

We need to talk about **mental health** in a changing climate

COP26 EVENT SUMMARY

22/11/2021

Climate Cares is a collaboration between the Institute of Global Health Innovation and the Grantham Institute.

**INSTITUTE OF GLOBAL
HEALTH INNOVATION**

Grantham Institute
Climate Change and the Environment

That the United Nations Climate Change Conference had **never before held official events dedicated to the mental health impacts of climate change lends credence to this often overlooked topic being labelled an invisible injustice.** That changed this year. And we are immensely proud of our role in this history-making, holding one of the first official COP events on the interplay between climate change and mental health: ‘We need to talk about mental health in a changing climate’.

On 9 November, our Climate Cares team - a collaboration between Imperial’s Institute of Global Health Innovation and Grantham Institute - held a hybrid event as part of the Resilience Hub, which blended a **stark evidence review with thought-provoking discussion and immersive storytelling.** We united leading voices and thinkers in the field for an open and honest panel discussion with the aim of engaging, inspiring and driving necessary action in this arena.

Our event laid bare the paucity of, yet compelling evidence for climate change’s far-reaching consequences on mental health globally. From higher temperatures raising the risk of suicide, to PTSD following natural disasters and young people feeling frozen in their anxieties over the future of the planet, **the impacts are tangible and yet largely absent from the public and policy discourse, and currently unaccounted for in policy and planning.**

Through a series of audience activities and the telling of real stories from people across the world, we encouraged the audience to connect with and share their feelings including both hope and fear. Our goal was to **help normalise the range of strong emotional responses to the climate crisis and encourage people to bring these to action for change.**

Some of the responses to our question of **"Why does the climate crisis make you feel this way?"** included:

“I don’t have any hope at the moment. Not enough is being done, and I feel like giving up.”

“I feel helpless because the scale of the problem is too large and the willingness for action is too small. I know I can contribute as an individual, but it won’t be enough.”

“It feels insurmountable. But we have to take responsibility, personally, collectively and globally.”



In addition to raising much-needed awareness of the complex and bi-directional relationship between climate change and our mental health and wellbeing, we used the event to show that it does not have to be this way.

Our event brought to the fore the multitude of evidence-backed **opportunities for 'win-wins' that tackle climate and mental health together**, producing more resilient communities. For example, by creating more green spaces, reducing air pollution from fossil fuel burning, and helping people to have more energy-efficient homes, decision-makers can bring positive change that benefit people and planet.



A number of **key themes** emerged during the event and its discussions between the panel and audience, which we urge leaders to consider while developing policies and plans, summarised below:

1 Climate change is an underappreciated mental health emergency
To make the hidden connections between these challenges tangible and more concrete, it is vital to better measure the growing impacts globally and continue to work to raise awareness.

2 It is normal and a sign of empathy to feel a range of emotions in response to the climate crisis

We need to allow ourselves to reconnect, 'open our hearts' and use this to drive action.

3 There are considerable opportunities for tackling climate change and improving mental health simultaneously

These co-benefits of climate action already demonstrably offer a return on investment. Successful approaches need to be scaled up and replicated. This requires more investment and commitment from leaders.

4 Community-based approaches are vital to making meaningful progress in this arena

Building connections - across borders, sectors and disciplines - will help to create resilient communities of people who are equipped to cope with and respond to climate change, increasing capacity and infrastructure, and supporting people to share knowledge and problem-solve.

In the wake of this event, our Climate Cares team is continuing to work with and learn from international partners, carry out novel research to further understand how people around the world are responding to climate change, and develop evidence-based interventions to help people both cope with and respond to these challenges. It is our mission to create a global network dedicated to this cause, which can exchange knowledge and resources and drive both policy, community and individual action to nurture people while creating a safer climate future. If you are interested in collaborating with us or supporting our work, please get in touch at climatecares@imperial.ac.uk.

You can **watch the recording** of the event here.



Access the **slides from the event** here (including extra resources).



Download and read our **briefing paper** here.



We would like to thank everyone who played a part in making this event happen, with a **special thanks to our speakers:**



Professor David Nabarro (chair)

Special Envoy on COVID-19, World Health Organization, Co-Director, Institute of Global Health Innovation



Jennifer Uchendu

Founder, SustVibes, Nigeria



Dr Gary Belkin

Founder and President, Billion Minds Institute



Dr Lisa Page

Consultant Liaison Psychiatrist & Clinical Senior Lecturer, Royal College of Psychiatrists (also Brighton & Sussex Medical School (BSMS) & Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust)



Dr Emma Lawrance

Mental Health Innovations Fellow, Institute of Global Health Innovation, Imperial College London



Dr Fahmy Hanna

Technical Officer Department of Mental Health and Substance Use, co-Chair IASC Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, World Health Organization