



Mental Health, Well-Being and Climate Change

From changing land to damaged belongings to evacuations, climate change can directly and indirectly impact mental health and wellbeing.

Changing Land and Ecological Grief

Changes to the land, the water, the ice, the snow, and the weather can impact a person's sense of place and threaten traditional practices that support well-being. Loss of land-based activities and work because of climate change can impact personal and community income and disrupt a person's sense of belonging and cultural identity. It can also lead to reduced food security as it becomes more difficult to get out on the land and find the animals and plants that they traditionally harvest. This may be especially true in areas where land-based activities are an essential part of tradition and where changes are occurring faster such as in the North, including the far north of Ontario.

First Nations in the North speak of how being out on the land keeps them grounded and is part of their identity. They are worried that the changes will continue and stop them from practicing long-lived traditions. The voices of Inuit in the video "[Lament for the Land](#)" may echo what you feel and have heard in your community, that climate change is affecting culture, leading to fear, worry, sadness and mental illness.



Severe Weather, Floods, Fires and Evacuations

Severe weather, flooding and wildfire are all becoming more common because of climate change. The threat of natural disasters and uncertainty of the future can leave people feeling stressed and worried. These natural disasters can cause personal injury, damage to belongings and buildings and require evacuation especially of vulnerable people. People can feel defeated when they are always recovering from a loss. Evacuations lead to cultural disruption and displacement all of which has been shown to lead to mental health disorders. Mental health impacts from climate change are also expected to magnify existing stresses like food insecurity. Some community members will be more vulnerable to mental health issues depending on age, gender, social and economic factors, and pre-existing disorders.



Evacuation of Fort Hope in 2011 due to wildfires.



What can we do?

Finding ways to continue cultural activities

The best way to prevent the sense of loss of a way of life is to make sure that it is not lost. If you can't get out to a traditional area because of downed trees from a severe windstorm, try to find a different route to get there. Or, if there are no berries where you used to go, search for new patches and share the findings with community members. It's about minimizing impacts to cultural activities and working around them. It's also about sharing your knowledge with others, especially youth. By organizing cultural activities, you are keeping traditions alive and strengthening your sense of value. Supporting each other in a time of change is important; talking to friends and family about your feelings increases the sense of community and togetherness, so you know you are not alone in a difficult situation.



Birthing of the drum, Camp Chikepak 2017

Taking action: Active Hope

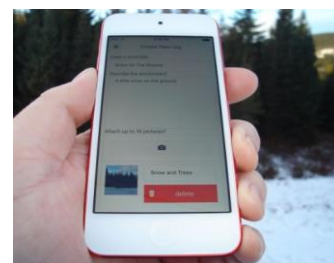
Active hope is the concept of moving hopeful intentions from an inactive state to an active process of taking action on climate change adaptation. It starts by accepting the reality of the problem, then setting goals to address the problem, and then engaging in actions to reach the goals. In other words, accept that things are changing, set goals to fix it and then do it! By taking action, people feel like they are making a difference. This might mean activism like Autumn Peltier of Wikwemikong First Nation, addressing world leaders at the United Nations about protecting water. Or, planning and building a sustainable energy grid in your community. Or, speaking up when you see someone being reckless with a campfire. The key is to take action to make the world a better place. This will give you and the people around you, especially youth, some hope for the future.

Advocating for More Services

Addressing mental health impacts requires a support system of mental health professionals, resources, and services. Mental health services are already lacking in many areas of the north. Communities should continue to push for the resources they need, build mental health response into emergency preparedness planning and climate action plans, as well as help community members see how climate change and mental health is relevant to them. It is also important to end the stigma surrounding mental health issues. People in need of mental health services may be more willing to ask for help if mental illness is accepted as an illness like any other, like cancer, for example.

Environment and Health Monitoring

Monitoring of the land and public health is a possible strategy for responding and adapting to changes. For example, a community in Rigolet, Nunatsiavut Labrador has developed a community-led, and community-designed environment and health monitoring strategy called the "eNuk Program". An important part of the program is the eNuk app, which is a tool for community members to record their observations while on the land. Observations like thin sea ice or poor trail conditions can be shared to help community members make decisions when planning their travel routes, increasing safety.



Charlie Flowers, a research lead and community member in Rigolet, demonstrating the eNuk app.
<https://enuk.ca>

More Reading

Examining relationships between climate change and mental health in the Circumpolar North
http://www.lamentfortheland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CC-Circumpolar-MH_Cunsolo-Willox-et-al.-Online.pdf
Climate change and mental health: risks, impacts and priority actions
https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/88223/1/13033_2018_Article_210.pdf



UP NORTH ON CLIMATE
Climate Change Impact and Adaptation
Study for the North of Ontario