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Climate depression. Critical analysis of the concept

Magdalena Budziszewska[1], Weronika Kałwak[2]

[1] Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw
[2] Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University

Summary

The aim of this paper is to discuss the challenge posed to mental health by climate change. Our inquiry is based on literature review and original qualitative studies. The data are collected from both desk research and in-depth interviews with participants belonging to following groups: high school and university students, young parents, activists, and psychotherapy patients. This paper also offers the critical review of contemporary terminology used for mental health problems and emotions appearing in the context of climate change, as well as the history of scientific interest in the issue at hand. The term and phenomenon of climate depression acquires a special focus, based on qualitative studies participants' self-reports and main arguments critical to medicalization of emotions experienced when facing the climate crisis. The additional analysis of socio-political and cultural aspects of climate change and mental health concludes in establishing the urgent need for further research in the area, so as to gain multidimensional understanding necessary for providing adequate mental health services. It is very likely that it will be increasingly needed in the future.

Key words: climate change, depression, anxiety

Introduction

> *Warmer and warmer summers. Less and less snow in winter. Forests are burning. Drought, lack of water. Glaciers in the mountains are disappearing. Sea ice in the Arctic is disappearing. The permafrost is thawing. Methane is released into the atmosphere. […] Amazonia on fire. Siberia on fire. Australia on fire.*

In the movie *It's okay to panic* [1], from which the quote comes, the Polish atmospheric physicist Professor Szymon Malinowski recounts how climate change intertwined with his personal and professional life. Although he is discussing undeni-

able facts, such a list of calamities presented at the opening credits sounds infinitely depressing and relentless, like intrusive thoughts. Malinowski, among many other researchers, has taken a position on the legitimacy of emotional responses to the climate crisis. In 2018, Nature Climate Change published a report which shows that the awareness of the problem can be a serious stressor, and even a risk factor for mental health, also for the scientists involved [2].

The aim of this text is to reflect on the issue of mental health in the face of the climate crisis. The starting point is the sheer ambiguity of the term 'climate depression'. Our reflection is based on the review of available scientific literature and own qualitative research. In our interview studies carried out between 2018 and 2020, the topic of strong emotional experience of climate change and coping with it proved to be lively discussed in such groups as adolescents, activists, young parents and those planning offspring, as well as students or psychotherapy patients[1]. Participants declared burdensome depressive and anxiety symptoms, resignation and trauma-like symptoms; some of them referred to these climate-related difficulties as climate depression, and several participants sought professional help. Although qualitative research does not allow us to say anything conclusive about the prevalence of the phenomenon, the tremendous response to our inquiry suggests that we are dealing with a new phenomenon, as well as the emergence of new popular terms ('climate anxiety,' 'climate depression') that deserve the attention of practitioners and researchers.

The first instance of ambiguity appears in the face of the abundance of media materials and attempts to seek support in social media, where the users use the term 'climate depression.' This term also appears in some statements by practicing psychologists and psychotherapists, formulated as part of their psychoeducational activities; finally, the Polish Suicidological Society takes notice of climate depression in its bulletin from the end of 2019 (while referring to press materials) [3]. At the same time, this term does not appear in any of the scientific articles in the literature review[2]. Professionals

[1] Qualitative studies mentioned here are conducted independently by both authors, and most of them are still in progress. A variety of qualitative techniques is being used, drawn from in-depth interviews with experiential focus and conducted face to face. We also use discursive and secondary analyses. The average sample size is about ten interviewees for one subgroup. So far several dozen interviews have been collected with groups of psychotherapy patients, youth, parents, and activists. The co-authors of some part of this research are also students participating in our research team and/or master seminar.

[2] A search of the EBSCO database of titles and abstracts of scientific articles, using the term 'climate depression', resulted in 306 titles (198 titles after deleting duplicates). We have identified 7 texts on climate change referring to depression as a medical condition, of which three were of a scientific nature and the other ones were press releases. None of the texts used the term 'climate depression.' A climate depression search in the Google Scholar database resulted in over 120,000 pages of results. Up to page 20, the term 'climate depression' appeared once, in a press release about the psychological difficulties experienced by climate change scientists, but only in its title added by a journalist (M Thomas *Climate depression is for real: Just ask a scientist*, Grist, October, 2014). A search in the EBSCO database using more liberal terms ('climate change' or 'global warming' and 'depression' and 'mental') resulted in a list of 199 titles, 19 of which concerned the relationship between climate change and mental health (14 scientific articles, 5 press releases). None of the texts contain the term 'climate depression,' but one of the articles deals with 'climate-induced depression' [5].

seem to distance themselves from using this term, preferring a more neutral language (e.g., 'climate stress'). The point is to avoid over-medicalization of the phenomenon, which can be seen as an expression of a realistic concern for the condition of the planet, proving an adequate assessment of reality and lack of denial. Although frequent worry is generally strongly associated with psychopathological symptoms, Verplanken and Roy [4] have proved this correlation not valid for people who are worried about climate. Rather, such individuals are more open to experience and more often act pro-environmentally. The authors emphasize that climate worry is a rational concern in the current situation and not an expression of 'mass neurosis' or 'hysteria.'

On the other hand, the importance of self-identification with climate depression, usually occurring at the moment of recognizing their own situation in the encountered material, is emphasized by the participants of our interviews. They talk about an uplifting sense of community, about the awareness that "others feel the same as I do. " Above all, they talk about the loss of a painful sense of isolation occurring when confronted with the others who do not understand and with whom it is impossible to share the strong negative emotions associated with global warming. Some of the participants first encountered the term in an advertisement inviting them to take part in research-bound interviews. Recognizing themselves in the label of 'climate depression' validated their suffering ("this is true (…) since there is even a word for it and it is being researched"). Interestingly, so far, a significant number of participants have been remarking at the beginning of the study that they "have no diagnosis of climate depression" (or depression at all). However, also many of them now or in the past have undergone psychotherapeutic or psychiatric treatment, sometimes because of the suffering experienced in the face of climate catastrophe (Budziszewska, Kałwak, own unpublished research).

The proof of the widespread use of the term 'climate depression' can be also found in the emergence of several psychological support groups linked by the common theme of climate depression – e.g., in Poland in Lodz, Warsaw and Poznan. The term 'depression' (and therefore perhaps also 'climate depression') is used in everyday speech in a different and more broad way than its professional meaning suggests. Moreover, as a result of many years of international psychoeducational programs, depression has become relatively normalized and destigmatized in social life, which may favor the use of a well-established and socially acceptable term for a never and less known phenomenon. Perhaps we are dealing here with a case of folksonomy, as society is signaling to science of an important phenomenon that needs to be professionally addressed?

The history of considering environmental and climate impacts in psychiatry

The topic of mental health risks associated with global warming has been addressed in the scientific literature with increasing frequency at least since the 1980s. In the first decade, single mentions occurred as warnings about possible deterioration of mental

health of the population, as the scientists inquired about the possible psychological reactions of people in response to changes in the distribution of goods and in relation to the impact of the economic situation – which they suspected would deteriorate as a result of climate change [6]. Dotto [7], being an early precursor, warned against mental illness and 'psychological exhaustion' if a rapid warming of the climate were to occur.

In the 1990s, the emerging mental health reports continued to be delivered in the form of projections and warnings, albeit more specific ones. It was suggested, for example, that the need for holistic support and psychological assistance may emerge among island communities forced to emigrate completely [8]. The researchers focused on increased health risks caused by severe weather events. An important precursor of the present literature is the book *The environment and mental health: A guide for clinicians* edited by Ante Lundberg [9]. The authors of individual chapters insert the reflection on global environmental changes and climate warming into the understanding of environmental health, until then limited mainly to occupational health issues. The co-authors of the book launch the thesis that care for the natural environment is crucial for the protection of public mental health. In her introduction, Ante Lundberg draws attention to the need to modify the established notion of the environment, so that it is no longer limited to family and the nearest social environment. She advocates for the acknowledgement of non-social environment and recognition of the importance of biological and physical aspects for individual psychological functioning.

The years 2000 and later brought an explosion of scientific interest in the subject. Apart from further prognoses, the first reports of a *de facto* deterioration of mental health (especially in the case of the inhabitants of regions already affected by global warming) began to materialize. The literature now comprises hundreds of positions, including several institutional reports and major attempts at synthesis. In general, the consequences of climate change for mental health are divided into direct and indirect, as well as acute and chronic. Their detailed description can be found elsewhere [10–12]. APA Report 2017 [11] lists, among others: anxiety and depression, addictions, increased risk of aggression and violence, strain on social relationships, chronic multidimensional stress, loss of autonomy and control, PTSD, loss of personal and professional identity, feelings of helplessness, fatalism, loss of meaning in life. The key point is that some of these reactions are anticipatory; i.e., the experienced suffering and psychopathological symptoms are associated with anticipation rather than actual experiencing of a catastrophe. This is particularly characteristic to the inhabitants of relatively safe regions of the global north, including Poland, as opposed to the inhabitants of the global south, who more often fall victim to disasters, wars, and worsening living conditions caused by climate change [13].

Modern professional and institutional response

Both individual professionals [14] and professional associations have been increasingly vocal in recent years on the subject of obligations arising from the climate crisis. The first report of the American Psychological Society on the relationship between psychology and global warming [15] postulated a number of actions in the field of social psychology (e.g., confrontation with denialism) as well as community and clinical psychology. The next APA report from 2014 [10] expanded on a topic of health that had been discussed from the beginning, and the last one published in 2017 [11] focused exclusively on the negative consequences of climate change for mental health. Since 2017, APA representatives formally participate in the proceedings of the International Panel on Climate Change at the UN – IPCC. The APA is followed by other professional organizations; e.g., in 2015 the International Psychoanalytical Association adopted the so-called Boston Declaration, which states that the task of analysts should be to actively seek to reverse "denial, helplessness, and apathy" towards climate change. On the other side of the globe, the Australian Psychological Association has issued a number of publications and recommendations, among others, for people experiencing emotional difficulties due to climate change. In Poland, a declaration on this issue was given, among others, by the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Warsaw (in 2019); a research group on climate change was created by the Rasztow Institute for Group Analysis (also in 2019), and the Polish Psychiatric Association established the Committee for Climate Psychiatry in 2020. The above list of institutional responses is, of course, by necessity, cursory and brief.

Most commonly used terms

Eco-anxiety and climate anxiety

Various terms are used in professional literature to describe these emotional and mental health difficulties. The term 'climate anxiety' or 'eco-anxiety' often appears both in professional reports [10, 11, 15] and in literature. Historically, the term ecological anxiety referred rather to obsessive and irrational anxiety about various forms of environmental pollution. Clinicians were advised to communicate to such patients a relatively lesser significance of environmental threats as compared to other known sources of risk (such as car accidents or smoking), thus appealing to their rationality. However, in the case of climate change, given its global nature, the question remains open: What level of concern is appropriate here? The risks associated with climate change are clearly underestimated in society and the use of defensive mechanisms, such as denial, detachment, and disavowal are empirically documented [15]. Contrarily, people experiencing climate change anxiety are often more knowledgeable than the rest of the population (and often the clinicians themselves), and their perception of the existential threat as serious and currently far from being solved is basically correct.

Among the professional groups at particular risk are, as has been pointed out earlier, scientists themselves, as well as people well informed by virtue of their profession: journalists, policy makers and activists [2]. Preliminary evidence indicates that another vulnerable group may be the clinicians themselves. In the Seaman study [16] on how clinicians respond to patients bringing climate change theme into therapy conversations, 62% of the clinicians indicated that they themselves experienced feelings of fear, anxiety, danger, anger, and sadness during such discussions. Significantly, the majority of medical practitioners considered these conversations to be very significant and impactful in terms of their attitude towards patients.

To sum up, climate change anxiety is often realistic and can affect anyone, including clinicians, which poses a particular challenge to the therapeutic process (Sally Weintrobe discusses this issue in detail [17]).

Existential anxiety and collective emotions

Another frequently used term is 'existential anxiety.' The totality of the threat of climate change, which implies being confronted with human mortality, gives it the character of an existential crisis. Emotions can be experienced in relation to oneself as well as in relation to important groups with which we identify. In the second case, we talk about collective emotions. The advantage of thinking about climate anxiety as a collective emotion is reflected in the research on collective angst – which is a not necessarily conscious fear of one's own in-group continuity, future and survival [18].

Fear, panic

Since the threat of climate change is realistic, the term 'climate fear' is sometimes postulated to use. However, since the consequences of climate change are stretched over time and burdened with uncertainty, it seems that the word 'anxiety' remains in use, independent of the psychological definition. An intense and politically motivated debate is currently taking place around the public use of terms such as 'anxiety,' 'fear' and 'panic' in relation to climate change, as well as the adequacy of the feelings they call into attention. Climate activist Greta Thunberg, at the World Economic Forum summit in Davos in 2019, addressed the audience with such opening words: "I want you to panic." This phrase entered the canon of the media discourse about the climate crisis and caused a wave of criticism. The opponents accuse Thunberg of calling for excessive emotional reactions and point to the irrationality and harmfulness of emotions such as panic. Her supporters, however, stress out that it is precisely the lack of vivid emotions in the face of the threat of ecological and humanitarian disaster – the mechanism of which, based on a scientific consensus, is known and incontestable – that deserves criticism, and can even constitute a certain kind of psychopathy. Thus, the debate about the adequacy of experiencing such responses as fear, anxiety

and panic – seemingly only a scientific debate about their place on the continuum of norm and pathology – turns out to be a dispute about the shape of social and political reaction to perhaps the most serious global challenge of our times. Such a situation is, in fact, nothing new in psychiatry. Behind the question of to what extent one can, or even should, be afraid of climate change is the fundamental inquiry about future of our civilization, while public disclosures of anxiety evoke strong responses from the public because they challenge the status quo.

Solastalgia, mourning, fatalism, and hopelessness

Philosopher Glenn Albrecht [19] introduced a concept of solastalgia to describe painful, nostalgic feelings associated with the loss of a well-known natural environment, such as the landscape, meaningful place or a sequence of seasons. The concept of mourning, sometimes in opposition to depression, is also often used in the literature. Mourning (also after the loss of the natural world) may be unrecognized and socially unacknowledged, but the concept of mourning itself does not connote a disorder (such as depression). Instead, it indicates processual character. In consequence, several stadial models of climate mourning have been proposed [20]. On the other hand, the concepts of both lack of hope and fatalism are used in empirical studies rather than in clinical research, due to their better operationalization.

Apathy and melancholy

Renee Lertzman, author of the psychoanalytically oriented book *Environmental melancholia* [21], postulates the existence of a specific gap between the real concern of people for the degradation of the environment and their lack of ability to express these feelings and to transform them into action. This in turn creates an impression of a widespread social indifference. She describes this phenomenon as environmental melancholy, the unconscious feeling of deep disturbance and profound loss, combined with simultaneous difficulty in naming and expressing this experience. The result is apathy, non-involvement and pessimism; phenomena that are depressive in their very nature.

Climate stress

The concept of 'climate stress' has been proposed as an umbrella concept covering the multiplicity of psychological responses [10] to the stressor of experienced or anticipated climate change. Depending on individual cognitive assessment and resources, it can be perceived as more or less grave. If the risk posed by climate change is assessed as probable and of apocalyptic magnitude (or at least life-and-health-threatening, for oneself or children), it may manifest itself in symptoms similar to traumatic stress. This is referred to in the literature as 'pre-PTSD.'

The notion of climate stress, while taking into account the whole continuum of stress reactions, allows for the use of stress coping theories in current research. The strong basis of such a conceptualization is that emotions and reactions are seldom isolated. Rather, one experiences a complexity of feelings dynamically changing over time, alternating from anxiety and sadness to anger, as well as a shifting sense of agency and meaning of life. Therefore, a general model of stress response explains such shifts better than focusing on just one type of emotion [22]. In addition, this corresponds to the experiences shared by participants of our interviews (Budziszewska, Kałwak, own unpublished research).

Climate depression

It is only against the background of the above summary of climate-anxiety-related terminology that the meaning of the concept of climate depression begins to emerge. Paradoxically, the term is rarely used or discussed in professional literature. However, depression is mentioned as one of the possible reactions resulting from climate change [10, 11, 15]. Estimating the prevalence of this new phenomenon is difficult, not only because of the lack of formal recognition criteria, but above all because of the professional position on its nature that has not been established so far. Thus, 'climate depression' seems to be a term of a common language with a medicalized sound to it. On the other hand – and this is particularly important from the perspective of this article and the exploratory goals of qualitative research – this term has been spontaneously chosen by research participants, who present it as one with which they easily and willingly identify, to describe their own experience. This may mean that the term 'climate depression' reflects a certain shared experience, responding to an authentic, important, and deeply felt subjective phenomenon, although it does not indicate a precise psychiatric concept or a diagnosis.

What is the core of this phenomenon? Perhaps the profoundness of the suffering and the lack of hope, associated with a shared sense of helplessness in the face of the climate crisis. Depression, unlike other forms of dejection, connotes an extremely malignant, protracted inner distress. This word is sometimes associated with some kind of accusation and/or call for help. What causes "the depression" is experientially undeniable and demands to be acknowledged. Frequent themes in interviews with people who, according to their own self-diagnosis, suffer from climate depression include anxiety, helplessness, lack of hope, fatalism ("it's too late to prevent catastrophic climate change"), loss of meaning in life and interests ("in this situation, why should we learn, develop?"), social withdrawal and loneliness, a sense of burnout in action, lack of power and passivity, irritability and anger, aggressive and self-aggressive fantasies, persistent nightmares and insomnia. Many of the themes are related to parenthood: considering, postponing decisions, or giving up having children, as well as anxiety about the future of children who already are there. At the same time, these difficulties

usually do not reach a clinical level, or they reach this level for a short time (several days to several months). Similar difficulties, in a similar vein, are reported by people who are highly-functional socially and professionally, with no history of earlier mood disorders, as well as by those who have had previous diagnosis of depression and anxiety disorders. In the latter case, however, our interlocutors often share the impression that feelings related to climate are qualitatively different. They experience them specifically as being more rational and externally located, and thus more difficult to control; e.g., through skills acquired through psychotherapy. Thus one often formulated expectation for psychologists and psychiatrists is that the medical practitioners already have prior knowledge of the matter and an opinion based on scientific consensus, so that the patients do not have "to enlighten" their therapists or, in extreme cases, to meet with some forms of climate denial (Budziszewska, Kałwak, own unpublished research).

The existing literature [11, 13, 15] points out that emotional distress in response to climate change, if left unattended, can lead to fatalism and despair, thus contributing to the deterioration of mental health of individuals and populations. This, in turn, poses a challenge to public health, while it also leads to an obstruction of the technological, social and economic changes required by climate protection. Therefore, in order to maintain a realistic hope for the necessary social change, it is crucial to discuss how to deal with these difficulties, both in the area of public discourse and in psychiatry and psychological assistance [24].

The approaches discussed so far in the literature are related to the notion of active hope [13], which supports individual and collective sense of agency, experience of community, and transformative action. Preliminary reports indicate that such experiences, especially open communication and joint action, actually improve patients' well-being [13, 22]. At the same time, the notions of hope and agency are associated with pitfalls and paradoxes that have so far been little explored. For example, there is a growing awareness of the inadequacy of individual actions, while the entanglement of the individual in complex political and economic systems that are beyond understanding may encourage an untrue and unfavorable attribution of responsibility rather than increase the sense of agency. Therefore, the role of psychological assistance and psychotherapy cannot be overestimated, provided that we consider it as complementary or alternative to the promoted community actions, depending on the needs and capabilities of the people and population concerned. The benefits of individual psychotherapy and the needs of professional support groups are present in our research results, and the role of psychological assistance is emphasized in the literature [13]. The theoretical and ethical foundation of psychotherapy and its supportive role in the face of climate change, discussed within the new fields of eco-psychiatry and eco-psychology, are issues that should also become a topic in mainstream psychiatry and psychology [25].

Recapitulation

The phenomenon of climate depression challenges the traditional schemes of understanding mental disorders, especially the established ways of thinking in terms of rationality/irrationality, internal/external source of psychopathology and determining mental health by the adequate perception of the world. Perhaps we are dealing with a pathological (suffering paralyzing everyday life) but justified (therefore, rational) reaction to the realistic and total threat in the world: not inside the individual or his/her family but outside in the material environment of every person's existence.

From the very beginning, discussions about climate depression have been criticized for the medicalization mechanism behind it [23]. It seems right that individuals should not base the understanding of themselves on psychopathological notions that motivate stigmatization and self-stigmatization of individuals experiencing psychological difficulties. In addition, the use of medical language for this range of experiences is problematic, particularly when research gradually reveals the ambiguity of the location the climate depression takes on the continuum of norm and pathology. At the same time, the phenomenon of climate depression seems to go beyond the area of mental health. The climate depression narrative in the media (both traditional and social), as well as in personal close relations with others, can be seen as a specific socio-political pro-climate activity. The testimony of personal life and painful experience, as well as public identification with a label indicating psychiatric diagnosis, serve to increase the visibility of the climate change consequences and solidarity with particularly vulnerable victims of systemic neglect in the face of the threat of climate crisis [11, 24].

The reflection on the non-obvious concept of climate depression reveals the multidimensionality of the phenomenon behind it, as well as the need for further recognition of this complex, ethically and discursively shaped area of knowledge, so as to form the basis for the necessary psychological support. Most likely, we are going to need it increasingly often.

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Address: Magdalena Daria Budziszewska
University of Warsaw, Faculty of Psychology
e-mail: mbudzisz@psych.uw.edu.pl