Building Climate Resilience: Group and Community Approaches for Children and Young Adults

There is a growing appreciation that climate change is an overwhelmingly huge and complex problem with immeasurable impacts. It can be considered a “wicked” problem, a term used to describe a problem in which there is no known algorithm to solve and demands interdisciplinary and creative approaches to address (Grundmann, R., 2016).

It follows that any mental health treatment responses to this climate crisis we might craft would fit better and be more effective if we considered them from this new and unique viewpoint. We need to act differently both as individuals and as collectives in order to both mitigate the damage of climate change and adapt to life in new and more challenging types of human habitats. We need to help our children learn how to do the same.

There is a growing body of literature exploring factors that are key to building psychological resilience in the face of climate change impacts.

Mitigation and adaptation actions and practices are emerging as two of these key factors (Clayton, et al., 2017), (Hayes et al 2018), (Maiella et al., 2020).

Let us first consider the various meanings of mitigation and adaptation. These terms have different meanings depending on the profession and the context. It is worth noting from the onset that “mitigation and adaptation, though often discussed separately, are in practice intertwined, and must be addressed together” (Lewis, et al, 2021).

Mitigation refers to interventions aimed to reduce climate change by reducing greenhouse gasses: for example, using renewable power sources such as solar, electric cars, and regenerative agricultural practices.

Adaptation to climate change from an engineering and design perspective focuses on how to design infrastructure (buildings, roads, houses) that can better withstand climate change impacts, i.e. increase infrastructure resiliency)

The definition of adaptation to the mental health professional is a work in progress. The consensus expert opinion at this point suggests that psychological adaptation includes the ability to not only tolerate, endure and cope with the negative impacts of climate change, but includes an intentional cultivation of resilience (ecopsychepedia group adaptation section), (Hayes et al., 2019.

Research supports the premise that community and group psychosocial approaches are key to both mitigation and adaptation on individual and community levels. (Adger et al., 2005). Augustinavicius et al., (2021) expand and enrich this premise

to suggest that a more systemic, holistic approach to the climate crisis “ can present an opportunity for advancing progressive action that ultimately strengthens communities, reverses social and structural inequality by adopting a climate justice stance, and generates the development of climate-smart practices that improve health and well-being”.

Thus, when we add together the fact that both mitigation and adaptation efforts are key components to build psychological resiliency, and that broader, more creative and new approaches including groups and communities will be key, it pushes us to consider mental health treatment interventions outside of the individual treatment room or treatment zoom setting. This holds true both for adults and children.

There are a handful of group approaches that have been developed, primarily with adults in mind, that can be helpful for children who have been exposed to climate related disasters such as extreme weather events. Examples include Psychological First Aid (Brymer et al., 2006) and Skills for Psychological Recovery (Berkowitz et al., 2010). See Group Adaptation section of Psychepedia for more details on these approaches.

Approaches have also been developed to support adults with the more chronic and existential impacts of climate change (Mark & Lewis, 2020). Climate Café’s are small discussion groups where adults get together to talk about climate change and share their concerns about it. Of note, the Climate Psychology Alliance-UK (2021) has offered for the first time a Climate Café for young adults ages 18-25. The Good Grief Network (2021) is a more structured group approach consisting of a 10 week support group with the goal to help people build resiliency in order to better cope with climate change and other systemic issues such as racism. Joanna Macy founded The Work That Reconnects, an approach geared to help participants develop more active, creative and collective ways to address climate change impacts rather than withdrawal from the challenge of engagement (2021). The Transformational Resilience approach (Doppelt, 2017) focuses on building individual and community resilience to climate change impacts through two core skills: “presencing” (decreasing the automatic fight/flight response to the acute and chronic climate impacts) and “purposing” (creating an intentionally meaningful despite of climate change impacts).

While there are a growing number of group approaches for adults, there are few such approaches yet designed for children and adolescents. However, it is clear that the pediatric population is distressed and struggling with how to cope with these existential aspects of climate change (Burke, et al, 2018).

The existing approaches to generally fall into three categories: environmental science/climate literacy information, creative arts/expressive arts projects, and youth climate engagement/activism.

Environmental Science/Climate Literacy

There are a number of web sites geared to engage youth from elementary through high school.

<https://climatekids.nasa.gov/>

<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/climate-change>

<https://climate.nasa.gov/>

<https://ourclimateourfuture.org/> info and advocacy

There are also a growing number of interactive on line games to help students and teachers explore creative solutions to climate change. One such example is a video game, EnerCities (Paladin, 2021), a video game in which the player is encouraged to build a thriving but environmentally sustainable city.

CREATIVE ARTS

Arts based interventions are being explored as modalities for encouraging youth to consider thoughts and feelings around climate change . Burke et al (2018) suggest that “participatory, climate change based arts interventions could hold the key to more effective approaches to engaging multiple publics in climate compatible behavior change”. An essential variable suggested by Moser (2016) is the opportunity to consider more hopeful narratives of the future than the apocalyptic future more frequently portrayed in fiction and the visual arts.

One such example is the Future Coast Youth project (Doyle, 2020) which utilizes play and storytelling to help youth participants engage with the multiple impacts of climate change in a way that holds space for engagement, problem solving and pro-environmental behavior.

ACTIVISM

There are a large number of grass roots activism organizations gears for children, youth and families. Some examples listed below. (what additional section of psychepedia might we add here for more info?)

[Climate Action Families](https://climateactionfamilies.org/)

<https://www.earthguardians.org/>

https://fridaysforfuture.org

<https://rebellion.global/>

https://www.sunrisemovement.org/?ms=SunriseMovement-WeAreTheClimateRevolution

Conclusion:

Group and community approaches to climate change impacts, both from extreme weather even disasters as well as the more ongoing chronic existential concerns are increasingly being seen as public health approaches that can support individual and community mitigation efforts and help sustain individual and community resilience. While there is a growing interest in group approaches for children and young adults, there is a great need for systemic development and assessment of new approaches. Despite the paucity of programs and research, all adults (caregivers, mental health providers, educators, etc.) have a responsibility to familiarize themselves with the approaches to date in order to help the children of today grow into more climate resilient adults of tomorrow.

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