**Climate anxiety**

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The heavy monsoon rains have once again flooded many areas of Pakistan leading to socio-economic crises. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “108 people died, 216 people were injured, and over 550 houses were damaged across Pakistan by monsoon rains and flash floods between 1 July and 1 August 2024”

The intensity and frequency of climate-led disasters are increasing day by day. According to the NASA Earth Observatory, in June 2024, early summer heat waves hit both western and eastern US. The recent Canadian forest fires are the one of the deadliest in its history. Similarly, wildfires blazed forests in France. Russia has also faced these forest fires this year. The current floods in Bangladesh are also devastating. There are so many other scary examples from other parts of the world engulfed by climate-led disasters.

Climate-led disasters leave many devastating impacts on the affected populations. One of the impacts is psychological trauma or anxiety caused during a natural catastrophe and the consequent implications for the affected population. The term ‘climate anxiety’ is being used by experts to analyze impacts like depression and stress on human existence and land due to climate change.

First, we will explore the causes and impacts of climate anxiety on human beings. Major catastrophes in any part of a country not only affect those directly involved but also create widespread sadness and anxiety throughout the nation. A study by Yale University found that 12 per cent of Americans struggle to stop themselves from consuming negative news about global warming, which contributes to a growing sense of unease.

The loss of loved ones in disasters leaves a lifelong psychological impact on the surviving family members. Additionally, in climate-related disasters such as floods, people suffer financial losses due to crop damage and the destruction of homes and shelters. The fear of losing shelter and the inability to provide for their families adds to their anxiety.

The damage to infrastructure often halts educational activities, depriving children in affected areas of their basic right to education. Such distressing experiences during childhood can have profound and lasting effects on young minds. As Sigmund Freud noted, “Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways.” The fears, anxiety, and trauma faced by children during such events can significantly influence their personality development.

In addition, women and girls become more vulnerable to crimes such as kidnapping and abduction during times of crisis. The fear of such incidents, along with the incidents themselves, leaves lasting impressions on their mental health, contributing to an increased sense of insecurity and anxiety among the female population.

In a crisis situation, women are also subject to domestic violence. In a patriarchal society, men release their tension over any socio-economic issues in the form of domestic violence, victimizing women in their homes. According to a 2013 report by the UNDP, “There is an exponential rise in mental illness including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation for women who have experienced violence and abuse. This is another kind of psychological trauma faced by all members of a family.

“In addition to that, the apprehension of facing a similar kind of climate-led disaster in the future also creates anxiety and phobia in the population. Such kind of mental issues lead to many medical problems like high blood pressure, heart attacks, etc”.

The anxiety and psychological impacts caused by any disaster are normally neglected areas in the relief and rehabilitation efforts conducted by the government and private sectors. There are some policy recommendations to tackle the mental health of affected populations during natural disasters. Psychiatrists and psychologists must be included in the medical teams and camps to immediately provide counselling to the affected persons.

Many government organizations in Pakistan have established helplines to offer immediate support for crimes against women, which is a commendable initiative. However, it is essential to raise awareness about these helplines in remote areas where most women are illiterate and lack access to information. Mental health sessions should also be included in seminars and conferences on climate change and disaster management. As one of the top ten countries most affected by climate change, Pakistan is highly vulnerable to climate-related disasters.

The academia in Pakistan should prioritize research to develop better strategies for addressing mental health issues during natural disasters, considering local traditions and dynamics. We also need to train psychologists and psychiatrists specifically to handle the psychological trauma faced by disaster-affected populations. Providing financial support and initiatives to restore normalcy in disaster-stricken areas can also help alleviate anxiety and other mental health concerns.

Addressing climate anxiety and mental health challenges related to natural disasters is a crucial aspect of disaster response and recovery. It requires concerted efforts to ensure the overall well-being of populations affected by catastrophes.

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