

## How Climate Change Destroys Us from Within

Canadians are very happy people, everybody knows that. In fact, they are so happy, in 2019 the UN even ranked them ninth in their “World Happiness Report”, a list of the happiest countries in the world.<sup>1</sup> But there is one growing problem that troubles this cloud of maple-syrup-sweet happiness: Climate change. Due to its location on the globe, Canada is especially affected by the rising temperatures, rising oceans, rising number of natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> This does not only affect the graceful flora and adorable fauna, but it also comes back at us humans, the ones who are causing it. There is no doubt that the effects of climate change can destroy homes, damage our physical health, and overall make our lives worse in every way imaginable. However, what is often underestimated, is the great impact climate change has on our mental health.

This topic is also discussed in the article “Depression, anxiety, PTSD: Climate change is taking a toll on our mental health, experts say” by Melanie Green, published on July 8th, 2019 in the “Toronto Star”. The article talks about the mental health issues caused by climate change and how in particular younger people are affected by them. Especially natural disasters cause people to feel hopeless, stressed, and anxious. Possible therapies include conveying the affected people a feeling of security by teaching them how to act in the case of a natural disaster, taking part in community initiatives and so on.<sup>3</sup> But why does our psychological and social wellbeing suffer from climate change?

The existence of climate change is no secret. All countries can feel the consequences, yet some more than others. Canada is among the unlucky ones, especially its territories in the North. Between 1948 and 2016, temperatures have increased by 2.3°C, which is three times the world’s average.<sup>4</sup> One definitely not unimportant by-product of this are forest fires.<sup>5</sup> Natural disasters such as these act as “visual reminders” of climate change. They make sure we have to think about it all the time and consequently, we feel stressed. People of regions higher at risk also tend to face anxiety, and people who even had the “pleasure” of experiencing them might go on suffering from posttraumatic stress disorders. The American Psychiatric Association has noted an increase in need of medical assistance for people with mental health problems or psychiatric conditions after extreme weather events.<sup>6</sup> This is a very significant problem, considering that it takes a long time to recover from it. Time we do not have, since these natural disasters get more frequent every day.

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<sup>1</sup> Texiwala, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Hong, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Green, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Hong, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Belairdirect, 2019

<sup>6</sup> Morganstein, 2019

Another serious issue are the coping mechanisms people develop for climate change. The sources of discomfort are not only the knowledge of climate change happening, people might have lost their home or job as an effect of it, too. Also, during extreme weather events, affected regions are often disconnected from the outside world and therefore cut off from any social contacts. There has been an observed increase in aggressive behaviour and domestic violence as a result.<sup>7</sup> Another consequence of this and the emerging stress is an increase in alcohol usage associated with these situations.<sup>8</sup> The feeling of hopelessness combined with violence and alcohol/drug abuse greatly damages people's mental wellbeing and can lead to depression. In 2019, the economist Marshall Burke even found a connection between elevated temperatures and increasing suicide rates as well as increasing use of depressive language on Twitter.<sup>9</sup>

And let us not forget the people who are most affected by the changes that climate change brings about: The indigenous people of Canada, the Inuit. Given that many Inuit choose to live the traditional way, a life close to nature, they feel the contaminations more than inhabitants of big cities. Increasing temperatures mean less ice and damaged permafrost. As a consequence, the nature suffers greatly and with it the Inuit, who oftentimes depend on it.<sup>10</sup> Climate change also brings more natural disasters such as forest fires, floods, avalanches, severe storms and so on.<sup>11</sup> By all of this, people in the far North are reminded that one day (probably rather sooner than later, seeing how the situation is evolving) they will have to radically adapt or even give up their current lifestyle and with it, their culture and heritage. This can lead to depression and other mental illnesses. In Nunatsiavut, results of an Inuit-led study in 2012/2013 suggested that there is a direct relation between the weather and the mental health of people living there.<sup>12</sup>

We cannot deny the existence of climate change and we cannot deny its impact on people's wellbeing. It forces itself into people's minds, it forces them to feel and do things they do not want. It does not let go. Yet while informing myself about this topic, I could not help but notice how this issue does not get taken seriously enough. There is only very limited literature on it, and in the published texts, researchers often call it "eco grief" or "climate anxiety". These names are really just euphemisms for depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorders and/or other mental disorders, caused by the realization that our planet is hurt by our careless behaviour. And exactly that is my second point, all those kinds of therapy mentioned in the newspaper article... Why don't we just fight climate change itself instead of its symptoms?

(909 words)

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<sup>7</sup> Morganstein, 2019

<sup>8</sup> Morganstein, 2019

<sup>9</sup> Horton, 2019

<sup>10</sup> Ford, 2014

<sup>11</sup> Public Safety Canada, 2019

<sup>12</sup> Middleton, 2020

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