

Psychological Impact of Coastal Displacement and Climate Anxiety: A Review of Mental Health Outcomes in Climate-Vulnerable Coastal Communities

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ABSTRACT

The effects of coastal erosion and climate change are not confined to physical transformation; they also impact the psychological state of coastal populations inhabiting threatened shorelines. This paper reviews the psychological impacts of coastal displacement and the larger context of climate anxiety based on the literature available in the fields of environmental psychology, disaster psychology, and mental health. The paper reviews the role of coastal land, home, and community loss in the development of grief, stress disorders, and the syndrome of solastalgia that is associated with emotional discomfort caused by changes in one's home environment. In addition, the psychological research techniques used for investigation of climate anxiety will be reviewed, such as standardized anxiety scales, qualitative interviews, and community longitudinal studies. The findings suggest that coastal-displaced populations suffer from anxiety, depression, and disconnection to their home environments; at the same time, vulnerable groups of people (e.g., children, elders, and indigenous populations) face elevated risks of climate-related mental problems. This paper will discuss potential solutions that could reduce anxiety in displaced populations and interventions that can help people cope with negative emotions. Psychological support is a vital element of climate adaptation planning, which should include not only physical and economical but also the mental well-being.

Keywords: *Climate Anxiety, Coastal Displacement, Solastalgia, Environmental Psychology, Mental Health, Climate Change Adaptation*

While climate change can be defined via its tangible manifestations, like rising sea levels, strong winds, and loss of coasts, the phenomenon of climate change can also be characterized by the way it affects people emotionally. Coastal erosion is one of the major consequences of climate change that leads to the loss of property, homes, and sometimes a whole identity. In other words, climate change results in the destruction of the natural environment and thus forces people to move from the place where they lived for many years or generations. The review will be devoted to the impact of displacement on people and their emotions, including climate anxiety.

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Climate anxiety can be understood as the state of fear and constant worry of the person when he/she realizes the threat of climate change. Even though this type of fear and worries may appear in people who do not experience it directly, people experiencing active erosion are more likely to suffer from climate anxiety. Indeed, people who see the process of losing a piece of land, a house, or a familiar beach may feel unique grief that has been called solastalgia (distress about environmental change experienced in one's place of residence) (Albrecht et al., 2007).

Psychological implications of coastal erosion extend beyond the moment when people get displaced. The studies of the populations affected by disasters indicate that anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress continue to exist even after the event is over, especially when there is prolonged uncertainty associated with housing, income, and social relations because of the displacement (Fritze et al., 2008). This problem becomes especially important in case of coastal regions, where erosion is more of a continuous process than the disaster that takes place once and causes psychological stress that may last for years.

This review will try to cover the literature on three related topics: psychological and emotional consequences of coastal displacement and climate anxiety; approaches used by psychologists to research the issue and estimate its implications; and coping mechanisms and assistance programs that were designed to help people who experience the adverse consequences of coastal erosion and climate change. The review is needed to prove the importance of mental health as an essential part of the adaptation strategy to climate change.

Causes and Drivers of Climate Anxiety and Psychological Distress in Coastal Communities

There are various sources behind the psychological stress that affects the coastal communities under threat from erosion. First and foremost, the main cause of such stress for the affected communities is the loss of home and land per se. The sense of home can be regarded as much more than the feeling of being in a safe place and the necessity of losing it evokes the response akin to the reaction of loss and grieving (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Unlike natural disaster such as earthquakes, the process of gradual erosion gives people plenty of time to observe the worsening environment around them.

Uncertainty serves as the second factor contributing to the psychological distress of the affected populations. Coastal communities affected by the process of erosion experience uncertainties regarding the timing and whether they would have to leave the land at all, how much help they will get from the government and where they will be able to resettle. Such uncertainty has proven to increase anxiety levels in people more compared to a predetermined and difficult time frame of evacuation (Fritze et al., 2008). Uncertainty about the future is known to provoke long-term anxiety in psychological literature.

Lastly, lack of connection with the social and cultural environment is also an important component. Many coastal communities, especially Indigenous and fishing communities, have strong cultural and spiritual connections to the land and the water in their vicinity over generations (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013). Relocation from erosion means losing not only homes but also livelihoods and cultural practices that normally serve as protective factors for mental well-being. As a result, the disruption of these connections increases the risk of isolation and psychological vulnerability of the individual precisely when he/she needs support the most.

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Last but not least, the anticipation of climate change and its effects – climate anxiety – is another component of psychological distress related to relocation from coastal areas due to erosion. While physical loss is still yet to come, residents of the threatened areas are already burdened with uncertainty concerning the fate of their communities. The problem of climate anxiety is particularly evident among youth, who report increased concern over their futures in the face of climate change (Hickman et al., 2021).

Methods Used to Study Psychological Impacts of Coastal Displacement and Climate Anxiety

The methods employed by researchers examining the psychological implications of coastal erosion and climate anxiety include a variety of approaches originating from the psychology and public health literature. Among those frequently used are standardized psychometric scales – a specific type of survey intended to measure certain psychological constructs. For instance, in their study, Clayton and Karazsia (2020) developed the Climate Change Anxiety Scale, which allows quantitatively estimating the level of worry/distress related to climate change. It is possible to examine how the level of anxiety changes over time depending on the environmental situation or implemented interventions.

Interviews and case studies are also essential for the field due to the personal nature of the psychological experiences being studied (grief, solastalgia etc.) and difficulties associated with using numerical scales for their measurement. Thus, in one of their papers, Cunsolo Willox et al. (2013) conducted qualitative interviews with the Inuit community in the northern Canada to examine how environmental changes affected their cultural identity and emotional well-being. It should be noted that such studies usually require prolonged presence among the people whose experience needs to be studied.

Longitudinal studies, in particular, are important in determining how psychological distress changes throughout displacement, from the initial awareness of risk through to relocation and resettlement processes. Longitudinal studies allow researchers to identify whether effects on psychological wellbeing are transient or permanent, and whether any particular interventions are effective in decreasing distress in the long term (Fritze et al., 2008). Unfortunately, longitudinal studies are costly and require continuous financing and the consent of people or communities involved; they may not be as easy to implement as one-off surveys.

Lastly, psychologists begin combining psychological tools with geographic and environmental measurements, comparing levels of anxiety/distress with levels of actual environmental exposure to particular threats, such as the proximity of the location to an eroding coastline or frequency of storms there. Such interdisciplinary research provides more accurate dose-response relation data, in other words, determines the connection between the physical exposure to coastal erosion and mental well-being (Clayton, 2020).

Impacts, Vulnerable Groups, and Coping and Support Strategies

However, the psychological consequences of such displacement do not affect everyone equally. For instance, children and teenagers are regarded to be one of the most vulnerable population groups because they cannot have the same capacity to deal with the challenges of displacement as adults; moreover, studies show that young people feel worried about their future due to the effects of climate change, which affects their psychological state (Hickman

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et al., 2021). The elderly population also has to face a unique challenge because for many of them displacement means giving up decades of accumulated ties.

Often, indigenous and traditional coastal communities are subjected to some of the worst psychological consequences of displacement because they are connected with their land and sea spiritually. According to Cunsolo Willox et al. (2013), the environmental changes experienced by the Inuit population in the Canadian Arctic were associated with the feelings of grief, loss of identity, and diminished control. It is clear that the psychological consequences of environmental changes may be very different from each other depending on the cultural context. The same trend is present in low-lying Pacific Island communities.

Nevertheless, studies also indicate coping mechanisms and interventions that can be implemented to help deal with psychological distress. One of the most prominent protection factors in these studies is social support, as the communities that preserve their social connections and identity through the displacement process demonstrate higher levels of psychological well-being than those communities whose unity is disrupted during displacement (Fritze et al., 2008). Therefore, it is evident that the resettlement strategy aimed at preserving communities' unity may help prevent psychological distress associated with displacement.

Community-based programs in terms of mental health are also a promising way out, especially because these programs help involve people into the work of the health workers in terms of recognizing and managing climate stress (Clayton, 2020). In addition, the active involvement of the affected communities in the processes of adaptation and decision-making helps restore the feeling of control, which can serve as an effective counterbalance for helplessness that is usually associated with environmental uncertainty. The combination of practical and psychological aid helps achieve more positive results in comparison with focusing on physical relocation only.

DISCUSSION

Reviewing this literature makes evident the need to pay much greater attention to the psychological aspects of coastal erosion in the context of climate adaptation planning. At present, there is a tendency in policies to address mostly physical infrastructure, economic compensation for losses, and land use planning in response to this problem, while the psychological side of climate adaptation is considered to be secondary, and sometimes it is ignored altogether. Nevertheless, the literature under analysis makes evident that there is enough research on the issue of psychological distress from climate change and relocation, and these findings can be used to introduce proactive measures to address mental health problems during climate adaptation.

One consistent finding throughout the literature is that the gradual and continuous process of coastal erosion might result in a psychological burden unique from that experienced following sudden disasters. Although sudden disasters lead to immediate trauma, they also generally involve a defined point beyond which recovery becomes possible. With coastal erosion, however, the continuous uncertainty that results from the situation has been found to potentially be even more psychologically harmful than a single instance of trauma (Fritze et al., 2008). This leaves one to wonder whether the current disaster support models, which tend to be geared towards single traumatic events, are well-equipped to deal with the process of coastal erosion.

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Yet another major theme is the differential susceptibility of various individuals to mental distress in the context of relocation. The literature is consistent in noting children, elderly people and Indigenous/Traditional cultures as more vulnerable, mainly owing to their cultural bond to their habitat, different life stages and different resource availability. This indicates that the blanket approach towards mental wellbeing of displaced persons is unlikely to work, and that the adaptation planning must take into account the particular needs of psychologically vulnerable segments of population.

Finally, the study of adaptive behaviors seems to lead to the same conclusion – the maintenance of social connection and community empowerment seems to be just as important as individual psychological intervention, if not even more so. This is a major consideration when planning relocations of people from coastal areas. The policies that aim at maintaining the communities whole and engaging people in the process of decision making about adaptations seem to yield better results than those which consider relocation only as logistical or personal issue.

CONCLUSION

Psychological impacts resulting from the erosion due to climate change are just as real, although much less tangible, than the physical and financial ramifications of such an environmental issue. Not only does loss of one's home, land and sense of place contribute to grief and anxiety, but also to a specific type of psychological stress – solastalgia. Climate change-induced uncertainty is another contributor to the development of general climate anxiety, especially among the youth. Studies conducted via psychometric scales, qualitative interviews, and longitudinal analyses have shown that these effects are quantifiable and that some populations, including children, seniors, and indigenous communities are at increased risk.

Perhaps most importantly, the research in question provides concrete solutions to the issue at hand. It has been proven that social cohesion during displacement, active involvement of affected communities in adaptation strategies, and mental health care services within the community can significantly alleviate stress. For the future, climate adaptation policies for coastal areas should focus on integrating mental health support into the process of resettlement and adaptation rather than treating it as a separate matter.

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Conflict of Interest

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