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Climate Change & The Silent Storm: India's Growing Mental Health Crisis

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Read on: <https://www.bwhealthcareworld.com/article/climate-change-the-silent-storm-indias-growing-mental-health-crisis-553003>

For decades, climate change has been perceived primarily through the lenses of environmental degradation and economic disruption. Rising sea levels, erratic rainfall patterns, and dwindling biodiversity have long dominated discussions. However, a more insidious, less visible impact is slowly gaining attention—the toll on mental health. In India, where climatic unpredictability is increasingly becoming the norm, the psychological consequences of climate change are emerging as a quiet, yet urgent, public health concern.

While the physical effects of climate change—heat strokes, respiratory ailments, and waterborne diseases—are well recognised and documented, its impact on mental well-being remains largely in the shadows. This gap in awareness is particularly concerning given the sheer scale and diversity of India's population, which spans across highly vulnerable geographies and socio-economic strata.

Take, for instance, the country's intensifying heatwaves. March 2022 was officially declared the hottest in 122 years, a record that sent alarm bells ringing across the scientific community. But

while rising temperatures are acknowledged for causing dehydration, heat exhaustion, and even fatal cardiac events, the corresponding impact on psychological health has received scant attention. Data emerging from psychiatric institutions, however, tells a different story. The Central Institute of Psychiatry in Ranchi noted a 10- 20 per cent increase in patient admissions during peak summer months, with a sharp rise in manic episodes among individuals with bipolar disorder. Similarly, facilities in New Delhi and Bikaner recorded a 5- 10 per cent surge in heat-related mental health conditions, pointing to an alarming trend that can no longer be overlooked.

Beyond clinical data, the psychological strain of climate uncertainty is also manifesting in the general population, particularly among the youth. A 2024 study conducted by the Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group found that an overwhelming 89per cent of schoolchildren in the Delhi-NCR region reported experiencing anxiety linked to climate change. These findings are echoed in research published by the International Journal of Indian Psychology, which underscores the emotional toll of climate-induced stress among adolescents and young adults. Symptoms such as persistent worry, restlessness, and even behavioral withdrawal are increasingly being reported. For young minds still forming their understanding of the world, the looming specter of climate catastrophe is no longer a distant, abstract threat—it is a constant, deeply personal source of fear.

This psychological distress is not confined to urban students alone. Among India's vast informal workforce, climate change represents an immediate and daily battle for survival. In the scorching fields and factories of Bihar, brick kiln workers labor under merciless sun, often in temperatures that breach the limits of human tolerance. These individuals, lacking adequate rest, hydration, or protective infrastructure, are not only at risk of physical exhaustion but also cognitive decline and mental fatigue. The chronic stress of working in such conditions—compounded by economic vulnerability and job insecurity—fuels a hidden mental health crisis that few are equipped to address. And yet, these struggles seldom make it into mainstream conversations on climate change.

What is emerging is a deeply interconnected crisis: one where environmental degradation exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, and both in turn intensify psychological distress. Addressing this multidimensional challenge requires an equally comprehensive response.

The Road Ahead: Embedding Mental Health in Climate Action

To begin with, India must integrate mental health support into its climate adaptation and disaster response frameworks. Psychological first aid should be a standard component in relief efforts following heatwaves, floods, and other climate-induced calamities. Community-based mental health services must be strengthened in climate-vulnerable regions, with trained professionals available to provide culturally sensitive and context-specific care.

Next, we must reimagine our educational systems to include climate literacy—not merely in scientific terms, but also in ways that equip young people with the emotional tools to cope with eco-anxiety. Schools should become safe spaces where students can voice their fears and learn resilience strategies. Counseling programs, environmental clubs, and creative workshops can help convert anxiety into action and awareness.

Equally important is the protection of vulnerable workers. Labor policies must recognize occupational heat stress as a legitimate health hazard, and enforce regulations that mandate access to rest periods, shade, hydration, and psychological support. Investment in cooling technologies, adaptive work schedules, and early warning systems could offer immediate relief and long-term sustainability for India's labor force.

At the policy level, this means redefining what we consider “climate resilience.” It is no longer enough to build dams and plant trees. True resilience must include the mental and emotional

fortitude of a population facing unpredictable futures. Policymakers, mental health professionals, educators, and environmental activists must come together to create a unified, compassionate, and data-driven approach to climate action.

India stands at a pivotal moment in its climate journey. The battle ahead is not only against melting glaciers and rising temperatures but also against the invisible psychological storm quietly gaining strength within communities. If left unaddressed, this mental health crisis could undermine our collective capacity to respond to climate change itself.

Recognizing and responding to this reality is not just an act of empathy—it is an urgent necessity. Because the cost of inaction is measured not only in economic loss or environmental degradation, but in the emotional and cognitive suffering of millions.