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Climate Change and Mental Health: What Can We Do?

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CLIMATE CHANGE AND MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT CAN WE DO?
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Learning Outcome: Identify three actions to address mental health issues resulting from climate change.
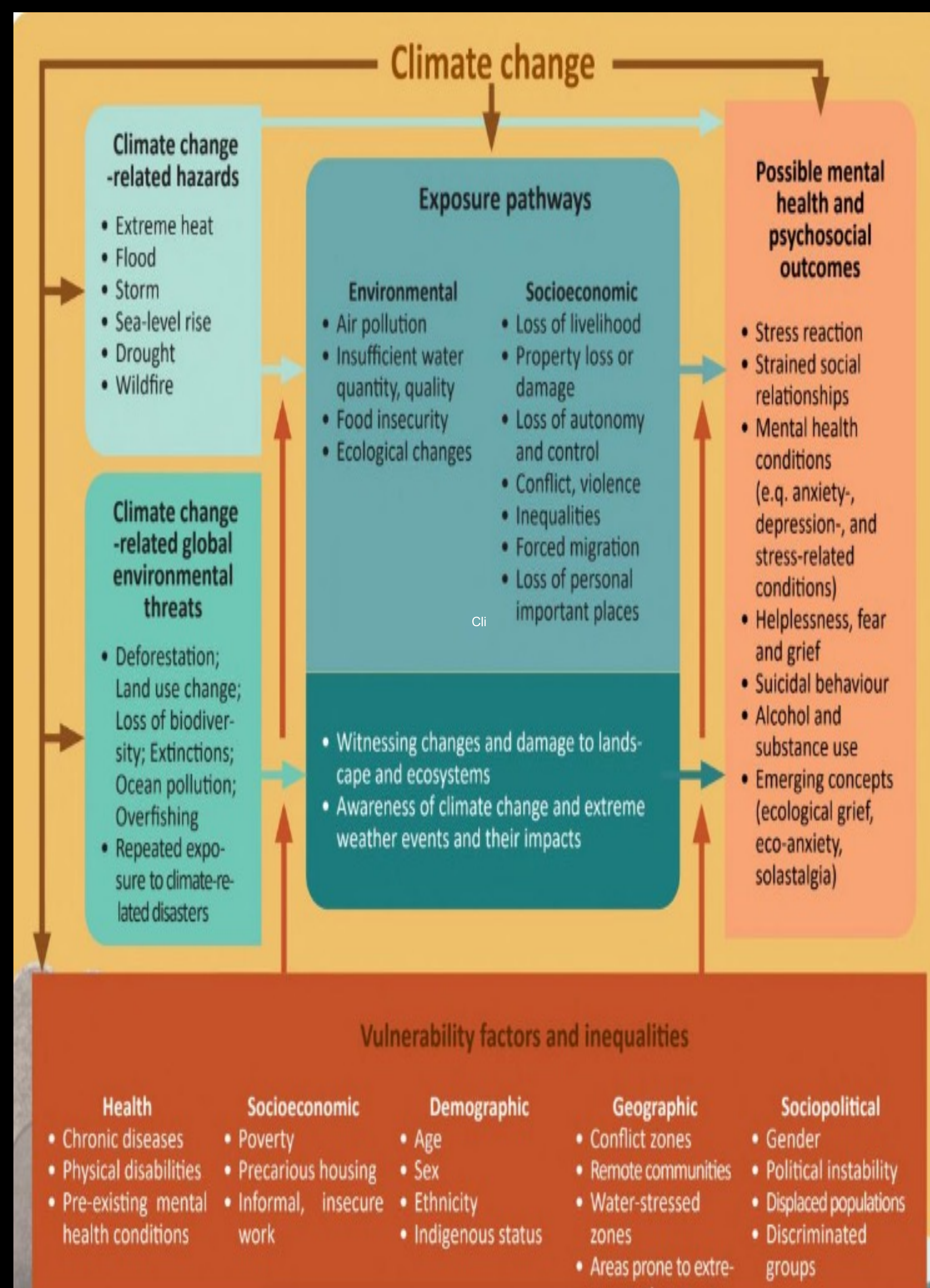
Abstract

- Climate change is recognized by the WHO as the **defining health issue of this century.**
- Significant impact on mental health.
- Vulnerable populations are most affected – poor, elderly, people of color, indigenous populations, women, children, those with existing mental illness.
- Nurses have a moral and professional responsibility to take action to mitigate effects of climate change on mental health.

Background

- Rising land and ocean temperatures result in droughts, land loss, air pollution, thawing of permafrost, rising sea levels, flooding, and increased salinization of sea water.
- Acute events include wildfires, hurricanes, cyclones and extreme heat waves.

Impact

- Forced displacement and migration.
- Death and illness.
- Impaired air quality.
- Food insecurity.
- Loss of livelihood.
- Land loss.
- Increase in vector, and food /water borne illnesses.
- Interpersonal and group violence.

Climate change

Climate change-related hazards
- Extreme heat
- Flood
- Storm
- Sea-level rise
- Drought
- Wildfire

Climate change-related global environmental threats
- Deforestation; Land use change; Loss of biodiversity; Extinctions; Ocean pollution; Overfishing
- Repeated exposure to climate-related disasters

Exposure pathways

Environmental
- Air pollution
- Insufficient water quantity, quality
- Food insecurity
- Ecological changes

Socioeconomic
- Loss of livelihood
- Property loss or damage
- Loss of autonomy and control
- Conflict, violence
- Inequalities
- Forced migration
- Loss of personal important places

- Witnessing changes and damage to landscape and ecosystems
- Awareness of climate change and extreme weather events and their impacts

Possible mental health and psychosocial outcomes
- Stress reaction
- Strained social relationships
- Mental health conditions (e.q. anxiety-, depression-, and stress-related conditions)
- Helplessness, fear and grief
- Suicidal behaviour
- Alcohol and substance use
- Emerging concepts (ecological grief, eco-anxiety, solastalgia)

Vulnerability factors and inequalities

Health
- Chronic diseases
- Physical disabilities
- Pre-existing mental health conditions

Socioeconomic
- Poverty
- Precarious housing
- Informal, insecure work

Demographic
- Age
- Sex
- Ethnicity
- Indigenous status

Geographic
- Conflict zones
- Remote communities
- Water-stressed zones
- Areas prone to extreme…

Sociopolitical
- Gender
- Political instability
- Displaced populations
- Discriminated groups

(WHO, 2022)

…leading to new terms

Eco - Anxiety

Solastalgia – the distress caused by environmental change

Ecological Grief

Actions

- Advocacy – local, federal, global.
- Education – **Nurses Climate Challenge.**
- **Climate, Health and Nursing Tool (CHANT)** – Assessment tool for individual nurses, faculty, and organizations.
- **Environmental Health Nurse Fellowship** - training program created by Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments (ANHE).
- **Nurses Drawdown** – global initiative for restoring and sustaining healthy communities and planet.
- Build individual / community resilience.
- Address environmental and social determinants of health- inequities.
- Improve screening / assessment and utilize validated tools such as the **Environmental Distress Scale**.
- Research – conduct and support.

References

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