



The Massachusetts Psychological Association
2023 Annual Conference

Raising the Next Generation: Innovation to Address the Evolving Needs of Youth and the Profession

Saturday, November 4th, 2023
Norwood, MA

Acknowledging Climate-Related Distress in Young People: Psychologists' Roles as Clinicians, Educators, and Advocates (1.5CE)

Presented by Deanna Toner, PhD and Kelsey Hudson, PhD

The direct and indirect effects of climate change place young people at risk for significant health and mental health consequences, and numerous environmental, public health, pediatric, and mental health organizations have identified children as an at-risk, vulnerable population to the impacts of climate change (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) (Clayton et al., 2021). Although the psychological impacts of climate change on young people have received significantly less clinical and scholarly attention than adults' responses, results of recent studies and surveys — as well as the exponential growth in youth-led climate justice activism — have begun to inform our understanding of how young people are coping with and emotionally responding to climate change.

The climate crisis has already impacted children's human rights and health on a national and global scale. Young people globally report high levels of anxiety, distress, and moral injury related to climate change, even those who have not been directly impacted by climate or environmental disasters (Hickman et al., 2021). Thus, it is critical to equip young people with strategies to manage distress, build agency, and cope given that they will bear the largest burden of the climate and environmental emergencies across their lifetimes. Due to extensive training in understanding how individuals respond to and cope with stress and distress, mental health providers are uniquely positioned to support young people as they adapt to an increasingly climate-changed world. Thus, mental health professionals have an important role to play in empowering young people to adaptively cope with climate change and must be prepared to acknowledge, validate, and support young people's climate-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Proposed Workshop Agenda: First, we will briefly review the literature regarding the psychological impacts of climate change on young people, including why this group represents a vulnerable population (and which young people are likely to be most affected by climate change), the various direct and indirect consequences of climate change, and common emotional and behavioral responses to climate change. We will then provide recommendations for delivering climate-aware clinical care to young people, including empirically supported strategies for increasing agency, building emotion regulation skills, and identifying and utilizing effective coping strategies in the face of climate distress (Dooley et al.,

2021; Ojala, 2022). We will briefly review what is known about the risks and benefits of youth climate activism, with an emphasis on applications for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and neurodiverse young people, whose perspectives and voices have been excluded in much of the academic literature to date. Throughout the workshop we will include information on why climate change is a children's rights issue, the ways in which climate and racial justice are inextricably linked, and how young people can be effective agents of change in the fight for climate justice. We will end the presentation portion of the workshop by describing why mental health providers are well-positioned to advocate for and support young people experiencing climate change distress, arguing that engagement with this issue aligns with psychologists' ethical guidelines, and providing follow-up resources for how mental health providers can serve as clinicians, educators, and advocates. Finally, fifteen minutes will be reserved at the end of the workshop for questions and reflections.

Learning Objectives:

- Participants will summarize the literature on the psychological impacts of climate change on youth;
- Participants will recognize the roles of mental health professionals in supporting and empowering young people experiencing climate-related distress and identify at least two ways to engage in self-reflection about one's own climate emotions and position;
- Participants will identify at least three empirically supported strategies for increasing young people's adaptive coping abilities, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation skills and at least two culturally and developmentally sensitive adaptations to these strategies.

Deanna Toner, PhD (she/her) is a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at Harvard Medical School/Massachusetts General Hospital Lurie Center for Autism. Her clinical work, research, and advocacy broadly aim to support neurodiverse children, adolescents, adults, and their families. Dr. Toner earned a PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Massachusetts Boston and completed an APA-accredited pre-doctoral fellowship at Harvard Medical School/Massachusetts General Hospital (child track). She is especially passionate about social justice and inclusion.

Kelsey Hudson, PhD (she/her) is a child and adolescent clinical psychologist whose clinical work, research, and advocacy focus on climate-related youth mental health. Dr. Hudson received her PhD from the University of Vermont in 2019 and completed her post-doctoral fellowship in 2021 at the Child Program through Boston University's Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders. Dr. Hudson also holds a Certificate in Climate Change and Health from the Yale School of Public Health. Currently, she is co-editing a book on climate change and youth mental health for Cambridge University Press and sees children, adolescents, parents, and young adults in her independent practice, Climate-Aware Care.