

ENVIRONMENTAL STORYTELLING

STORIES FROM APPALACHIA AND THE AMERICAN
SOUTH



VOLUME TWO

SPRING 2024

CHECK ON YOUR PEOPLE: LOOKING CLOSER INTO THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON APPALACHIAN MENTAL HEALTH

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INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES ARE YET ANOTHER THREAT BROUGHT ON BY THE ONGOING CLIMATE CRISIS. APPALACHIA'S PEOPLE FACE UNIQUE RISKS.

In February 1972, the mountain holler of Buffalo Creek, West Virginia lost itself in darkness. A community with a longstanding economic lifeline to the coal industry, the village lay downstream from a dam managed by the Buffalo Mining Company. On the morning of February 26, that dam collapsed. Witnesses described the onslaught of water as a thick, black, mud wave that emanated smoke and dust. The incident left four thousand residents homeless. It killed one hundred and twenty-five people (Vidovich; Webb).

What followed this event, however, was arguably just as grave. Sociologist Kai T. Erikson, who spent his career researching the impact of disasters, studied the mental health effects that permeated the Buffalo Creek community in the wake of the flood (Erikson). He documented post-traumatic stress disorder, increased rates of alcoholism, broken marriages, depression, and neglect. Appalachia is known as a place that values extended community ties. As people suffered, however, those ties suffered too. The once tight-knit community fractured, experiencing what Erikson noted as both individual and collective trauma.

The Buffalo Creek disaster is an example of an environmental catastrophe. But it is also an example of a psychological one. As the earth changes from our man-made climate crisis, it is not only rising temperatures and increased natural disasters we need to worry about. Also at stake is our ability to stay sane. Residents of Appalachia face particular challenges in this regard.

The Appalachian region spans from the mid-bellies of Alabama and Mississippi through the southern tip of New York (Pollard). It encompasses the entire state of West Virginia and expands into parts of Virginia, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the Carolinas. The region is home to more than twenty-six million people. Although officially defined as an economic region, Appalachia also serves as a meaningful cultural territory within the United States.

In the 1970s, psychology professionals began to note that those living in Appalachia not only faced distinctive mental health challenges, but also perhaps required different approaches to treatment (Keefe). Concepts of “family,” for example, extended far beyond the immediate nuclear unit. People touted particular values such as perseverance and neighborliness. An extensive history of exploitation meant that patients brought distinct attitudes into clinical settings. Even today, the American Psychiatric Association highlights Appalachia as a region in need of specific clinical sensitivity, citing important cultural differences such as a relational culture, religiousness, and reliance on community leaders (Elder, Griffith, Merkel, and Robinson). These observations highlight local clinical challenges and approaches to care. But what happens when the unique psychological needs of a region crash into a global crisis, predicted to cause its own marked psychological problems?

Public health officials have for a while now predicted what climate change might do to our bodies and minds. An academic collection published by Oxford University Press notes that mental health impacts can arise from direct trauma (such as living through a natural disaster), community conflict (like Buffalo Creek) or even vicarious trauma (think “doomscrolling”) (Levy). Individuals in lower economic strata— like many Appalachians— are in danger of experiencing it most.

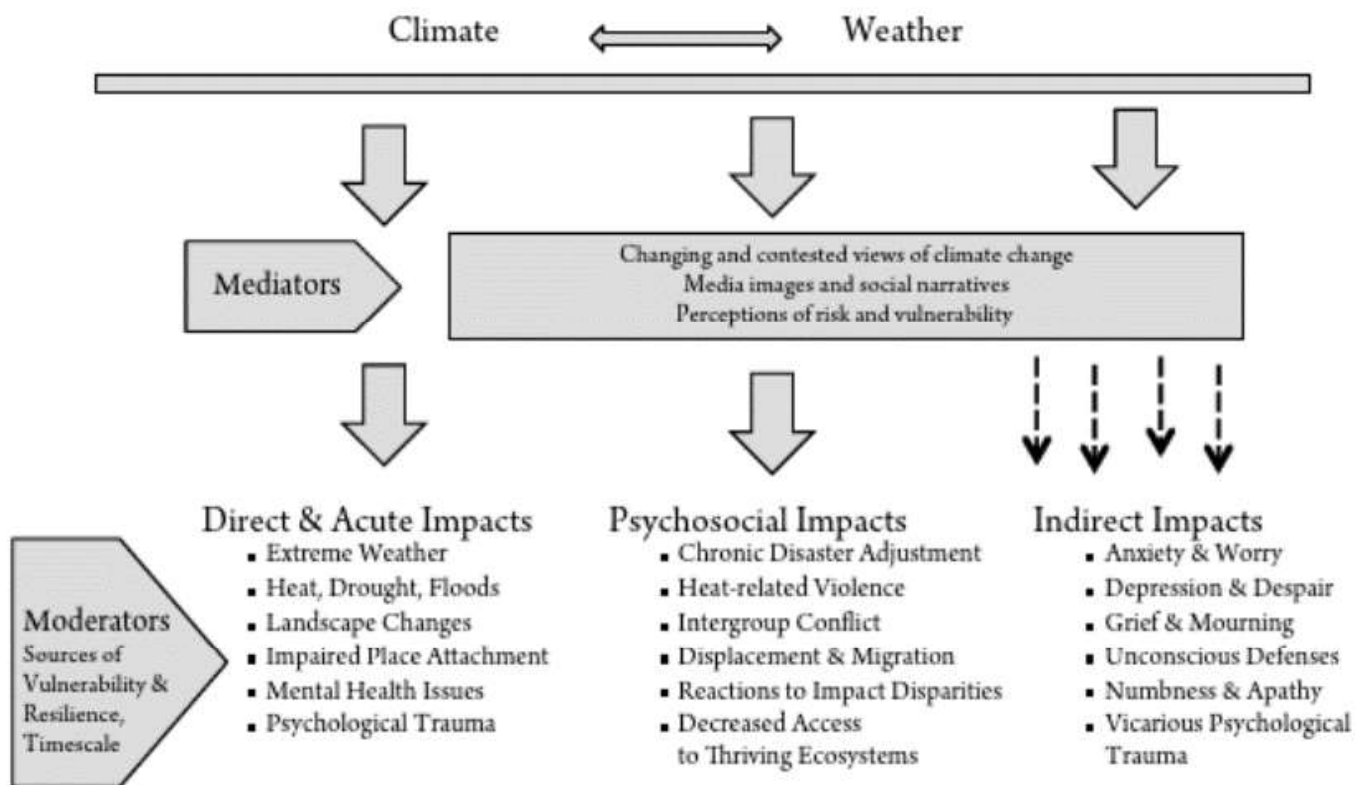


Figure 9-1 Climate change: Differentiating between classes of psychological impacts.

(Source: Doherty TJ, Clayton S. The psychological impacts of global climate change. American

Photo by Elizabeth C. Hirschman.

Some researchers have already started gathering stories that connect mental health with a changing climate. Dr. Sherry Hamby, for example, led a study that looked at early childhood experiences and nature in Appalachian communities (Hamby, Montgomery, Storer, and Banyard). Participants noted the valuable connections they made with the natural world, deep feelings of nostalgia for an environment no longer available to them, nature's role in shaping a sense of self and formative experiences with natural rhythms. Other sociologists mark the phenomenon of "climate grief," particularly among the elderly (Dennis and Stock). ("Climate grief" describes the feelings of sadness, anxiety, and loss that come with the recognition of a degrading planet.)

One of the more unusual factors predicted to influence mental health in Appalachia is gentrification. Citing the relative stability of the region to withstand major weather events, researchers are now considering the potential of Appalachia as a resettlement area for climate migration (Hirschman). A major population influx could mean an inpour of money and resources. However, it also could mean further environmental destruction and significant rises in the cost of living as those who can afford to move to safety do so. Studies show major distress accompanies the lives of low-income individuals who live in gentrified areas (Tran, Rice, Ong, Banerjee, Liou, and Ponce). This is particularly true for those who have lived in their communities long-term, like so many in Appalachia have.

All of this means that we need to do better. So much better. There's not much we can do to stop climate change in its totality. Rising temperatures are coming ("Temperature"). However, Appalachians still need support. And we can offer that. A better infrastructure of care is essential. The number of mental health providers in Appalachia is currently 35% lower than the national average ("Health Care"). Local and state governments should provide incentives to attract these professionals and increase initial access points to care. They can also invest in programs specifically designed to address trauma and alcohol and drug abuse. Mental wellness also does not exist, nor can it flourish, in a vacuum. Factors like increased access to decent paying jobs, expanded internet access, and investment in relationships with community leaders would all contribute to lowering barriers to treatment and improving quality of life.



Photo from the Logan Banner.

So much of Appalachia's history—like the events at Buffalo Creek—rings as warning. Yet it is unfair to relegate the region and its people as a place doomed to suffer. As we enter whatever new world the climate crisis brings, we can remind ourselves we still have choices. Instead of treating Appalachia as a disposable wrecking ground, we can make the decision to honor the dignity and culture of the people who call it home through investing in the most priceless possession of all— their wellbeing.

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