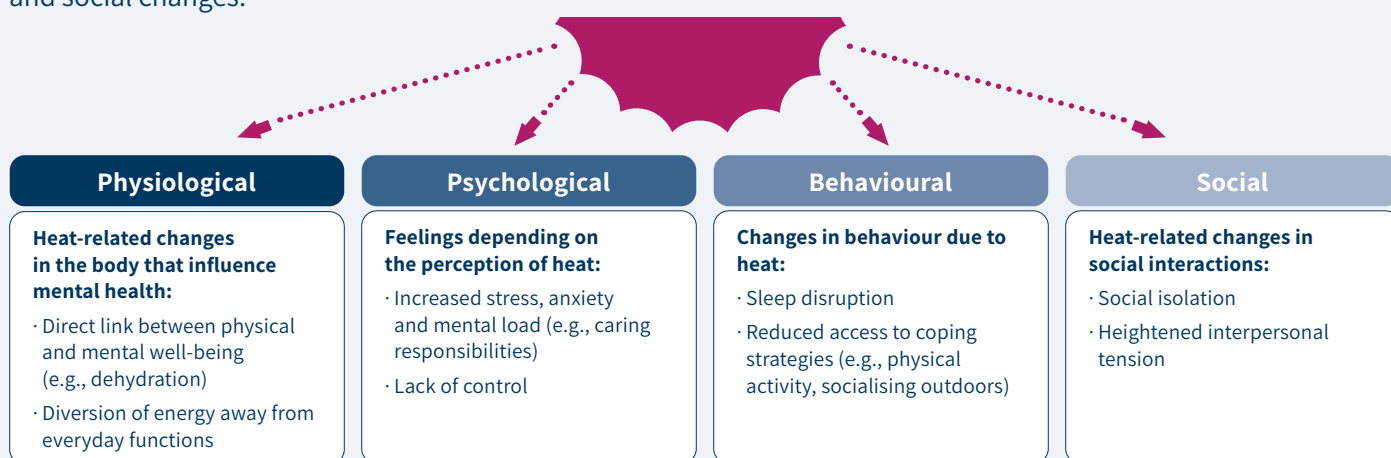


Extreme heat

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

Extreme heat is increasing in **intensity and frequency** due to climate change. It manifests as **persisting heat and humidity during day and night** or as heatwaves, which occur when temperatures that are 10 degrees above the region's average high temperature last for several weeks.¹ While the negative impacts of extreme heat on physical health have long been recognised, recent studies have shown that **extreme heat** negatively affects **people's mental health, too**.²

The negative impact of extreme heat on mental health can manifest itself as physiological, psychological, behavioural and social changes:



Source: Based on Baecker et al. 2025³

Heat and mental health are intricately linked with climate change, forming a vicious cycle. Deteriorating mental health due to heat also diminishes people's **resilience to other climate stressors** and their **capacity to engage in climate action**.⁴

Although research is growing, **action is missing worldwide**. Funders have an opportunity to address the impact of extreme heat on mental health while strengthening resilient communities that engage in sustained climate action. Apart from the vulnerable groups we outlined in our [Primer](#), there are three additional vulnerable groups that demand specific attention due to their heightened risk to heat exposure and related mental health impacts⁵:



People experiencing homelessness

- Lack of adequate shelter and cooling resources
- Barriers to accessing mental health care
- Disrupted support networks



Elderly people

- Higher sensitivity to heat
- Increased risk of isolation due to immobility and existing isolation
- Interplay of heat with existing medication



People residing in institutions

- Lack of heat protection in prisons and long-term psychiatric facilities
- No freedom of movement to seek relief from the heat or access cooling spaces

3 FAST FACTS

US\$ 2-3

saved for every US\$1 spent on South Australia's heat-health warning system through avoided hospital and ambulance costs.⁶

+ 10 %

increase in hospital visits for mental health issues recorded during heatwaves in the UK.⁷

> 40 %

of children under the age of 10 are already experiencing at least 20 additional "heat-stress days" due to climate change.⁸

¹ United Nations n.a., ² Baecker et al. 2025, ³ Baecker et al. 2025, ⁴ Read our [Primer](#) to learn more about this general interplay between climate change and mental health,

⁵ Climate Centre et al. 2022, ⁶ United for Global Mental Health 2026, ⁷ Centre for Climate and Health Security 2025, ⁸ Tandon 2026

WHAT FUNDERS CAN DO



Community-driven outreach: Extreme heat is already having an impact on communities and the people who care for them. One way to support the mental well-being of vulnerable people during extreme heat is to bolster **neighbourhood-based “heat outreach teams”**, which are staffed by local volunteers or community health workers. They provide **mental health information** and **access to psycho-social support**, such as [the Los Angeles Regional Collaborative for Climate Action and Sustainability](#).⁹ **Training mental health staff** on how to recognise the symptoms of heat-related illness, and providing them with heat **outreach toolkits**¹⁰ ensures that those most at risk get the support they need.



Advocate for mental health to be implemented into heat-related policies: Increasingly countries and municipalities accept that tackling heat requires a coordinated approach and dedicated financing. But **heat action plans**, that are being developed as a response, generally lack reference to mental health. This blind spot in the emerging policy landscape around heat means that mental health problems are locked into a resource and coordination gap.¹¹ [The Vienna Heat Action Plan](#) stands out as an exception of a heat plan that considers mental health. Beyond replicating such examples elsewhere, philanthropy can **facilitate wider policy changes by funding evidence-based guidelines**, such as the Wellcome Trust-funded [report](#) by United for Global Mental Health.



Bring together different stakeholders to combat urban heat: Cities are a particularly relevant hotspot for mental health and heat, as the urban heat-island effect can raise temperatures by 5°C to 10°C.¹² For heat-resilient urban planning that considers mental health, **the convening power of philanthropy is needed to connect and bring together different stakeholders**, such as mental health researchers, policymakers and industry representatives, while ensuring the voices of affected communities are heard.¹³ **Expanding green and blue spaces**¹⁴, such as [Bethnal Green Nature Reserve in London](#) or the Lal Maidan project in Mumbai¹⁵, can reduce heat exposure and mental health burdens while **fostering community, social interaction and nature connectivity**.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN FOCUSING ON EXTREME HEAT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Addressing social stigma and building heat-mental health literacy: Stigma around mental health or a reluctance to see themselves as “vulnerable” can prevent people from seeking help during periods of extreme heat. Therefore, raising awareness of the impact of heat on mental health and reducing overall stigma around mental health are as vital as providing support itself.

Mental health and extreme heat are both culturally determined: No single solution fits all. Cultural norms and local differences shape perceptions of mental health as well as heat. For example, in religious communities, funding cooling centres in places of worship and training religious leaders in mental health support can help to reach those in need.

Mental health and extreme heat are not isolated issues: Mental health and heat are not isolated but embedded in a wider system of interconnected issues such as social inequality, public health, affordable housing, labour regulations and many more. Incorporating considerations of heat and mental health into existing funding strategies on these issues is a fast track to improving outcomes for people and the planet.

 [Link to bibliography](#)