
POSITION STATEMENT

CLIMATE CHANGE AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH



On 9 August 2021 the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its sixth assessment report which found global warming would, by 2040, have likely increased by 1.5 degrees since industrialisation and that this will have been driven by human-induced emissions of greenhouse gases. The report called for urgent and drastic action to prevent the devastating environmental and societal impact which would result from this rise in global temperatures.¹

Orygen joins the World Health Organization² and many others in the global scientific and healthcare community in recognising the climate crisis and the threat it poses to public health in the 21st century. Orygen also acknowledges the impact of climate change on young people and, in particular, their mental health and wellbeing.

The changing climate is resulting in an increase in the number and severity of natural disasters including floods, bushfires and other extreme weather events, destroying the natural environment, ecosystems, homes and livelihoods. The psychological toll of these traumatic events has been clearly evident.³ Orygen specifically acknowledges the unique connection to Country held by First Nations young people and their communities, and the impacts that natural disasters and extreme weather events have on their social and emotional wellbeing.

In addition, Orygen is aware that the findings of the recent IPCC report, among many other scientifically based reports and reviews highlighting the strong evidence of the current and future impact of climate change, may elevate experiences of fear, distress and climate anxiety among many young people.

Recent Australian surveys have found that, even in the midst of the current pandemic, climate change was ranked by young people to be the most pressing challenge⁴ and remained a greater cause for concern than COVID-19, with 58.1 per cent of 15-25 year olds identifying climate change as 'very much a problem' compared to 28.2 per cent identifying COVID-19.⁵

We know that elevated and sustained levels of anxiety during adolescence and young adulthood translate into an increase in rates and severity of mental illness, including anxiety disorders and depression.⁶

As climate-related disasters continue to occur, and the threat deepens, in future we will be able to measure time trends and mental health impacts of climate anxiety. However, right now young people are telling us that this is having a negative effect on their mental health and wellbeing. We need to recognise and respond to their experiences while we simultaneously undertake systematic data collection and research to truly understand the scale and impact of this problem.⁷

Orygen believes that the impact of climate change on young people's mental health must become an urgent global and national priority area for research and policy. We need to develop and deliver effective mental health and wellbeing service responses for young people affected by climate change. But even more than that, as organisations that seek to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people, we must take actions to address climate change now and into the future.

¹ IPCC, 2021: Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Cambridge University Press. In Press.

² <https://www.who.int/news/item/06-10-2015-who-calls-for-urgent-action-to-protect-health-from-climate-change-sign-the-call>

³ Clayton S, Manning C, Krygsman K, Speiser M. Mental health and our changing climate: impacts, implications, and guidance. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association and EcoAmerica, 2017.

⁴ Foundations for Tomorrow 2021 Awareness to Action Report.

<https://www.foundationfortomorrow.org/the-report>

⁵ Patrick, R., Garad, R., Snell, T., Enticott, J., Meadows, G. Australians report climate change as a bigger concern than COVID-19, *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, Volume 3, 2021,

⁶ Romeo, R. The Teenage Brain: The Stress Response and the Adolescent Brain *Curr Dir Psychol Sci*. 2013 April ; 22(2): 140–145. doi:10.1177/0963721413475445.

⁷ Wu J, Snell G, Samji H. Climate anxiety in young people: a call to action. *Lancet Planet Health*. 2020 Oct;4(10):e435-e436. doi: 10.1016/S2542-5196(20)30223-0. Epub 2020 Sep 9. PMID: 32918865.