

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

GARRET BARNWELL

AIM OF REPORT

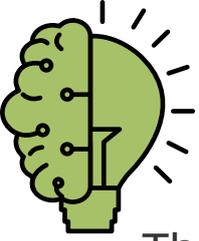
To demonstrate the less tangible harms of the climate crisis and the threat/risks of harm (from a mental health and well-being perspective) arising from the decision to develop new coal capacity, particularly for young people and coal-affected communities.

EXPERT BIO

Garret Barnwell is an independent practice clinical psychologist registered with the HPCSA with over 5-years of clinical practice and more than 10-years of experience with the international medical humanitarian sector and community psychology. He currently works as a clinical psychologist in private practice in Johannesburg and as a researcher with expertise in community assessments and interventions and the psychology of climate change.

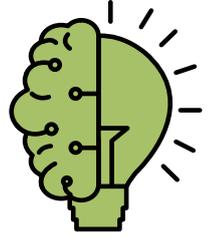
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Climate change has profound adverse mental health implications for those living in South Africa.
- The consequences of climate change are already being experienced and these effects will only accelerate in the future, placing today's children and future generations in harm's way.
- People experience climate change through a range of traumatic and stressful events, or climate change exposures. Climate change exposures include exposure to natural disasters, water insecurity, air pollution etc - these are exacerbated by the burning of fossil fuels.



- These exposures lead to well-understood psychopathologies, including anxiety, depression, suicide, interpersonal violence, decreased work productivity, and increased hospitalisation, amongst others.
- Climate change exposures can be experienced directly (e.g., natural disasters) or vicariously through witnessing others suffer, these events may be experienced as anticipated harms (e.g., anticipated threats, loss, and damages related to the future of climate change) and they may be accumulative (when a person may experience several traumatic or stressful events across their lifespan.)
- Those living in South Africa are particularly vulnerable to such effects of climate change due to poverty and other socio-economic and historical factors and climate change has the potential to deepen the wounds of historical injustices.
- Children and future generations will have to bear the brunt of the impacts of the climate crisis – this means not only having to live with and respond to the physical impacts and harms but the psychological harms as well, which can manifest as concerns and fears over current climate harms and fears for the future. Those who are affected are likely to have extra challenges at school as their concentration and emotional wellbeing are harmed. Children can turn these feelings inwards and experience profound sadness, loss, helplessness, or hopelessness, or they can turn these feelings outwards in destructive ways.
- It is not only the negative experiences that the children and individuals have, but what these experiences can take away. Hope, happiness, a sense of self-worth, and trust in the world can be challenged and dulled.





QUOTES:

“My expert opinion is that climate change has profound adverse mental health implications for those living in South Africa.”

“Climate change has the potential of deepening the wounds of historical injustices, and the literature suggests that it will have profound mental health, wellbeing and societal consequences.”

“Numerous studies that have been cited show that greenhouse gas-emitting energy sources have detrimental physical, mental, and neurocognitive consequences.”

“As we know from the COVID-19 pandemic, preparation is everything, and in the case of climate change, we know that it is already with us and will determinately affect those most vulnerable in South Africa.”

“It is extraordinarily difficult for the majority of South Africans to adapt to the advancing climate shocks, such as climate change-exacerbated disasters, water insecurity and economic losses.⁹ The same social conditions that make individuals and communities more vulnerable to climate change, are the same that put people at higher risk of mental illness and psychological adversities.”

“The government’s choice to not adequately avert the mental health impacts of climate change contribute to the psychological experience of institutional betrayal and secondary trauma for current and future generations. The institutions that are supposed to safeguard communities are the ones making decisions that will have irreversible and profound consequences for their mental health and wellbeing. We cannot escape the fact that climate change impacts pose an existential threat to individuals, families, and communities that is psychologically - and otherwise – harmful.”