



Central  
Saanich

# Climate Change and Mental Health Risk and Resilience

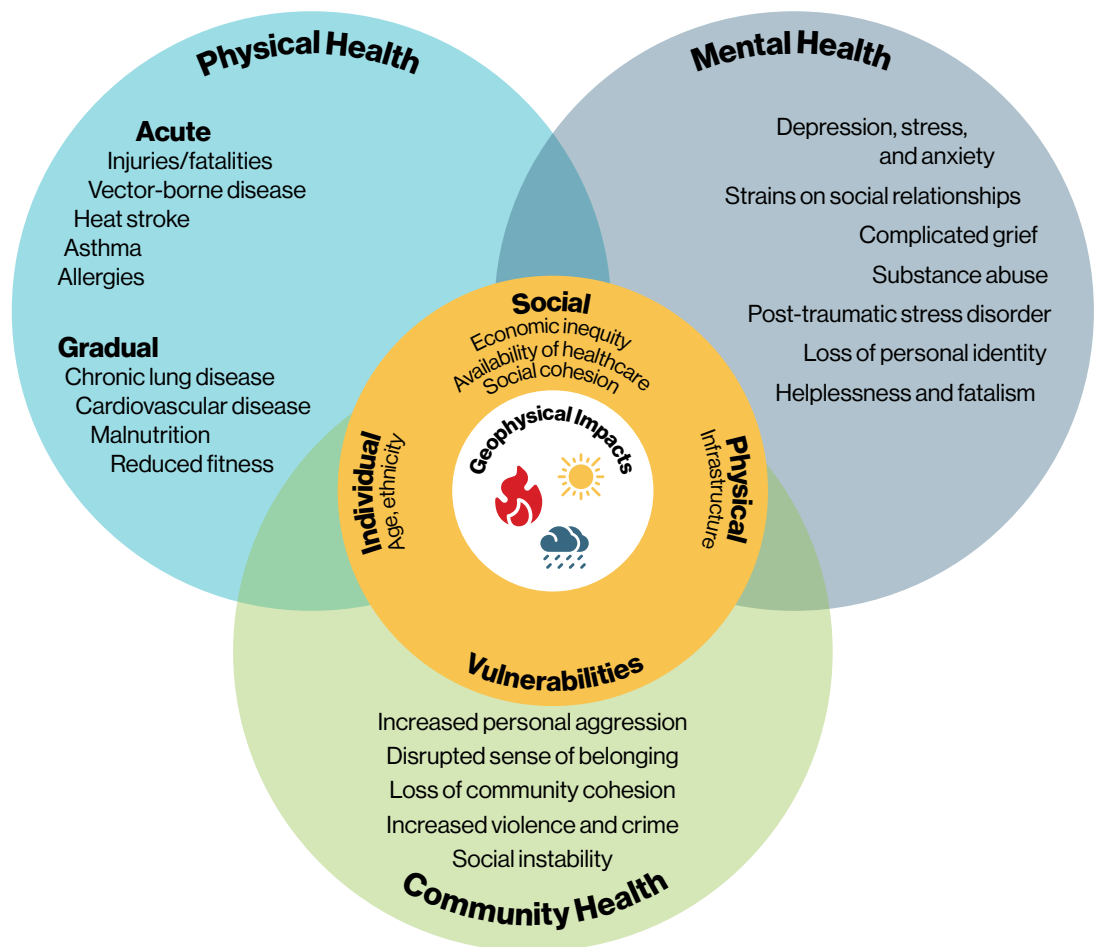
2026

# Overview: Mental Health and Climate Change

Mental health is deeply connected to our sense of safety, belonging, and connection—to each other, to the land, and to the places we call home. Climate change disrupts all of these. Across B.C., including in Central Saanich, people are already feeling the mental and emotional strain of a changing climate. From anxiety during prolonged wildfire smoke to grief as familiar landscapes shift, the mental health impacts of climate change are real, growing, and wide-ranging.

The *District of Central Saanich Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Adaptation Initiative* looked at climate impacts in several areas, including physical, mental health and community health (see Figure 1). Climate change impacts mental health in a range of interconnected ways. Understanding these impacts means considering what can be done at a community level to build collective well-being, cohesion, and resilience.

Figure 1. Linkages among climate change and physical, mental and community health



Source: Health of Canadians in a Changing Climate, 2022

# Direct and Indirect Mental Health Impacts

In Central Saanich, climate-related mental health risks may arise from:

- **Direct impacts** from experiencing climate-related events—such as exposure to wildfire and wildfire smoke, floods, or extreme heat—which can lead to acute trauma, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress, as well as emotional reactions like fear, grief, or anger.
- **Indirect impacts** that emerge more gradually, often through climate-related social and economic disruption such as increases in family stress, housing or financial insecurity, substance use, and the loss of cultural identity or access to nature.
- **Eco-anxiety or ‘climate grief’** due to the growing emotional burden of simply living in a time of climate crisis. This can include anxiety, grief for lost landscapes and species, and a sense of helplessness or dread about the future. While these feelings are a valid and even adaptive response to the scale of the challenge, they also point to the urgent need for community-wide approaches that support mental health and foster a sense of agency and action.

## Disproportionately Impacted Groups

While climate change affects everyone, some groups are more likely to experience significant mental health impacts from a changing climate, due to greater exposure, existing vulnerabilities, or compounding stressors.

- **Indigenous Peoples** face a heightened risk of experiencing mental health impacts, as they are witnessing the immediate impacts on their territories, traditional foods and food systems, medicines, and ways of living, in ways that may resurface past and ongoing trauma from colonialism and systemic racism.
- **Children and Youth** are more likely to experience eco-anxiety, fear, and a sense of helplessness about the future. Young people may face mental health challenges due to increasing awareness of climate risks and ongoing exposure to media about global climate-related events.
- **Farmers and Ranchers:** Climate-related disruptions to land, livestock, and livelihoods have led to significant stress and burnout. Many face barriers to care, including stigma to access mental health support, limited targeted services, and cultural norms of self-reliance.
- **People with Pre-existing Mental Health or Substance Use Conditions** are more vulnerable to worsening symptoms or crises during and after climate-related events and may have less access to support during emergencies.
- **Older Adults and People with Chronic Health Conditions** may be more susceptible to stress, displacement, or isolation during extreme weather, and face additional barriers to accessing health and mental health services.
- **First Responders and Emergency Personnel:** Repeated exposure to disasters can lead to cumulative stress, burnout, and trauma, with limited opportunities for rest, recovery, or mental health support.

Despite growing awareness, there remains a lack of consistent data and surveillance to fully understand the mental health impacts of climate change in B.C., particularly at the local level. Assessing both risk and protective factors—such as social connection, access to services, and mental health literacy—is essential to guiding meaningful, community-informed responses. Rather than labelling groups as inherently “vulnerable”, it is important to recognize the broader structural, social, and historical conditions that shape people’s sensitivity to climate impacts and their capacity to adapt. Taking a strengths-based approach allows communities to build on existing sources of knowledge, care, and resilience while addressing underlying inequities.

## What We Heard: Mental Health Themes Across the Community

Through workshops and focus groups with youth, older adults, farmers, and local service providers, several shared themes emerged around the mental health impacts of climate change in Central Saanich. While each group experiences climate change differently, there is a shared emotional burden—marked by worry, stress, and uncertainty—as well as a strong desire for action, connection, and more inclusive planning.



### Cross-Cutting Mental Health Themes

- **Worry, Anxiety, and Emotional Strain:** Across all groups, participants reported worry about the future and the cumulative stress of increasingly frequent climate events. This includes anxiety about personal safety, the well-being of loved ones, and the loss of environmental and cultural touchstones.
- **Overwhelm and Powerlessness:** Many participants, especially youth and farmers, described a sense of powerlessness in the face of large-scale changes. This includes feeling like individual actions aren’t enough or being stuck with hard choices (e.g., economic survival).
- **Desire for Connection and Community Care:** Service providers and older adults emphasized the importance of neighbour support, check-ins, and community networks—especially during heat events, power outages, or wildfire smoke exposure.
- **Barriers to Accessing Support:** Financial constraints, mobility issues, digital exclusion, and rural location were identified as key barriers to accessing cooling spaces, clean air shelters, and mental health supports.
- **Strain on Service Providers:** Organizations and frontline staff are already playing a critical role in mental health and emergency response. They identified a need for more coordinated systems of care, better data sharing, and enhanced awareness of who is most at risk.



## Population-Specific Insights

### Youth (Stelly's Secondary):

During a workshop with Grade 11 students at Stelly's Secondary, youth shared deeply personal and emotionally complex reflections on how climate change is impacting their mental health and future outlook. Their voices underscored not only the psychological weight of climate change but also a strong desire for meaningful action and agency to contribute to change. They:

- Expressed strong feelings of worry, anxiety, and frustration about climate change, often tied to systemic inaction and uncertainty about the future
- Reported experiences of anger, grief, and hopelessness, but also hope and empowerment when they saw opportunities to contribute to solutions
- Described tangible impacts on daily life (e.g., cancelled outdoor activities due to smoke, family evacuations, flooding, changes in local ecosystems)
- Reflected on fears about the future, including careers, housing, and loss of cultural or environmental identity
- Emphasized the importance of visible action and meaningful engagement from leaders and their community to sustain hope

### Farmers and Ranchers:

- Described mental fatigue and emotional burnout from ongoing heat, drought, and smoke events
- Wildfire smoke is particularly “demoralizing” and creates tough trade-offs between financial survival and worker health

- Leased land farmers face added stress due to limited ability to invest in climate resilience
- A need for water security, emergency animal evacuation plans, and financial support was emphasized

### Older Adults:

- Shared concerns about the affordability of home adaptation (A/C, air filters) and accessibility of cooling centres
- Wildfire smoke is a significant health and emotional concern, especially for those with respiratory conditions
- Valued community support (neighbours, volunteer drivers), but identified gaps in communication, especially for non-digital users

### Service Providers:

- Highlighted that the most at-risk individuals are often not connected to services or flagged in health systems
- Stressed the need for proactive systems of care (e.g., coordinated health check-ins), improved emergency preparedness education, and accessible resources
- Called for more culturally safe and trauma-informed supports, particularly for Indigenous residents

# Opportunities for Mental Health Climate Resilience

In this project, we interviewed key partners and climate change and mental health experts about community-level opportunities to build mental health resilience to climate change. The following opportunities were highlighted as key strategies to support the mental health of individuals, families, and communities in Central Saanich as they adapt to a changing climate.<sup>1</sup>

Area	Opportunity
<b>1. Community-Based Mental Health Supports</b>	<b>Psychological First Aid (PFA):</b> Train first responders, municipal staff, service providers, and community leaders in PFA to recognize and respond to climate-related distress. This low-barrier, scalable model builds local capacity to offer emotional support during and after extreme events.
	<b>Peer Support Models:</b> Facilitate peer support networks among community populations and groups, such as farmers, youth, older adults.
	<b>Climate Cafés and Dialogues:</b> Create safe, informal spaces for residents to process climate emotions, share coping strategies, and build a sense of shared purpose and hope.
	<b>Staff Wellness:</b> Leverage existing staff wellness supports and programs to integrate mental health supports for climate-related impacts.
<b>2. Public Participation as a Pathway to Mental Health Resilience</b>	<b>Engagement as Empowerment:</b> Actively involving residents in climate adaptation planning can help counteract feelings of helplessness and despair. Knowing that one’s voice matters and contributes to community solutions can be a powerful antidote to eco-anxiety and climate grief.
	<b>Support Informed Action:</b> Facilitate access to clear, locally relevant information about climate risks and opportunities for action. Awareness paired with agency supports emotional wellbeing and reduces fear.
	<b>Youth Involvement:</b> Provide structured, visible opportunities for young people to shape decisions and lead initiatives. When youth are invited to co-create change, their sense of purpose and future orientation is strengthened.
	<b>Education:</b> Partner with schools and the school district to integrate local climate and resilience topics into the school curriculum.

<sup>1</sup> Mental health impacts from climate change rarely occur in isolation—they are often intertwined with economic, ecological, and social impacts. Given this overlap, these opportunities present mental health-related resilience actions that would be integrated across the broader set of objectives and actions, rather than as a distinct category.

Area	Opportunity
<b>3. Trauma-Informed and Culturally Safe Approaches</b>	<b>Trauma-Informed Communication:</b> Ensure that climate adaptation messaging (e.g., via municipal websites, social media, etc.) is psychologically supportive, avoiding fear-based tactics and reinforcing agency and care.
	<b>Culturally Appropriate Support:</b> Ensure that support services meet the needs of Indigenous Peoples, migrant workers, and equity-denied groups. Consider land-based healing, multilingual support, and partnerships with trusted community organizations that hold relationships with priority populations. Partner with Indigenous Nations & equity-serving groups for culturally appropriate supports.
<b>4. Social Connection and Neighbourhood Resilience</b>	<b>Strengthen Local Networks:</b> Support neighbourhood-level initiatives like “Meet the Street,” check-in systems, and neighbourhood hubs to enhance social cohesion and preparedness.
	<b>Wellness Checks:</b> Work with service providers and neighbourhood groups to strengthen community check-ins during climate-related events.
<b>5. Green and Natural Spaces for Wellbeing</b>	<b>Protect, Restore, and Enhance Natural Environments and Greenspaces:</b> Invest in parks, tree cover, and nature-based infrastructure while recognizing ecosystems as sources of identity, connection, and mental health, especially for Indigenous Peoples.
<b>6. Cross-Sector Collaboration and Policy Leadership</b>	<b>Policy Integration:</b> Embed mental health and wellbeing goals into the climate adaptation planning, including staff wellness, emergency planning, and community health outcomes.
	<b>Collaborative Governance:</b> Work with health authorities, service organizations, school districts, agricultural groups, and community-based service organizations to develop integrated responses for mental health and climate change.
	<b>Develop Pre-disaster Recovery Plans:</b> Planning in advance for the mental health, cultural, and social needs that emerge after disasters, drawing on lessons from COVID-19 and other extreme weather events.



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