

https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ucla20

Overview

Climate change, or “long-term change in the average weather patterns” (National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), 2021, para. 6), is a force that leaves no human unaffected. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA; 2021, para. 4) also specifies that global warming, or the “long-term heating of Earth’s climate system” is mostly caused by human activity and that we are currently seeing the highest increase in global temperatures that has ever been recorded. This brings up social justice concerns (American Counseling Association, 2020) including economic disparities, cultural affronts in regard to land loss, and the distribution of resources after a climate crisis or the access to resources as a preventative measure. As Naomi Klein touches on in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014), our consumer-driven society necessitates extreme production of material goods, which is mainly funded by those with the most wealth and resources. However, the mass production that occurs is typically at the expense of the planet, most affecting those with few resources and little power to change the system.

Ecological Counseling

When looking at the definitions of climate change and global warming through an ecological perspective, it becomes evident that addressing clients’ issues in the context of their broader environment should also include addressing climate change and its effects on clients’ holistic wellness. Climate change is impacting people on physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and economic levels (Letcher, 2021). In order to attain optimal holistic wellness for both counselors and their clients, focusing on climate change will continue to become exponentially more relevant and important. This can start by taking a closer look at the existing model of ecological counseling.

Ecological counseling considers the various systems with which the client interacts or is impacted by in their daily lives (Shallcross, 2013). In an effort to strive for best practice then, a counselor would need to also consider the impacts of climate change and global warming on their client and the systems that they are a part of. However, even through an ecological lens, this ideal of holistic wellness can fall short. Reese and Myers (2012) point out these shortcomings in the ecological model. Their proposed model is called EcoWellness and introduces a model of wellness that incorporates nature and its impact on mental health in order to achieve full holistic wellness and expand on the commonly acknowledged ecological framework of counseling. Implementing the concept of EcoWellness into counseling practice with clients could be one of the most direct avenues of leadership and advocacy that professional counselors can take with this topic, as they could incorporate it within their already established practices with clients without much change in their routine. Although this model bridges a gap in the previous literature and introduces other avenues of clinical work for mental health counselors to explore, there are still some questions regarding the divide between ecological wellness and EcoWellness.

This article provides a discussion of the relevance of climate change to the counseling field and proposes an argument for why professional counselors at all levels should be aware of and concerned about the impacts of climate change on mental health. Discussions of advocacy and leadership initiatives within the field are also included. Following this overview is a section on who is impacted by climate change and how, before discussing more direct avenues of advocacy.

Scope of Impact

An important question that needs addressed when beginning to explore avenues of advocacy for counselors within the realm of climate change is who exactly is impacted? Although there is no individual or group that is exempt from the impacts of climate change on the planet, there are populations who are more vulnerable and at higher risk of suffering from these devastating impacts (Jaakkola et al., 2018). Marginalized groups will face the most significant consequences of climate

change (Hayes et al., 2018). Specifically included are individuals from low-income backgrounds, Indigenous populations that rely heavily on their natural environments, young children who will be the ones facing the brunt of the worsening climate crisis as they age, and those with untreated mental and physical health conditions.

Impact on Marginalized Groups

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that different marginalized identities do not exist within a vacuum and there are people who will experience the effects of climate change at an

youth mental health as a public health issue in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Murthy, 2021). Although the growing awareness of mental health as a public health issue is necessary, it is long overdue. Scarcity of resources because of a lack of awareness could ultimately lead to further intersectionality of marginalization and significantly impact the wellbeing of marginalized groups.

Roberts et al. (2019) found that children in the United Kingdom who were exposed to air pollution at the age of 12 were significantly more likely to experience depression at age 18 than those who had not been exposed to air pollution. Typically, individuals who are at higher risk of being exposed to air pollution are those that live in urban environments or crowded cities. U.S. cities are some of the

mental health treatment, but also in preparing future counselors to be more aware of climate change and empowering them to become the leaders and advocates on the frontlines challenging the systems that are in place.

Traditional Advocacy Efforts

There are many different avenues of advocacy that exist within the mental health field. However, often these avenues are narrow and specific to one population or issue. One area of advocacy and leadership that has been overlooked within the counseling profession is that of climate change and its impact on mental health. Not only is climate change a concern that affects not just one group, but all of humanity, there are also considerations specific to clients' mental health and overall wellbeing that counselors, counselor educators, and other

have access to systems that the client does not (ACA, 2018), or if the client decides not to be involved in advocacy initiatives. Collaboration with the client is consistently emphasized throughout these competencies, so it is important for counselors to be mindful of participating in collaborative efforts whenever possible.

On the individual level, one of the most direct ways for counselors to become involved in climate advocacy initiatives is within the context of the counseling relationship. This is where Reese and Myers (2012) model of EcoWellness comes in. EcoWellness is defined as "a sense of appreciation, respect for, and awe of nature that results in feelings of connectedness with the natural environment and the enhancement of holistic wellness," (Reese & Myers, 2012, para. 3). Implementing EcoWellness within ecological counseling work allows counselors to understand their clients' experiences through an even broader holistic lens and helps them to become aware of avenues for advocacy that they may not have thought about beforehand.

Social justice is at the heart of the counseling profession. Lee and Hipolito-Delgado (2007) define social justice as full engagement from all people in a society with an emphasis on individuals who have been excluded or marginalized due to systemic oppression including those who have been discriminated against due to characteristics such as age, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, or socio-economic status. Seeking continued education about the systems that are affecting clients would likely benefit a counselor who hopes to remain social justice oriented and better understand what their role is in challenging those systems.

Another area of advocacy that counselors can become involved in is beginning to make changes within their personal lives to promote a

other spaces that clients do not have access to. Counselor educators and clinicians could collaborate in order to conduct research, distribute this research within an academic setting such as a classroom, inform stakeholders within the community, and educate clients.

Professional Advocacy

Advocacy in this realm could look different for each professional. As counselor educators it could be their job to ensure that the people who are most vulnerable when it comes to climate change have the necessary information that they may not already be getting, whether this be through initiatives in their academic community, within their classrooms, or taking their teaching skills out to the community to conduct trainings or provide resources. This could also look like collaboration amongst colleagues within academia from different schools within their professional network, or perhaps inviting trained individuals into the classroom to speak to students.

Counselor educators and clinicians alike could advocate for the protection of lands and environmental policy at the legislative level with their clients in mind. As clinicians, counselors can instill hope and empower clients to work together as a community for the greater good of all people, which is a part of the ethical standards for best practice

and create sustainable change, flexibility will likely be necessary. Although each model of leadership has its own strengths, a holistic leadership approach will be imperative, similar to typical counseling work. Adapting to the needs of our unique clients, communities, and systems will require us to use humility and discernment to determine the appropriate method.

Charismatic Leadership

A charismatic leader possesses skills such as authenticity, personal power, warmth, drive, and persuasiveness (Murray, 2020). This type of leader tends to be the person on a team with a strong vision for the group and is able to win over their followers through their strong, authentic personalities. Someone with these leadership qualities could potentially help create change by appealing to people's emotions and getting community members more personally invested with the topic of climate change and mental health.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders do exactly what their name suggests; transform. These are the leaders who inspire change amongst their followers and are concerned with each team member's success. There are four pieces that make up a transformational

The key for counselors who want to take on a leadership role in the work to stop climate change and preserve clients' mental wellbeing will likely be flexibility. No matter which leadership model one takes on, what will remain important is that the leader

Beneficence also needs to be considered when deciding how or if one should become involved with climate change advocacy or leadership as a professional counselor. Beneficence describes the responsibility that counselors hold to not only consider, but contribute to the wellbeing of their client (American Counseling Association, 2014). This also means to be active in preventing harm whenever possible (Forester-Miller & Davis, 1996). Therefore, if through means of therapeutic conversation, leadership, advocacy, or personal commitment to change we are able to prevent harm, then doing so would fall within the bounds of the counselor's moral guidelines (American Counseling Association, 2014). Continuing education on climate change and its impacts on mental health could be a starting point for clinicians. Goodman et al. (2004) stated that unless foundational change is happening outside of our offices within our smaller communities, whether that be neighborhoods or schools, and is discussed in religious and political spheres, then our work will never truly come to fruition. To create lasting change, counselors' work must also exist outside of the office.

Counselors hoping to foster self-advocacy in their clients would need to be mindful of emphasizing the client's unique cultural values in the development of an advocacy plan. Any advocacy action plan that is created with clients would need to be practical and doable, considerate of the client's culture, and relevant to their life (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). Preparing clients to be advocates has to be a collaborative effort that does not put them at a greater risk.

Counselors could also simply start the conversation with their clients about how climate change is affecting them and empower them to take control of what they can to slow the process. Expanding mental health access is another disparity that has been shown to become more prominent in the wake of climate-related disasters (Flores et al., 2019).

counselors are equipped with, they can be a part of

Hann K, Pearson H, Campbell D, Sesay D and Eaton J. (2015). Factors for success in mental health advocacy. *Global Health Action*, 8(1), 28791

- Usher, K., Durkin, J., & Bhullar, N. (2019). Eco-anxiety: How thinking about climate change-related environmental decline is affecting our mental health. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 28*(6), 1233–1234. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12673>
- Watts, N., Amann, M., Ayeb-Karlsson, S., Belesova, K., Bouley, T., Boyko, M., Byass, P., Cai, W., Campbell-Lendrum, D., Chambers, J., Cox, P. M., Daly, M., Dasandi, N., Davies, M., Depledge, M., Depoux, A., Dominguez-Salas, P., Drummond, P., Ekins, P., . . . Costello, A. (2018). The Lancet countdown on health and climate change: From 25 years of inaction to a global transformation for public health. *Lancet, 391*(10120), 581–630. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)32464-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)32464-9)
- Witmer, J. M., & Sweeney, T. J. (1992). A holistic model for wellness and prevention over the life span. *Journal of Counseling and Development: JCD, 71*(2), 140. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1992.tb02189.x>