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The DMH Responder is a quarterly production of...

NYS Office of Mental Health Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response Steve Moskowitz, Director 518.408.2967 Steven.Moskowitz@omh.ny.gov

NYS Department of Health Office of Health Emergency Preparedness Judith LeComb, Manager Preparedness Training and Education 518.474.2893 prepedap@health.ny.gov

Articles contributed by the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz www.newpaltz.edu/idmh



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Welcome

Welcome to the Winter 2015 issue of the New York DMH Responder, our quarterly newsletter for the Disaster Mental Health community. This is the first of two issues that will focus primarily on the consequences of climate change which will also be the topic of the upcoming Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz's annual conference in April. Details about that event are included in this issue and our spring issue will feature a summary of those presentations on a variety of angles, including health and mental health issues and the challenges of communicating complex environmental information. For now, we present an overview of the ways the topic causes distress in the public and we examine some possible ways of coping with that stress.

As always, your feedback and suggestions for topics to cover in future issues are welcome; please email any comments to Judith LeComb at DOH or Steve Moskowitz at OMH.

Preparing for the Effects of Climate Change

In the face of overwhelming and constantly growing scientific evidence (including the recent confirmation that 2014 was the hottest year on record globally) most people now acknowledge that climate change is leading to more frequent natural disasters and these events are often more intense and larger in scope than in the past. Professionals with training in disaster mental health understand the "dose-response" relationship that means that people with exposure to these more serious events are likely to experience stronger negative emotional responses. As a result, DOH and OMH personnel put a lot of effort into treating post-disaster reactions during and after each hurricane, winter storm, seasonal flood, and other weather events, even as these



demands become longer lasting and more complex.

But what about stress resulting from climate change itself? The traditional goal of disaster mental health has been to help

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people return to pre-event functioning. However, current shifts in weather patterns mean that this process now involves not only coping with the trauma of a particular incident but also adapting to our changing environment. It's less a question of "getting back to normal" and more a matter of learning to cope with the ever-evolving "new normal." Unfortunately, meeting this demand runs counter to the way humans evolved to cope with threats. As a species, we're remarkably good at mobilizing our physical and mental resources to deal with an urgent hazard. We flee or fight and when the danger is over we return to our baseline and rebuild our internal resources to cope with the next peril to come along. But what can we do in the face of a threat that we know is increasing over time rather than diminishing? That is the challenge the healthcare and mental health fields face in helping the public cope with climate change.

In one sense, responding to more powerful disasters is certainly not the easy part, but at least the part we know how to do. Of course, meeting greater need requires more trained professional responders and other resources, but that's primarily a matter of scaling up existing knowledge and preparation and adapting them to a lengthier response cycle. In contrast, it's climate change's ripple effects that are creating unfamiliar challenges that we must now figure out how to address. What are these needs that have been recognized to date?

According to the U.S. Department of Defense *Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap* (2014) some

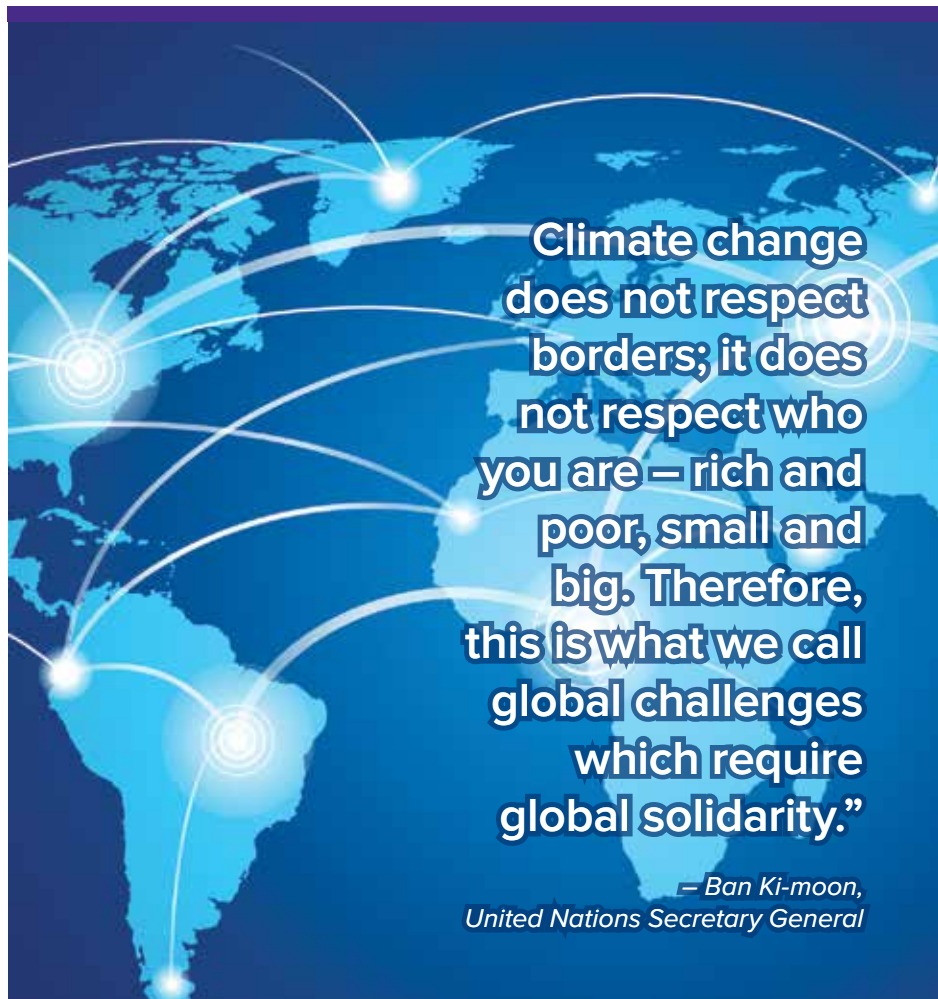


involve issues of security – both concerns about food and water insecurity related to droughts and temperature increases that will impact crop production and challenges for national security as climate change serves as a “threat multiplier” with the potential to exacerbate problems globally including infectious disease outbreaks, forced migration of refugees, political instability, and terrorism. These varied challenges are expected to stretch military resources worryingly thin, limiting capacity to respond to particular events.

Looking specifically at mental health effects the National Wildlife Foundation issued a research report bluntly titled *The Psychological Effects of*

Global Warming on the United States and Why the U.S. Mental Health Care System is Not Adequately Prepared (2012).

This report predicts that in response to the physical and economic destruction related to climate change, “the incidences of mental and social disorders will rise steeply. These will include depressive and anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorders, substance abuse, suicides, and widespread outbreaks of violence. Children, the poor, the elderly, and those with existing mental health disorders are especially vulnerable and will be hardest hit.” Children in particular are at risk of psychological distress, the report suggests, as they confront



existential worry about their futures as well as dealing with current effects (see this issue's Research Brief for more on young people's reactions). Additionally, responders will risk becoming overwhelmed as they attempt to cope with constant demands for help.

Healthcare providers are also bracing for an increase in various infectious diseases and other threats to health as climate change interacts with other societal factors like increasing population density and global travel. The World Health Organization (2014) predicts that climate change will cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year worldwide between 2030 and

2050 including 38,000 due to heat exposure in elderly people, 48,000 due to diarrhea, 60,000 due to malaria, and 95,000 due to childhood under-nutrition. WHO also cites water quality and quantity, food security, and protection from disasters (including both coastal flooding and extreme drought) as mechanisms through which climate change is expected to compromise health worldwide.

Closer to home, climate change-related risks include not only acute, extreme weather events like the hurricanes and floods that have recently struck New York state, but also chronic public health concerns like the drastic increase in Lyme Disease that has sickened and disabled so many in

our communities. New York faces the loss of revenues and of many aspects of our way of life that will result in widespread stress, whether an individual is coping with an acute problem like illness or loss of employment, or is more generally trying to adapt to the changing environment.

What can be done to help members of the public confront feelings of helplessness and chronic stress in the face of climate change's undeniable effects? That will be the topic of the next Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz annual conference which will be held on April 17, 2015. Sponsored by the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services, "Preparing for the Health and Mental Health Consequences of Climate Change" will focus on problem solving and practical solutions to the serious health, public health, and mental health costs of climate change. Presenters with national and international reputations will describe innovative and practical approaches to addressing community-based problems, including the role of messaging to overcome climate change denial and motivate mitigation efforts among individuals and communities and the psychological impact of living under conditions of uncertainty about the future. See the conference announcement in this Issue for more details about speakers and how to register. Key conference findings will be reported in the Spring 2015 issue of the DMH Responder newsletter.

Research Brief

How Young People Cope with Climate Change

One of the most difficult aspects of climate change for many adults is how uncontrollable it seems. This is even truer for young people who have little power to influence public policies or other mitigation efforts, yet who understand that they will have to live with the long-term consequences of current global energy use practices. To understand how youths dealt with their worries about climate change's impact on their futures a researcher in Sweden (Ojala, 2012) surveyed 90 children (mean age 11.7 years), 146 late adolescents (mean age 16.4 years), and 112 young adults (mean age 22.6 years) about how they cope with worry and promote hope around the issue. The findings suggest useful interventions that could be used to help people of any age handle distress related to the topic.

Not surprisingly, worry about climate change was lowest among the youngest children who had not yet developed as much awareness of the issue. 29% of the youngest group reported worrying fairly much, a lot, or very much, compared with 62% of the adolescents and 61% of the young adults. Participants were then asked, "When you feel the most worried do you do anything to not worry so much? If yes, describe what you do." These responses were grouped into the following coping style themes and sub-themes.

Emotion-focused coping:

This style of coping is often used in an attempt to control or reduce negative thoughts or feelings that are evoked by a stressor,

which was clearly the case here. Sub-themes included *de-emphasizing the seriousness* of climate change by arguing that the issue is exaggerated or of no personal consequence; distancing oneself from the problem by avoiding reminders and distracting oneself when cues are encountered; and seeking *social support* from friends and relatives to regulate worry and gain comfort. A minority of the two older groups also reported *hyperactivation*, or an elevated awareness of the issue involving rumination, helplessness, fatalism, or venting of anger. For example, one young adult said "I feel powerless; there's nothing I can do. Even though I recycle a lot it feels like the coal-fired power plants just spew out carbon dioxide and then everything seems pointless."

Problem-focused coping:

Responses in this group involved actions the young people were taking to try to mitigate climate change themselves. Sub-themes included *preparatory actions* such as thinking about the issue, researching information, and making plans about what to do, and *direct actions* including saving energy, avoiding driving,

and buying environmentally-friendly products, as well as persuading others to take similar actions. Another strategy that acknowledged the limitation of individual activities was encouraging *collective problem-focused actions* such as working together to combat climate change. As one young adult's respondent put it, "I try to think positively and convince myself that if everybody does something, it will help. Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do a little."

Meaning-focused coping:

The final group of responses reflected efforts to balance some degree of optimism with an acknowledgment of the seriousness of the problem. Sub-themes here included *positive reappraisal* such as focusing on growing public awareness of climate change's consequences; *positive thinking/existential hope* that the problem will eventually be solved; trust that scientists, environmental groups, or politicians will develop innovative solutions to counter the effects of climate change; and *faith* that God will protect them. For example, one adolescent commented "I believe



we people have the power to fix our mistakes,” while a young adult said “I hope the changes that need to be made happen. That might not happen until the situation is absolutely urgent, but still. Change is going to happen because it is necessary.”

Overall, the emotion- and problem-focused strategies were mostly commonly used to combat worry, while the meaning-focused strategies were more commonly used to promote hope. This is a lesson that could be implemented while trying to help clients or patients cope with stress related to climate change: If an individual is ruminating about the threat, emotion-focused actions like seeking social support could help reduce distress. If one is feeling helpless encouraging individual or collective activities to address the problem directly could restore some sense of control. And if someone is feeling hopeless about climate change’s consequences meaning-focused activities like reframing the issue to focus on global efforts to contain those effects could instill some optimism about the future. Of course none of these strategies actually solve the underlying problem of climate change but they could help individuals at least manage their emotional reactions while bigger solutions are pursued.

Source:

Ojala, M. (2012). Regulating worry, promoting hope: How do children, adolescents, and young adults cope with climate change? *International Journal of Environmental & Science Education*, 3(3), 537-561.



Preparing for the Health and Mental Health Consequences of Climate Change

April 17th, 2015

State University of New York at New Paltz

Sponsored by New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services (DHSES)

| Keynote Presentations

Mental Health Consequences of Climate Change.

Dr. Nicole Lurie, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Climate Change, Communication and Our Inconvenient Minds.

Andrew Revkin, New York Times

The Health Consequences of a Changing Climate.

Dr. George Luber, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Envisioning a Feasible, Scalable, Effective, and Engaging Mental Health Post-Disaster Response.

Dr. Josef Ruzek, National Center for PTSD

| Workshops

Phone/Texting Crisis Counseling in the context of Climate Change.

Lauri Benblatt, Disaster Distress Helpline

Rebuilding Social Connections:

A Skills for Psychological Recovery Intervention.

Dr. Josef Ruzek, National Center for PTSD

Lyme Disease and Co-infections: A Global Emerging Health Epidemic.

Dr. Richard Horowitz, Hudson Valley Healing Arts Center

Exploring Online and Social Media Innovations that can Foster Effective Engagement on Climate Hazards and Other Environmental Risks.

Andrew Revkin, New York Times

For more information, including Learning Objectives and Speaker Bios, please visit <http://www.newpaltz.edu/idmh/conference.html>

Thanks to sponsorship by NYS DHSES a number of complimentary seats are available. For information about requesting a scholarship, please email idmh@newpaltz.edu. Scholarships will be provided on a first come first serve basis.