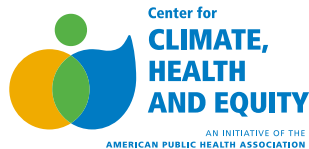




A Public Health Approach to Building Mental Wellness and Resilience in the Face of the Climate Crisis:

Recommendations for Community Groups



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APHA's Center for Climate, Health and Equity is at the forefront of public health efforts to advance policy, shape the narrative, and galvanize the public health field to address climate change. Best positioned to power, resource and connect a movement of public health professionals and their partners in the pursuit of climate justice and equitable health outcomes, the Center works to raise awareness of the public health implications of climate change; promote community-centered policies anchored in climate equity; and convene, train, mobilize and amplify trusted public health voices to influence policy and engage with their communities.

Introduction

The intensity of storms, flooding, drought, and other extreme weather events continues to rise because of climate change, leading to an increase in adverse mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Impacted communities and individuals can experience trauma from being displaced from their homes or living in damaged homes; suffering from personal injury, illness or loss; and having their community network, natural surroundings and infrastructure disrupted. Young people and indigenous communities can especially feel a loss of connection to the natural world and anxiety about their future. These direct climate impacts can be compounded by concurrent public health issues, such as rising gun violence, housing and food insecurity, racial discrimination and infectious disease outbreaks.

Due to the scale of the climate crisis, combined with the current shortage of mental health professionals in the U.S. and additional barriers to receiving mental health care such as social stigma, a public health approach is needed to address the impacts of climate change on mental health. A public health approach requires establishing a broad and diverse network of individuals, groups and organizations that help communities strengthen their capacity for mental wellness and resilience.

To build community-wide mental resilience and a robust social infrastructure to support individual and collective wellness, local coalitions and organizations should:



Phase One: Build Capacity

- Establish partnerships with others such as grassroots and neighborhood leaders, faith-based organizations, environmental justice organizations, local businesses, or civic organizations to help build capacity and community. No one individual or organization has all the answers. Leverage existing trust within the community to provide support and disseminate information.
- Create a planning team with partners and other interested community members and map out the different stresses and traumas — physical, psychological and social — that impact community members' individual and collective mental health.
 - Ensure you not only understand the current and recent traumas related to both climate and social inequities the community is experiencing, but also, any historical traumas the community has faced and may still be struggling to process.
- Work with the planning team to create a shared vision for the future, shaped by your understanding of the past. What does successfully building collective mental wellness and resilience look like? What does it feel like? What changes or outcomes are expected? What social supports, skills, assets and other resources will be required?

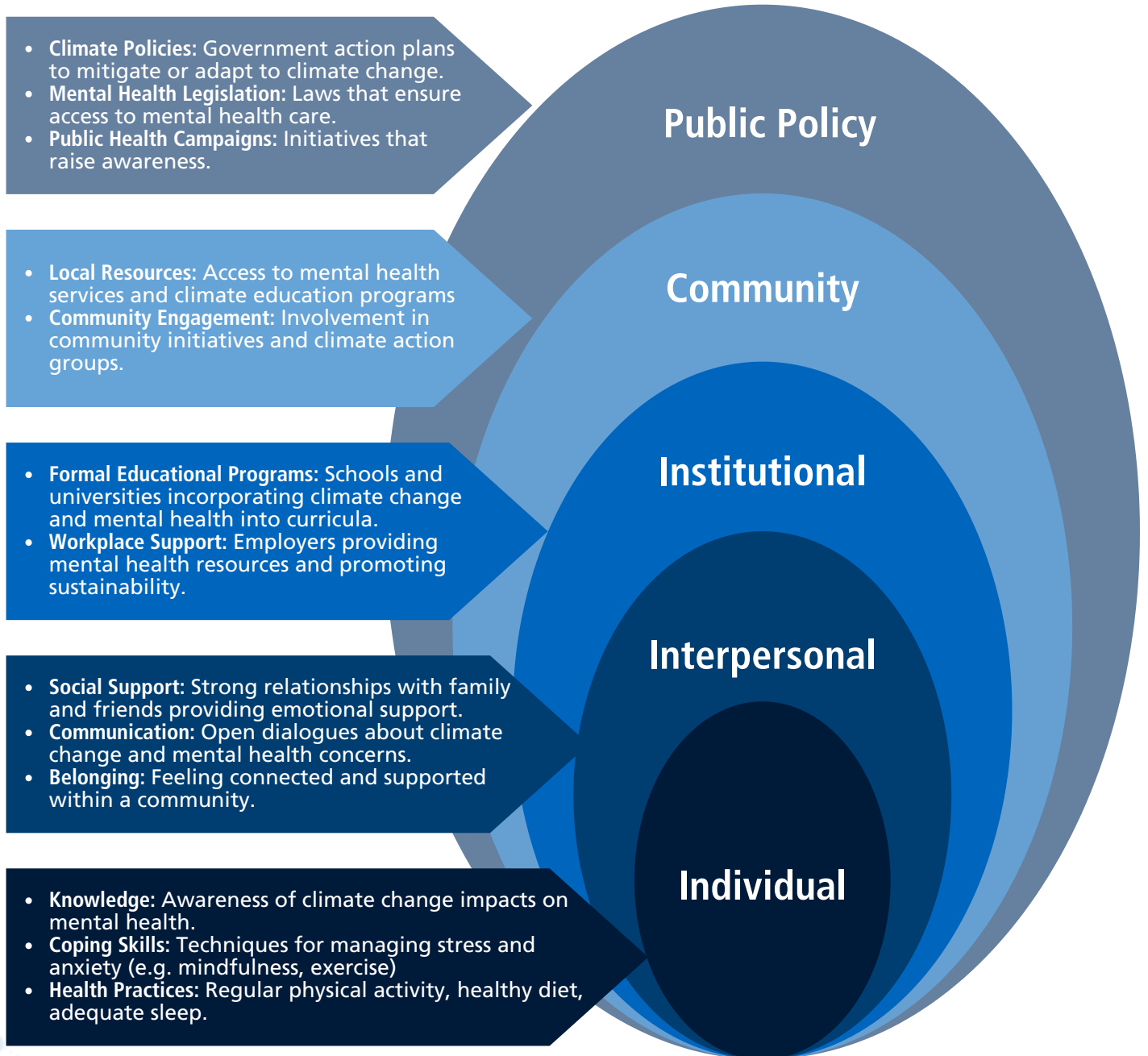


Phase Two: Lay the Groundwork

- Create an organizational structure and start identifying a diverse group of leaders to undertake this work. Make sure they are trained in communication, conflict resolution, facilitative leadership and trauma-informed responses to ensure that community members are truly able to take the lead and are not re-traumatized during discussions.
- Collaborate with community members (i.e., in focus groups or listening sessions) to identify and map existing conditions that help individuals cope with stress and trauma (known as protective factors), promoting resilience and mental health.
 - These factors include strong family ties, friendships and community connections that provide emotional and practical support. For example, engagement in cultural traditions, spiritual practices and community rituals can promote a sense of belonging and identity.
 - Other protective factors include community centers, recreational facilities and support groups, as well as the availability of mental health care, physical health care and social services.
 - Create a safe and supportive environment where community members feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Ensure that any sensitive information shared is kept confidential and used only for understanding and addressing community needs.
 - Establish trust by being transparent, empathetic and consistent in your interactions with community members. Use respectful, non-judgmental language and acknowledge the community members' experiences.



Example: Mapping Protective Factors and Community Resources



Phase Three: Co-Create & Implement Strategies

- Use the information you've gathered and work with communities to establish a layered and diverse set of group-oriented, adaptable and culturally appropriate activities to build resilience and heal trauma (e.g., support groups, healing circles, expressive therapies, nature-based therapies, memorial events, etc.) that will appeal to community members of various ages and backgrounds.
- Focus on activities that support and teach self-regulation, co-regulation, community building and self-expression, particularly those that foster strong social support networks. These can enhance collective resilience and can also be leaned upon to help provide mutual aid during climate-related disasters and other times of need.
- Include culturally appropriate and distinct activities that are relevant and accessible for vulnerable and marginalized populations (e.g., pregnant mothers, children, communities of color, people with pre-existing health conditions, etc.).
- Incorporate climate action and nature-based solutions such as water management, parks and lands preservation, GHG emission reduction and ecosystem restoration, to create a sense of hope and community and to increase community resilience.
- Train a diverse group of committed community members in mental wellness and resilience skill building so they can train other community members ("Train the Trainers" approach).
- Create universal awareness about mental wellness for all ages through educational activities, trainings, workshops, community gatherings and public messaging.
- Engage with the media (and use social media) to bring attention to these initiatives.

Phase Four: Evaluate, Learn & Improve

- Actively engage with community members to gain a sense of their dynamics and level of resilience. This is an ongoing process. This assists community members in determining which methods are most effective.
- Ask for participant feedback on the initiatives and projects. Are people feeling more hopeful? Is there a greater sense of community and solidarity?

Skill-Building to Support Mental Wellness and Resilience

To combat the mental health effects of the climate crisis, local leaders, trainers and facilitators can build social connections and develop tools to support self-regulation, co-regulation and self-expression.

- **Self-regulation**, or how people regulate their mind, body and emotions, can be achieved by going on walks, practicing mindful breathing, or even spending time with pets, among a variety of other practices.
- **Co-regulation**, or how people regulate their minds and bodies through interactions with others, can be achieved through the very activities undergone to build community, recover from disasters, and support one another.
- Activities that center **self-expression** (writing, drawing, spoken word, dance, etc.) can also be very useful in post-disaster, traumatic settings, or can also be adapted and implemented in pre-disaster contexts where individuals, especially youth, are experiencing eco-anxiety and hopelessness.

Developing these skills not only builds resilience in individuals but creates stronger bonds between community members, letting them express themselves and lean on one another more freely and openly. It is important to engage a diverse set of community members. By doing this, you are prioritizing the creation of a truly safe and supportive space in which all community members can grow, heal and thrive.

Example

The Complex PTSD Foundation recommends a trauma-sensitive approach, taking the nature of trauma into consideration to encourage healing environments instead of using practices that re-traumatize communities. Facilitators should ask questions like, “What happened to this person?” instead of, “What is wrong with this person?”. This way, people who experience trauma feel seen and their trauma is approached in a more respectful way.



Example



The Mayo Clinic Health System's Discover Gratitude program is a virtual, month-long program that includes daily journaling about thankfulness, mindfulness, and kindness. The point of this program is to improve one's well-being and health. Participants complete journals individually, and their entries do not get collected. The program checks in with participants through email a few times during the 30-day program. Emails also include resources and inspiring videos. When people register, they receive a welcome email with instructions and links to PDF journal sheets. At the end of the program, participants are encouraged to complete an evaluation.

Example

The Center for Mind-Body Medicine (CMBM) is a nonprofit organization that deals with psychological trauma on a population-wide scale. Trauma affects not just individuals, but entire communities. CMBM helps these communities create and implement evidence-based, inclusive, accessible, culturally-sensitive and sustainable public health interventions to relieve trauma, build resilience and experience post-traumatic growth. The CMBM train-the-trainer model is grounded in approaches that reestablish physiological and psychological balance after trauma. It includes a variety of self-care techniques, among them several forms of meditation, guided mental imagery, and self-expression in words, drawings, and movement, as well as a small group format in which trainees practice the techniques, share what they're learning with one another and experience small group support.



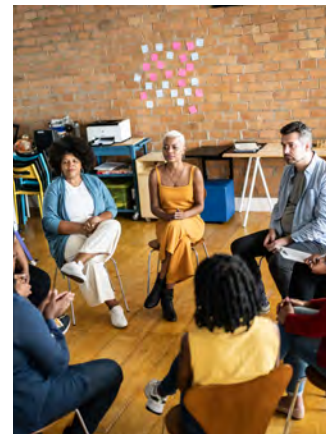
Tailoring Programs to Vulnerable and Marginalized Groups

Some groups or activities can be designed to focus on the experiences of subsets of community members and the mental, spiritual, and social stressors that they experience. This can be especially useful for vulnerable community members like children, people with disabilities including intellectual and developmental disabilities, people with pre-existing health conditions and pregnant people, or for marginalized groups like communities of color who are simultaneously trying to heal from racial trauma as well as cascading climate-related traumas. It is important, however, not to isolate or silo members of the community from one another, which can further perpetuate harm.

In the case of Indigenous communities and communities of color that are severely affected during a time of crisis, leaders can provide a safe space for self-reflection and collective conversations about how white supremacy and oppression have negatively affected community members' standard of living. This way, they can connect their experiences with racism to the disparate impacts experienced from the climate crisis.

Example

Rural Opportunity Institute (ROI) supports youth organizations and majority Black communities in rural Eastern North Carolina to interrupt the cycle of generational trauma and design innovative solutions for healing. ROI hosts activities such as listening circles, where community members can build resilience skills through storytelling. Participants share their experiences and challenges, and members of the circle offer tools for the group to practice helping them process their traumatic experiences. These tools include “systems mapping,” which connects actions and behaviors to their root causes and often illuminates the sources of trauma.



Incorporating Climate Action and Nature-Based Solutions

One way climate change impacts our mental health is through eco-anxiety, or a general fear for the future of our planet and our communities in the face of the climate crisis and environmental decline, a feeling that is particularly acute among young people. Experts suggest that an effective way to combat eco-anxiety is by getting people involved in solutions—providing opportunities for concerned individuals and groups to work towards a happier future for themselves and their families by engaging in climate action and implementing nature-based solutions.

Residents can work towards reducing local emissions in their homes and community or can advocate for local, state or federal climate policies. Encouraging involvement in efforts around water management or parks and land preservation can additionally create a greater sense of connection to the land; and building sustainable community gardens can have the added benefit of increasing access to healthy fruits and vegetables as communities work together to combat a global crisis. Research shows that when residents are actively engaged in this kind of work, their mental health improves, they help reduce local contributions to the climate emergency, and faith and hope in the future is improved.

Example

Healthy Community Services (HCS) is an organization that educates community members about coastal land loss mitigation and adaptation strategies as well as implementing nature-based stormwater management interventions to reduce the impacts of repetitive urban flooding in Orleans Parish. Their urban agriculture program teaches community members to reduce food insecurity by growing vegetables, herbs and fruits in sustainable ways.

HCS has a deep commitment to community engagement and educational awareness. The organization has worked with their community to plant over 1000 native tree species to improve local ecosystem biodiversity, and they host events like The Annual Tree Plantings, Twilight Gardening Workshops, Coastal Resiliency and Environmental Stewards trainings as well as Stormwater Management Seminars to help build multi-generational ties with residents in the community.

Building an Initiative that is Responsive to Change

When building a new community initiative, even the most well-laid plans are likely to change, either due to financial or logistical constraints, or to shifting community dynamics. Engaged leaders should evaluate their efforts every few months to make any necessary changes. In addition to making an organization more responsive and effective, adaptability and flexibility are also traits that improve mental health and can be adopted by community members who are engaged in decisionmaking. Be transparent in your leadership and encourage engagement at every step, from mapping the challenges that are impacting community members' mental and emotional health to designing solutions, evaluating progress and planning for uncertainty.

If you or your organization are interested in undertaking this critical work, visit itrcoalition.org to learn more and sign up to lead a prospective Transformational Resilience Coordinating Network.

Further Reading

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