauma, which have been characterised as psychological distress. Between these poles lie a wide range of everyday psychological responses, including stress, worry, grief and anger.

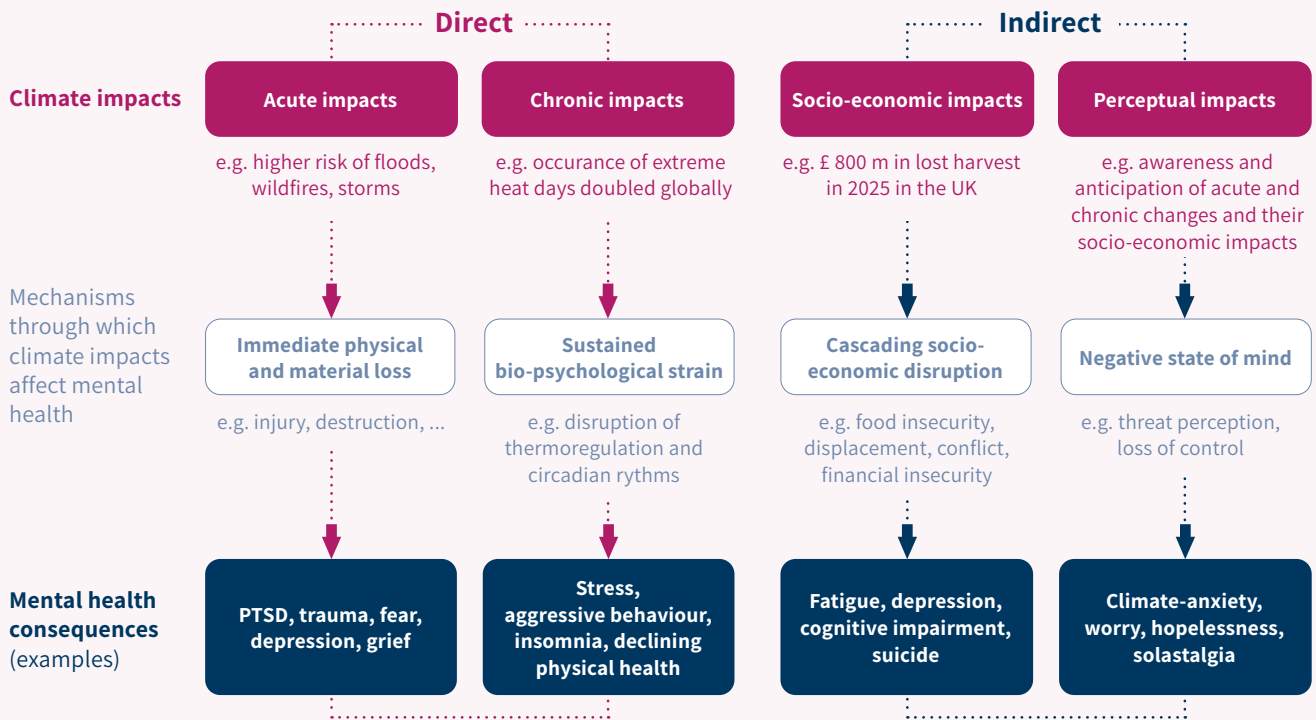


The visualisation illustrates how people's adaptive capacities vary depending on where they fall on the mental health continuum. Extreme weather events, environmental degradation, economic disruption, and the anticipation of future climate risks can intensify stress and psychological strain and therefore also shape how they respond and adapt. Strong mental well-being can support coping, cooperation, and collective action, while psychological distress can undermine the capacity to respond to shocks and adapt to change.

The state of people's mental health can therefore be both an outcome of climate change and a key determinant of climate resilience.¹

HOW IS CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTING MENTAL HEALTH?

Climate change exerts pressure on people's mental health in different ways, either through direct exposure or through the knock-on effects on people's material circumstances or perceptions.



Evidently, climate change will have significant long-term consequences for individuals' and communities' mental well-being.

WHO IS MOST AFFECTED? AND WHERE?

The mental health consequences of climate change are present everywhere but not evenly distributed.

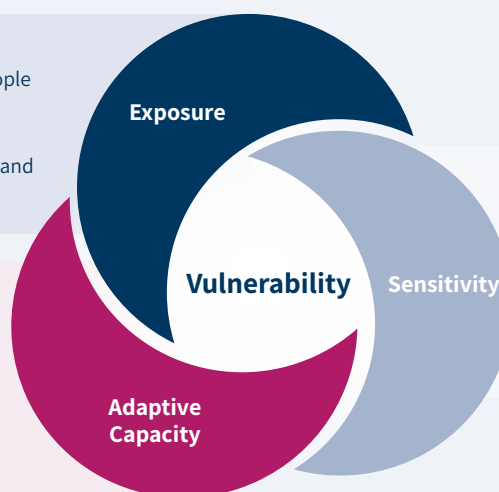
Vulnerability arises where exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity intersect, resulting in some people being more affected than others.

Exposure

- ▶ Defines how **frequently** and **intensely** people experience climate impacts.
- ▶ Influenced by physical and social contexts, e.g. where people live, work, and the roles and responsibilities they have.

Adaptive Capacity

- ▶ Describes the **ability to** prepare for, **cope** with and **recover** from climate impacts.
- ▶ Influenced by income, housing, education, interpersonal relationships and access to mental health and social support.



Sensitivity

- ▶ Reflects **how strongly** people are psychologically or socially **affected** when exposed.
- ▶ Influenced by age, gender, socio-economic and health status as well as cultural attachment to nature.

People with high exposure, high sensitivity and low adaptive capacity are most vulnerable to negative climate-mental health outcomes. Those already facing social, economic or health disadvantages are disproportionately affected by climate-related mental health impacts. Therefore, climate change deepens existing inequalities and increases the burden on these vulnerable groups.



WHO IS MOST AFFECTED? AND WHERE?



Children and youth

Younger people face long-term exposure to climate risks and often experience high levels of climate anxiety.²



Girls and women

Gender inequalities and increased risks of violence during disasters heighten vulnerability.³



People with pre-existing health conditions

Physical or mental health conditions can reduce the capacity to cope with climate-related stressors.⁴



Frontline responders

Frequent exposure to high-stress and traumatic situations during climate-related emergencies heightens risk of long-term psychological strain.⁶



Indigenous communities

Deep cultural ties to land mean environmental change can disrupt identity, belonging, and well-being.⁷



Low-income households

Limited financial buffers and insecure housing increase exposure and reduce recovery capacity.⁵



Agricultural and rural workers

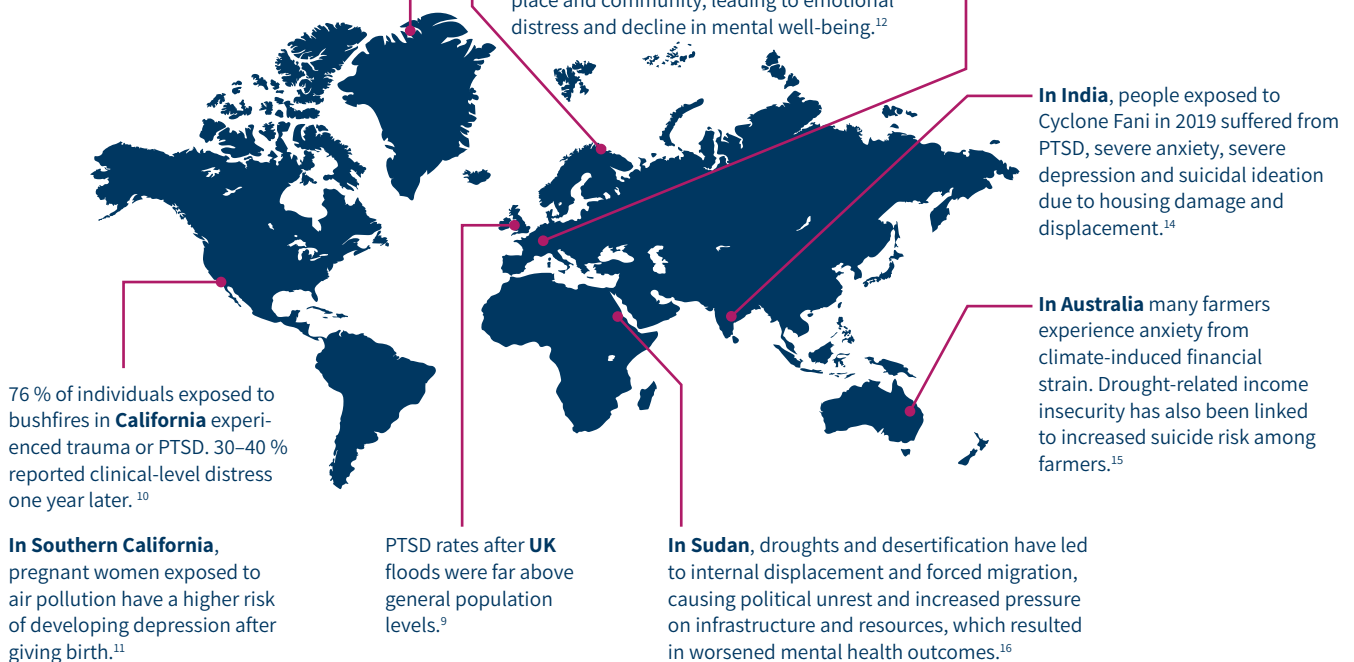
Climate-dependent livelihoods increase exposure to economic stress and uncertainty.⁸



Displaced populations

Displacement, uncertainty, and repeated exposure to climate disasters heighten psychological strain.

Evidence across the world



²Vergunst and Berry 2022, ³Bakir et al. 2023, ⁴Gebhardt et al. 2023, ⁵Mahmood et al. 2025, ⁶Walinski et al. 2023, ⁷Vecchio et al. 2022, ⁸Gvein and Mc Kenna 2023, ⁹Galea et al. 2007; Umweltbundesamt 2025, ¹⁰Grennan et al. 2023; Mishra et al. 2025, ¹¹Sun et al. 2023, ¹²Cunsolo Willox et al. 2012; European Parliament 2020; Cianconi et al. 2020, ¹³Janzen 2022, ¹⁴Lawrance et al. 2022, ¹⁵Lawrance et al. 2022, ¹⁶Lawrance et al. 2022

WHAT CAN PHILANTHROPY DO?

Philanthropy can step in at different points where climate change affects people's mental health.

The examples below illustrate a range of possible intervention areas, from immediate support after climate-related shocks to longer-term efforts that strengthen resilience and address underlying vulnerabilities.

Acute impacts

Strengthen frontline capacity: Support the training of local volunteers, teachers and community health workers to deliver basic psychological first aid and facilitate community-based support groups after climate disasters. (e.g. [StrongMinds](#))


Vulnerable groups 

Embed climate-sensitive mental health education: Support regional networks of universities and medical schools to integrate climate-mental health modules into standard curricula to ensure that future doctors are equipped to recognise mental-health effects linked to climate hazards. (e.g. [European Network on Climate & Health Education](#))


Vulnerable groups 
▶ All

Chronic impacts

Integrate mental health into urban planning: Bring together mental-health researchers with built-environment practitioners and urban planners to integrate mental health considerations into planning standards that address chronic climate stressors, e.g. through shading, ventilation and access to green spaces. (e.g. [Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health](#))


Vulnerable groups 

Create adaptive health alert systems: Develop digital interventions that inform about coping strategies (hydration reminders, sleep hygiene, stress-management prompts, breathing exercises) when temperatures or air pollution exceed critical thresholds. (e.g. [REDi Heatwave Service](#))

Vulnerable groups 

Socioeconomic impacts

Provide emotional support and decision guidance: Fund targeted communication campaigns in climate-affected regions that normalise help-seeking during livelihood loss, reduce stigma, and offer simple decision-support messages (e.g. avoiding high-risk loans). (e.g. [Australian drought-mental health campaigns](#))


Vulnerable groups 

Support grassroots evidence-building: Fund community-based research groups to document and evaluate their own cultural practices to enhance evidence on what works and replicate effective approaches across other climate-affected communities. (e.g. [Connecting Climate Minds' community agendas](#))

Vulnerable groups 
▶ All

Perceptual impacts

Develop narratives centered around hope, optimism and agency: Support youth-led initiatives to create honest, hope-building climate media (e.g. films, podcasts and storytelling projects) that centre lived experiences of climate impacts while showing practical ways people are coping and taking action. (e.g. [Climate Mental Health Network](#))

Vulnerable groups 

Enable local climate resilience initiatives: Fund community organisations, schools, and Indigenous knowledge groups to run citizen-science projects where participants monitor local environmental changes and reflect together on how these changes affect their community and emotional well-being. (e.g. [Indigenous Climate Hub](#))

Vulnerable groups 



- ▶ **Acknowledge the intersection:** Climate and mental health challenges reinforce each other. Funding is most effective when it intentionally connects both domains, supports work that bridges fragmented fields, and turns siloed knowledge into shared, actionable insight.
- ▶ **Be courageous:** The funding landscape is extremely limited. At the same time, the mental health impacts of climate change are urgent and accelerating. Even with incomplete and uneven evidence for effective interventions, it is crucial to act now.
- ▶ **Centre lived experience:** Interventions are more relevant, trusted and effective when shaped with people who have lived experience of climate-induced mental health consequences. Fund approaches that support co-design, local leadership and culturally grounded practice.