



UK Health
Security
Agency

Climate change and mental health: thematic assessment report

Appendix 4. Glossary



Glossary

This glossary provides definitions for terms used throughout the report. The terminology used in climate change and mental health research often spans multiple disciplines and sectors, and as a result, some terms may be used interchangeably or have slightly different meanings depending on context. Where relevant, definitions also reflect how terms are applied in this report's specific context.

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT): an action-orientated form of psychotherapy that helps individuals develop psychological flexibility by accepting thoughts and feelings without judgment and committing to meaningful actions aligned with their values.

Behavioural activation: a therapeutic approach that encourages individuals to engage in activities they find meaningful or enjoyable to combat depression and improve mood. By increasing positive reinforcement through action, behavioural activation aims to reduce avoidance behaviours and enhance emotional well-being.

Biodiversity: the range of plant and animal species found within a specific habitat. High biodiversity indicates a rich variety of plant and animal life.

Climate change-related hazard: a physical event or climatic trend that is more likely or intensified due to climate change and has the potential to cause harm or disruption. This includes sudden weather events (such as heatwaves or floods), slower-onset weather changes (such as droughts), and long-term climate shifts.

Climate change: gradual and long-term alterations in temperature, rainfall, and other aspects of the Earth's climate system, largely driven by human actions such as fossil fuel combustion, deforestation, and industrial activity.

Climate crisis: the urgent and far-reaching risks posed by the irreversible impacts of climate change, affecting environmental, social, political, and cultural systems.

Climate-coping mechanisms: strategies individuals or communities use to manage psychological stress caused by climate change. These may be adaptive (such as community action, nature connection) or maladaptive (including denial or withdrawal).

Clinical mental health intervention: therapeutic activities designed to treat or prevent mental disorders or psychological distress, delivered by trained mental health professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, or clinical social workers. These interventions include but are not limited to, psychotherapy (such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)), medication management, crisis intervention, and psychoeducation. In this review, interventions were considered clinical if they met the above criteria, regardless of delivery mode or setting (for example, delivered digitally or in schools).

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT): a form of talk therapy that helps individuals learn how to identify and change negative or unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that can affect their mental health.

Cognitive restructuring: a component of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) that involves identifying, challenging, and modifying negative or distorted thought patterns to alter emotional responses and behaviours. This technique helps individuals develop more balanced and constructive thinking.

Community resilience: a community's ability to adapt, withstand, and recover from the adverse effects of climate change and, importantly, adapt or change their systems to minimise these adverse effects. This involves strategies, policies, and actions to be taken at the local level to reduce vulnerability, enhance the ability to cope with and bounce back from climate-related disturbances and phase these disturbances out by changing the socioeconomic systems that are creating them.

CORE20PLUS framework: NHS England's Core20PLUS framework, adopted by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), identifies populations considered as being at potentially higher risk of health inequities, including the most deprived 20% of the national population and groups such as those with protected characteristics and inclusion health groups.

Cost-utility analysis: an economic evaluation method that compares the costs and health outcomes of different interventions, with outcomes measured in quality-adjusted life years (QALYs).

Cost-saving (societal perspective): economic benefits that accrue to society as a whole when an intervention reduces costs across multiple sectors (healthcare, social services, criminal justice, education, productivity losses). This broader perspective captures the full economic impact beyond just healthcare costs.

Cost-saving (healthcare perspective): economic benefits that accrue specifically to healthcare systems, including reduced hospital admissions, GP visits, medication costs, and other direct healthcare expenditures. This narrower perspective focuses on savings within health service budgets.

Digital mental health interventions: technology-based interventions, including mobile apps, web-based programs, and virtual reality tools, designed to prevent or treat mental health conditions.

Digital psychoeducational interventions: online or digital programs that provide information and education about mental health conditions, aiming to improve understanding and coping strategies.

Displacement: the forced movement of individuals or communities from their usual place of residence, often due to environmental disasters, conflict, or other threats. Displacement can have significant mental health impacts through loss of social support, identity, and security.

Domestic abuse: includes domestic violence, as well as emotional, financial abuse and controlling or coercive behaviour.

Dose-response effect: a relationship where changes in the level, frequency, or intensity of an exposure (such as therapy sessions, medication, or trauma) are associated with corresponding changes in the outcome (including symptom reduction or risk increase).

Drought: a period of abnormally dry weather characterised by precipitation levels below a certain threshold and lasting longer than a month. There are several definitions of drought, including meteorological (occurs in areas when dry weather dominates and are usually determined by the duration of the dry period and the degree of dryness), hydrological (normally associated with a precipitation deficit, and occurs when surface and subsurface water supply becomes low), agricultural (precipitation deficits lead to soil moisture deficits and negatively affects agricultural production, such as crop growth and livestock rearing) and socioeconomic (include some element of meteorological, hydrological and agricultural drought, but relates more to the supply and demand of economic goods).

Ecosystem: a network of living organisms that interact with each other and with their physical surroundings to operate as a connected unit.

Eco-anxiety: the wide range of emotional and psychological responses people may experience in response to awareness of climate change and environmental degradation. Due to varying definitions within the literature, in this report eco-anxiety is used as an umbrella term to include other emotions and definitions such as eco-distress, eco-anger, eco-fear, eco-grief and climate anxiety.

Flooding: occurs when land that is usually dry is inundated with water. There are 3 main types of flooding - river flooding (fluvial); coastal flooding, including storm surges; and surface water flooding.

Functioning: a person's ability to carry out daily activities across areas such as work, education, relationships, and self-care.

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD): a clinically diagnosed condition of ongoing anxiety and worry about many events or thoughts that the patient generally recognises as excessive and inappropriate.

GRADE-CERQual: an approach for assessing how much confidence to place in a study's findings. The overall confidence assessment of high, moderate, low and very low is based on an assessment of 4 components: methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy and relevance.

Group-based interventions: therapeutic approaches where multiple individuals are treated simultaneously by one or more healthcare professionals. Group therapy can address various conditions, including trauma, anxiety, and depression.

Heatwave: an extended period of hot weather relative to the expected conditions in that place at that time of year. In the UK, a heatwave is declared when a location records a period of 3 consecutive days or more where daily maximum temperatures meet or exceed the heatwave temperature threshold.

Inclusion health groups: include people experiencing homelessness, people with drug and/or alcohol dependence, vulnerable migrants, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, sex workers, people in contact with the justice system, victims of modern slavery and other socially excluded groups.

Insomnia: a sleep disorder characterised by difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking too early, resulting in daytime impairment. In the NHS, insomnia is recognised as both a symptom of other mental health conditions and a standalone condition requiring clinical attention.

Intersectionality: a framework for understanding how overlapping social identities (such as race, gender, class) shape people's experiences of disadvantage or privilege. In relation to climate change and mental health, it highlights, for example, how compounded vulnerabilities affect exposure and response.

Intervention: any organised programme or activity designed to promote mental health or psychosocial wellbeing, or to prevent or reduce negative mental health outcomes in the context of climate change. The term includes both formally evaluated interventions and informal or emerging approaches that reported qualitative or quantitative mental health outcomes. Noting that definitions in the literature (particularly where interventions may span multiple disciplines or be implemented outside of clinical settings), we adopted an inclusive approach to support the mapping and synthesis of diverse models of support.

Lay-delivered programmes: mental health interventions provided by trained community members who do not have formal mental health qualifications. These programmes aim to increase access to care, especially in resource-limited settings.

Linkage intervention: a healthcare approach that connects individuals to appropriate services or resources, often involving coordination between different providers or sectors. In mental health, this might involve linking primary care with specialist services or connecting health services with social care.

Mechanisms of change: the specific processes or components within an intervention that are responsible for producing change in mental health outcomes. For example, emotional regulation may be a mechanism of change in climate anxiety interventions.

Major depressive disorder: a clinically diagnosed mood disorder characterised by persistent low mood, loss of interest or pleasure, fatigue, disturbed sleep or appetite, and feelings of hopelessness.

Mediators: factors that explain how or why an intervention or exposure leads to a specific outcome. For instance, increased nature connectedness may mediate the link between green space exposure and reduced anxiety.

Meta-analysis: a form of review that uses statistical techniques to combine and compare results from multiple studies on a particular topic to identify patterns and inconsistencies.

Moderators: factors that influence when or for whom an intervention or exposure has an effect. For example, age or socioeconomic status may moderate the mental health impact of climate-related events.

Mental health: an important component of our overall health that we experience daily. Good mental health allows us to function well, feel secure, and reach our potential. In this report, mental health includes clinically diagnosed conditions (for example PTSD, depression, anxiety) and probable conditions (for example measured through validated screening tools). Conditions specifically mentioned in reviews or primary studies were included, although in some cases, these may not have been clinically diagnosed.

Mindfulness: a practice that involves paying purposeful attention to the present moment without judgment. Mindfulness training is used in various therapeutic approaches to help individuals become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, promoting better emotional regulation.

Nature connectedness: a psychological sense of being emotionally, cognitively, and experientially linked to the natural environment, often associated with improved wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviours.

Nature prescribing: a practice where healthcare providers recommend spending time in nature to improve physical and mental health, often involving written prescriptions for outdoor activities.

Nature engagement: the practice of connecting with the natural environment to promote mental well-being. Engagement with nature has been associated with positive emotions, reduced stress, and improved mental health.

Opportunistic symptom screening: the process of identifying individuals at risk of mental health disorders during routine healthcare interactions, enabling timely referral and intervention.

Pathways: the causal mechanisms through which climate-related events (such as flooding, heatwaves, or extreme weather) influence mental health outcomes. These may include direct

pathways (immediate psychological impact of experiencing climate events) and indirect pathways (through displacement, economic loss, or disruption of social systems).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): a mental health condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event, often characterised by flashbacks and nightmares.

Protective pathways: processes or factors that buffer individuals or communities from the negative mental health impacts of climate change, promoting psychological resilience or wellbeing. Examples include social support, self-efficacy, or connection to nature.

Psychological distress: challenging and uncomfortable emotional states experienced when an individual feels overwhelmed or under significant strain.

Psychological morbidity: the presence of mental health conditions or psychological symptoms that cause distress or impair functioning. In epidemiological studies, this term encompasses the burden of mental illness within a population.

Psychosocial interventions: structured, non-pharmacological approaches that aim to improve mental health and wellbeing by addressing the interaction between psychological factors (such as emotions, thoughts, and behaviours) and social or environmental influences (such as relationships, community context, or life circumstances). These interventions may include a range of strategies, such as psychoeducation, behavioural activation, peer support, or community-based support, and can include clinical components such as psychological therapies (for example, CBT). They are typically delivered by trained providers, including mental health professionals, social workers, or trained lay or peer facilitators, in clinical or non-clinical settings.

Quality of life: an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns.

Qualitative research: research or analysis focused on capturing subjective experiences, meanings, and perspectives.

Self-efficacy: a person's belief in their ability to organise and carry out actions needed to manage specific situations or challenges and the belief that our actions can bring about positive outcomes.

Standardised mental health measures: validated assessment tools used to systematically evaluate mental health symptoms, functioning, or outcomes. Examples used in UK practice include the PHQ-9 for depression, GAD-7 for anxiety, and CORE-OM for general psychological distress.

Social and economic determinants of mental health and wellbeing: the social and economic conditions that influence mental health, such as income, education, employment, housing, discrimination, and social support. These determinants shape both exposure to climate-related stressors and the ability to cope with them.

Socioeconomic status: an individual's or family's economic and social position relative to others, typically measured through income, education, and occupation. In the UK context, socioeconomic status is a key determinant of health outcomes and is often measured using indices like the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Solastalgia: a form of emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change close to one's home or sense of place, such as climate-related degradation or disaster.

Subthreshold PTSD (also known as subclinical): a condition in which individuals experience significant symptoms of PTSD following a traumatic event but does not meet the full diagnostic criteria.

Substance or alcohol misuse: the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol, that leads to significant health, social, or legal consequences.

Suicidal ideation: thoughts about taking one's own life, ranging from fleeting considerations to detailed planning, without necessarily leading to action.

Stress: the body's natural response to pressure or demands, involving physiological and psychological changes. While short-term stress can be adaptive, chronic stress can lead to mental health problems and is recognised in UK healthcare as a significant factor in conditions like anxiety and depression.

Trauma: a psychological and emotional response to deeply distressing or disturbing events that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. In mental health services, trauma is recognised as potentially leading to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and can significantly impact daily functioning.

Trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy: an evidence-based treatment for children and adolescents that addresses the mental health needs arising from traumatic experiences, focusing on reducing symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

Unified protocol: a transdiagnostic cognitive behavioural therapy that targets shared emotional processes across anxiety, depression, and related disorders, using modules like emotional awareness, cognitive flexibility, and behavioural exposure.

Wellbeing: well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. In this report wellbeing outcomes

are included where they have implications for mental health, for example, quality of life, sleep problems and mental exhaustion, among others.

Wildfires: any uncontrolled vegetation fire which requires a decision, or action, regarding suppression. In this report, the term 'wildfires' is used as an umbrella term and includes bushfires.

About the UK Health Security Agency

UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) prevents, prepares for and responds to infectious diseases, and environmental hazards, to keep all our communities safe, save lives and protect livelihoods. We provide scientific and operational leadership, working with local, national and international partners to protect the public's health and build the nation's health security capability.

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