



The Order of Psychologists of Piedmont (OPP) (Italy)

Psychology for a better Planet!

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«You must believe that you can help bring about a better world»

Bertrand Russell

Can psychology as a science and as a profession make a difference to the climate crisis?

Humanity is facing an irreversible climate crisis, and people around the world are suffering from it at many different levels, and in various ways. It is interesting to read that the issue of climate change is likely to dwarf any other scientific questions, even those, for instance, related to vaccines or GM crops (Kabat, 2017).

While research consistently shows that this crisis is affecting more than just the ecosystem, scientific evidence suggests that the enormous and frightening costs of climate change are still largely hidden, especially when considering the traumatic and depressive effects on psychological well-being.

Psychologists are already alerting Governments for the need of breaking the vicious circle of trauma, anxiety, and depression as the other relevant consequences of the climate impact.

The emotional, psychological and spiritual implications of climate and environmental changes are still understudied (Galway et al., 2019). There is a clear link between higher temperatures and number of suicides. There is some evidence for severe distress (increased mental illness onset) following extreme weather events (e.g., PTSD following flood events). In addition, people who meet criteria for mental disorders are thought to be more vulnerable to the physical and mental health impacts of climate change (Lawrence et al., 2021).

A recent systematic literature review (Coffey et al., 2021) highlights the importance of addressing these psychological issues early and radically enough to prevent what otherwise appears to be an inevitable disruption to life. Two aspects are particularly important in recognising how much our psychological health resents a polluted, unbalanced, less green, arid, unpredictable, and unfriendly environment: (1) solastalgia; (2) eco-anxiety.

Solastalgia is a term coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2005) to express the discomfort and melancholy caused by the destruction of the natural and domestic environment. It is an emotional bridge between present and past memories and feelings: It becomes a pervasive and endemic sense that a place is not only neglected, but more importantly, violated.



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Eco-anxiety is described as a chronic fear of environmental demise (Albrecht, 2011), but broader definitions define it as a psychological distress associated with experiencing deteriorating environmental conditions (Usher et al., 2019). Other views refer to anxiety associated with perceptions of climate change, even among people who have not personally experienced direct impacts (Clayton, 2020). In other words, eco-anxiety is a bridge between present feelings and future feelings about the environment dying before our very eyes.

There is already early clinical evidence that solastalgia and eco-anxiety have become common problems, affecting young and more vulnerable people in particular.

According to Pihkala (2020), these forms of anxiety could lead to profound existential crises, not far from the generalised sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapsing (Albrecht, 2011). If this is the case, and if climate change proceeds as rapidly as some scientists are showing, and if people continue to crowd denaturalised cities, then solastalgia will contribute to an accelerating spiral of mental illness (Louv 2011).

We are all aware that there are no easy answers to the climate crisis, and yet it is clear that psychology can make a difference.

Psychology needs to work with other disciplines (e.g., architecture, biology, engineering, meteorology, oceanography, and philosophy, to cite but a few) to develop an awareness of how human behaviour and habits have contributed to the climate crisis.

Psychology can play a key role in promoting environmental restorativeness, pro-environmental behaviour, a sense of environmental justice, and a shared eco-responsibility. Indeed, psychology can promote understanding of our inner world: the way we think and feel about the planet, how we act for or against it, and how we structure, inhabit, and transform our homes, cities, landscapes, and natural environments to make them more sustainable, habitable, and liveable (Inghilleri, 2021). Our role as psychologists is also to make people aware of the benefits associated with being in touch with nature and our respect for it (Berto & Barbiero, 2019).

Many initiatives in Europe and around the world welcomed COP26 in Glasgow (November, 2021). To celebrate the Italian National Day of Psychology, the Order of Psychology of Piedmont (OPP) (Italy) organised a conference - *Psychological Voices for the Planet's Future: Surrounding Ourselves with Well-Being* - (22 October, 2021), where different scientific perspectives came together to discuss ways to repair the damage caused by denial and superficiality and to inspire people to change their behaviour to restore, protect and respect the planet.



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We are very grateful to them all, and also to the *European Federation of Psychologists' Associations* (EFPA) for their contribution to the OPP conference through Nicola Gale, who spoke about the importance of organising and how European psychologists are tackling climate change.

Climate change can be addressed by promoting ecological solidarity and increasing collaboration around the world. This is why the Global Psychology Alliance (GPA), of which the OPP is a member, is an example of how psychology as a science and as a profession is working across geographical boundaries and getting psychologists from all continents to work together.

If the first step is to continue to promote awareness and responsibility, what MUST follow is sustainable actions, because each individual can protect the “living space” in which they live. In practical terms this means we can make the Planet healthier. The OPP knows the importance of working in unison with the EFPA and other associations in Europe, and in the world, to tackle the climate crisis together, because «there is no planet B».

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