Activist Psychiatrists and the Climate and Ecological Emergency

Collective action by psychiatrists to organise on the emergency

Dr Kirsten Shukla
My talk will be about

- The direct and indirect mental health impacts of the CEE including climate trauma and eco-anxiety

- The failure of governments to act, and even worse, the proposal of a new law by the UK government to silence protest

- The resulting feeling of abandonment and neglect by the young

- What we can do about it
Heat and aggression

• Direct heat resulting in sleep disturbance, exhaustion

• Heat stress associated with mood disorders, anxiety, suicides

• Increase in heat related violence and aggressive crimes
Flooding
Sea level rise

- Low lying islands
- Persistent worry and thoughts of relocation
- Specific fears of encirclement or siege by the sea replace the population’s normal relationship with the sea
Deforestation

• News have a stressogenic impact on western populations due to increased ecological awareness

• Indigenous populations suffer profound maladaptive disorders and depression
Wildfires

Children affected by forest fires showing post-traumatic phenomena such as:
- anxiety
- panic attacks
- problems sleeping
- acute stress disorder
- compulsively repetitive play
- flashbacks
- psychosis
Effect on certain vulnerable groups like the Inuit

• In the Canadian arctic, the Inuit refer to having a protective factor for their mental health and well-being in ‘being on the land’.

• Melting ice and change in weather conditions resulted in the impairment of these protective factors with some of the highest rates in suicide reported among Inuit youth.
Drought and food insecurity
Eco (Climate) anxiety/ grief

• A term coined to describe feelings of loss, helplessness and frustration caused by one’s inability to cope with climate change and the eco-crisis

• Also used to describe feelings of uncertainty and anticipation of the unknown regarding the crisis
Climate Emotions
FACING DIFFICULT TRUTHS

Climate Psychology Alliance
ICD 10 and DSM 5

• Climate change and ecological degradation are social determinants of health

• ICD 10 and DSM 5 offer no reference to mental disorders related to climate change

• Eco anxiety is not a diagnosis or illness
Climate Trauma

- Is one of the collective traumas underpinning our social structure

- The climate movement has succeeded in bringing increased awareness to this collective trauma.

- Other such movements bringing awareness to collective trauma are for example the #me too or Black Lives Matter movements.
The Chancellor has just said there is a need to support drivers through freezing fuel duty again at the Budget.

Meanwhile the government has hiked rail fares in England and Wales by 2.6%.

Skewed priorities? #Budget2021
Even worse than inaction is to actively try to shut down protest as the government is trying to do with the proposed Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.
Institutional betrayal
Abuse and Neglect
Position Statement on CEE

“The climate and ecological emergency is a mental health emergency”
April 2021 – German Constitutional court declaring climate stability to be a human right
Why do doctors need to become active?

Doctors have the Diagnosis – Lawmakers have the cure
Solutions to the eco-crisis will also benefit health

- Better air quality
- access to green spaces
- a healthy diet (the so called planetary health diet)
- cycling and exercise
- agriculture without pesticides
- More low-carbon care jobs
Divestment from Fossil Fuels

Royal College of Psychiatrists divests gas, oil & coal! Congratulations to The Royal College of Psychiatrists and to Fossil Free Psychiatry campaigners for holding the fossil fuel industry to account.
Psych Declares

- Healthy Recovery letter to G20 leaders
- Roundtable discussions
- Support for the CEE Bill
- Medact letter asking the UK government and COP 26 leaders to guarantee a fossil free COP 26
- MH Trusts to declare a Climate and Ecological Emergency
- We meet once a month via zoom
Time for a Global Climate Psychiatry Alliance?

- Key training and support needs
- Conferences and webinars (in covid style)
- Reading lists
- Resources
- Special Interest Group
- Climate Psychiatry Alliance
A call to policymakers

• We urge you to think differently about the climate crisis
• To see it not as a long-term problem, but as an immediate threat to life as we know it
• To raise awareness, educate the public and ensure appropriate media coverage as was the case with the covid crisis
• To legislate in order that we can make the societal level shifts in behaviour needed to maintain a healthy planet for all life on earth