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AHEAD

A MENTAL HEALTH MAGAZINE RELATED TO
SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE



In this edition:

CLIMATE CHANGE

To act or not to act?

TIPS & TRICKS

On how to boost your mental health and how to feel more engaged with sustainability

MENTAL HEALTH

In relation to climate change explained



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Dear reader,

It is a pleasure to welcome you here in my first mental health magazine "Ahead" for students! Ahead symbolises the need to address mental health problems in relation to the projected future, in which climate change will have a large impact on the earth and human health. In this magazine I sincerely hope to give you a first explanation about the relationship between mental health and climate change. Besides, the magazine will provide multiple tips related to mental health and sustainability from students, an excellent way to become inspired by each other!

It might not come as a surprise to you that in this turbulent Covid-19 era abundant students are not feeling mentally well. Currently, it is expected that the number of Dutch students with depressive complaints is 10.6% higher than before Covid-19 hit. Moreover, anxiety complaints are estimated to be 5.3% higher than pre-corona times (Caring Universities, 2020). Nevertheless, mental health issues are not solely related to Covid-19. Evidence has shown that many students also experience mental health problems due to the negative projection of the future, which will be severely influenced by climate change. Rising sea levels, food shortages, extinction of wildlife, melting arctic ice, vanishing coral reef: all examples of the effects of climate change that threaten not only the earth but also human mental health and survival. But how to deal with eco-anxiety, solastalgia and pre-traumatic stress? This magazine will dive deeper into that.

For what purpose is it exactly that mental health problems in relation to climate change and sustainability should deserve more attention? I argue that this reason is twofold. First of all, if the world becomes more sustainable, it is likely that the amount of climate-related mental health problems will be reduced, thereby benefitting human health too. Secondly, if people feel mentally well it becomes more probable that they can increase their efforts to be engaged with sustainability.

It is important to talk about mental health issues, both within and outside the field of climate change, in order to help each other and to search for solutions together.

"In the end, we will conserve only what we love.

We only love what we understand.

We only understand what we are taught"

I kindly invite you to read the next pages of this magazine and I am looking forward to hearing your opinion about it.

Please take care & stay healthy!

Annika Suichies.



**"There is always light.
If only we are brave
enough to see it.**

**If only we are brave
enough to be it."**

AMANDA GORMAN



Climate change: To act or not to act?

Surveys conducted across several countries reveal that many young people rank climate change as being the most problematic issue among society nowadays. Nevertheless, their lifestyles are not necessarily more sustainable than the lifestyles of older people and neither are young people always more engaged with sustainability. One of the explanations for this is that young people are sometimes so pessimistic about the future that do not feel empowered to act in the context of sustainability as a result (Ojala, 2018). Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as *psychological distance*, which means that even though people realize that climate change is becoming a severe problem, they still have the feeling that the trouble is rather distant. As a result of this, many people continue with their normal life routines, pushing sustainability practises aside (American Psychological Association, 2017).

However, The Lancet anticipates that climate change threatens the progress of the last fifty years that has been made regarding global health and development. This includes direct and indirect effects of climate change, see Figure 1 (Watts et al., 2015). Both of these effects cause health impacts, including mental illness. Mental health issues due to climate change should be taken seriously, as they might have a severe impact on other aspects of human health too. These mental health problems can even lead to physical health complications, due to altered sleeping, eating and/or exercising patterns. As a result of this, the functioning of the immune system can be reduced (American Psychological Association, 2017).

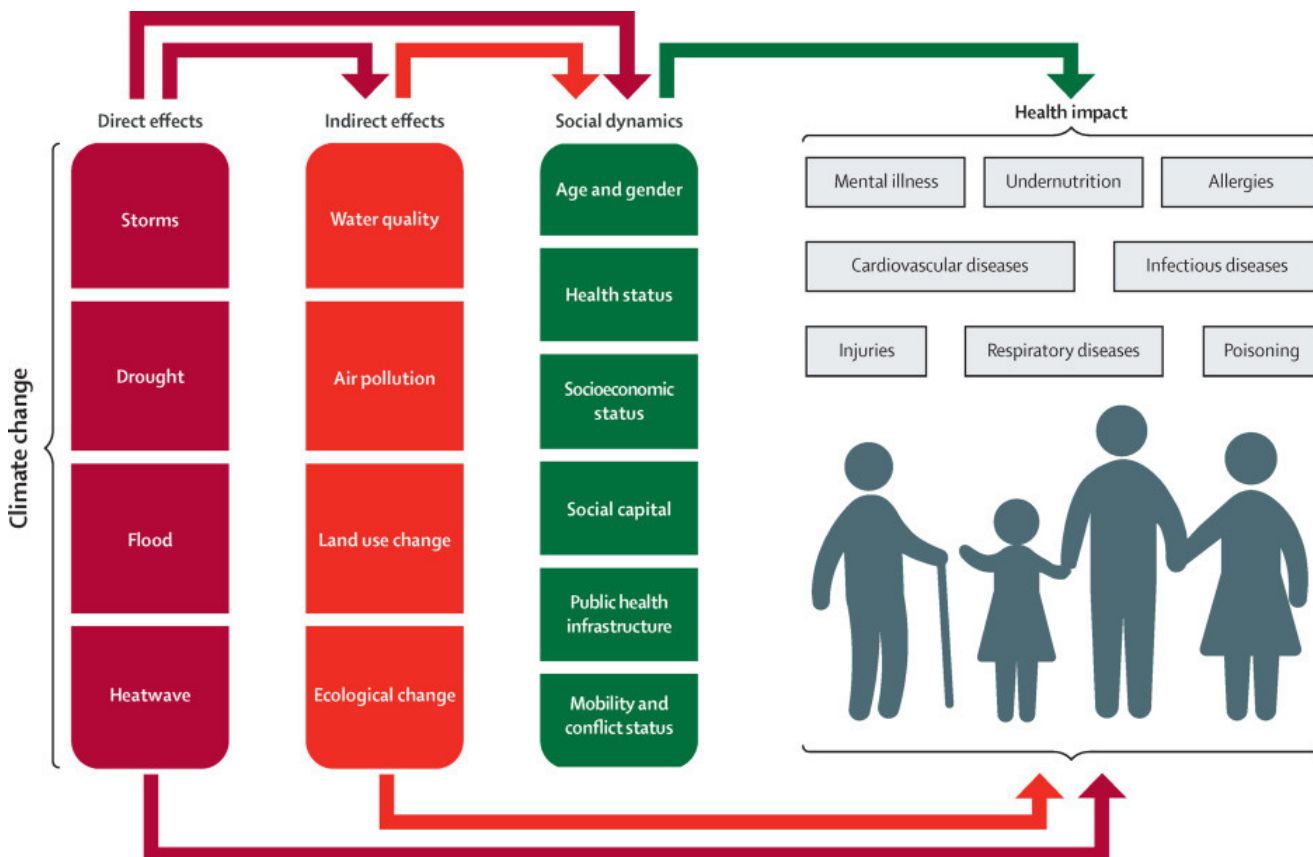


Figure 1: The direct and indirect effects of climate change on health and wellbeing

Mental Health

IN RELATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE EXPLAINED

Let me share a personal story. I myself grew up in a small and picturesque village in the North of the Netherlands, located in natural park Drentsche Aa. As a child, I observed plenty of pheasants in the meadows, chirping birds in the trees and a plethora of flying cockchafers when spring arrived. Unfortunately, as I grew older I experienced that things step by step started to change. Every year there were less fish in the river, local farmlands suffered from severe droughts in summer and became fully flooded during autumn. When I am back in my home town now, I wonder what the future will bring. Since I see less wild animals now and the nature is not anymore what it once was – what will happen in the future?

Climate-related mental health issues

It is important to be aware of the mental health problems that climate change can cause. Some of the common climate-related mental health problems will be discussed below.

Eco-anxiety

The ecological crisis, including climate change, can lead to strong feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability and uncontrollability. These three factors are the building blocks of anxiety (Panu, 2020). The American Psychological Association (APA) therefore defined *eco-anxiety* as: “the chronic fear of environmental doom” (American Psychological Association, 2017). Eco-anxiety has some connections with existential anxiety. Besides, it is also related to practical anxiety, which induces problem-solving attitudes. It is important to point out that experiencing eco-anxiety is thus not necessarily a bad thing. Experiencing emotions including eco-anxiety is often based on a purpose and helps us to identify a threat. Next to that, emotions can lead to action (Panu, 2020). The term eco-anxiety has also been criticised. For some people, the term seems to be pathologizing humanity’s understandable concern about life on earth. According to them, eco-anxiety should be seen as an anthropogenic phenomenon related to survival rather than a mental illness (Woodbury, 2020).

Solastalgia

Related to eco-anxiety is *solastalgia*, another sentiment which can influence mental wellbeing. As a result of climate change, the place and surroundings where people live is very likely to change now or in the future. Many people will experience this as a loss of the place they are attached to. This feeling is called solastalgia and is similar to the feeling that people experience who are forced to flee from their homes (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Even though it is likely that due to climate change feelings of eco-anxiety and solastalgia are becoming more common, there are multiple strategies for how to deal with these mental health problems. The APA (2017) proposes the following in order to support individuals with mental health issues related to sustainability and climate change:

- 1) Build belief in one’s own resilience;
- 2) Foster optimism;
- 3) Cultivate active coping and self-regulation;
- 4) Find a source of personal meaning;
- 5) Boost personal preparedness;
- 6) Support social networks;
- 7) Encourage connection to parents, family and other role models;
- 8) Uphold connection to place;
- 9) Maintain connections to one’s culture.



Insider tips on how to improve mental health

Students have also been asked to share their tips in several categories relating to sustainability and mental health that give them positive energy.

What do you do to become more sustainable?

- Buy unpackaged produce and bring your own bags when you go shopping;
- Use public transport;
- Eat less animal products;
- Put a sweater on instead of turning on the heater;
- Separate waste;
- Buy second-hand clothes;
- Reduce waste by using sustainable versions of daily used products such as soap bars or reusable cotton pads;
- Switch to a sustainable bank;
- Download the app 'Too good to go' on your phone, in which you can 'save' food products and meals for a low price, which would otherwise be wasted;
- Throw as little food away as possible.

How do you reconnect with nature?

- Go out for a walk each day without looking at your phone;
- Listen to the birds singing outside;
- Walk into the forest after it has rained, close your eyes and breathe in the smell;
- Buy some plants and take good care of them;
- Do a workout outside;
- Go for a cycling trip in nature and enjoy the beautiful views.



Insider tips on how to improve mental health - CONTINUED

Which mood booster do you recommend?

- Enjoying a nice cup of tea and reading a good book, while relaxing on the couch at the end of the day;
- Try to connect with people by for example going for a walk or calling a friend;
- Before you go to bed, write down something for which you was grateful that day;
- Enjoy your freedom;
- Put on a fun song and dance or sing out loud;
- Doing sports. Walking, cycling, running, rowing; anything!
- Each Friday, do some Frimibo with your family;
- Stretching while listening to a podcast.



Strongly recommended if you are interested in exploring more about climate grief is the Spotify Podcast 'Facing it' by Jennifer Atkinson!

What inspires you?

- Books and conversations with friends;
- People who are passionate about what they are doing;
- Seeing the sun for example reminds me of the way that we can brighten up each others day;
- Reading life stories of people to see why they did what they did.

What are you grateful for?

- To have people around me, who support and encourage me unconditionally;
- For my family;
- That my basic needs are met;
- Having amazing friends, and always being able to cheer each other up if necessary;
- Having the opportunities to do so much, like playing piano, renting a student house, etc.
- The flow of change that makes me grateful for every moment (just like the cloud in the sky that passes by will never return as the same);
- To be healthy;
- For being able to study.





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