

The impact of climate change on eating disorders: An urgent call for research

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Abstract

Climate change affects many of the documented risk factors for eating disorders (EDs) through direct and indirect pathways, yet to date the research in this area is nonexistent. Our aim is to identify the specific mechanisms through which climate change might be associated with increased risk for EDs, an exacerbation in symptoms, or poor clinical outcomes; highlight limited empirical data addressing these issues; and propose directions for a research program in this important area. Pathways for the impact of climate change on eating disorders and related data were reviewed. Four main pathways for the effects of climate change on EDs were identified including (1) decreased food access and security; (2) changes in mean temperature; (3) concerns related to food safety and eco-anxiety; and (4) indirect pathways through trauma, adversity, and increased mental health concerns. Except for the relationship between increased food insecurity and EDs, these pathways remain largely uninvestigated. Numerous factors may be implicated in the relationship between climate change and EDs. Future work in this area is imperative and should be conducted through a social justice lens with particular attention paid to the global areas most impacted by climate change and related vulnerabilities. Climate change will likely have adverse impacts on individuals with eating disorders and increase the risk for eating disorders. This paper reviews the different ways in which climate change may have these effects and calls for researchers to pay attention to this important area.

KEYWORDS

climate change, eating disorders, ecology, extreme weather, food, food insecurity, risk

1 | INTRODUCTION

Climate change is impacting lives worldwide and constitutes an urgent risk for the sustainability of the planet (Romanello et al., 2021). Of note, climate change is predicted to have adverse health impacts across multiple domains including those related to the production, availability, and safety of food (Carleton & Hsiang, 2016; Ray et al., 2019; Springmann et al., 2016; Tirado et al., 2010). Eating disorders (EDs) are influenced by economic and social factors (AlShebali et al., 2021;

Becker & Fay, 2018; Gorrell et al., 2019), and the food environment (Rodgers & Rodgers & Sonnevile, 2018). Therefore, the documented consequences of climate change—among the numerous threats it poses to the health of populations, ecosystems, and the planet—are also likely highly relevant to EDs. The aim of this paper is to identify potential pathways through which climate change might be associated with increased risk for EDs, exacerbation in symptoms, or poor clinical outcomes; highlight limited empirical data addressing these issues; and propose directions for this important research program.

2 | POTENTIAL PATHWAYS FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND EDS

We identified potential pathways through reviewing the literature and considering the intersections of climate change and ED risk factors.

2.1 | Food access and security

Prevailing models of the effects of climate change predict greater food insecurity among vulnerable groups (Romanello et al., 2021; Singh & Sharma, 2018). Two of the consequences of climate change include the lower availability of water and greater frequency of natural disasters in food producing areas (Tabari, 2020). These would likely negatively impact the cost and availability of fresh foods, thus increasing barriers to eating fruit and vegetables among low-income groups (Burke & Lobell, 2010). These factors would likely worsen food insecurity, which has been related to EDs (Hazzard et al., 2020). Research consistently shows greater frequency of bulimic-spectrum EDs to be associated with food insecurity in the US (Hazzard et al., 2021). Fluctuations in food availability may lead to cycles of overconsumption during periods of greater availability that drive bulimic symptoms (Swinburn et al., 2019). Moreover, widespread food scarcity may lead to population weight reduction, which could also constitute a risk factor for EDs through increased preoccupation with weight loss.

The food industry's adaptations to changes in food supply due to climate change may also constitute a pathway of increased ED risk, for several reasons. Lower availability of fruit and vegetables and water-intensive cereals such as rice that are staple foods for many groups, may lead to the development and marketing of substitute products. Such products may negatively affect individuals' capacity to regulate their intake through attention to satiety signals (Rodgers & Rodgers & Sonnevile, 2018). The increased need for products with an extended shelf-life, due to variable climate conditions and transportation difficulties, may result in the additional processing of foods. Such processing typically involves the addition of palatable ingredients (sugar, salt) in ways that similarly them difficult to eat in small quantities, and increase disinhibited eating. Finally, rising sea temperatures are linked to lower marine food security (Romanello et al., 2021).

2.1.1 | Changes in mean temperatures and land elevation

Emerging evidence suggests that warmer climates are associated with more ED behaviors (Gutierrez et al., 2013; Sloan, 2002). Such a relationship could be mediated by body image concerns when individuals are more aware of their body shape and size. Indeed, warmer weather may increase body exposure, and dieting and body dissatisfaction have been associated with warmer weather across the Western Northern and Southern hemispheres (Griffiths et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2022). In addition, evidence supports a relationship between variations in

ambient temperature away from the comfort point and increased energy expenditure and intake (Moellering & Smith, 2012), and higher elevation has been associated with improved thermoregulation, with higher adiposity at lower elevations (Voss et al., 2013). Land elevation is closely tied to temperature but may also change with rising sea levels. Furthermore, warmer climates have been linked to higher suicide risk and poorer mental health more broadly (Charlson et al., 2021; Ebi et al., 2021). Thus, increasing mean temperatures may lead to changes in metabolism and potentially exacerbate weight and shape concerns, which are known risk factors for EDs (McLean & Paxton, 2019), and may exacerbate mental health concerns and food related anxieties.

2.2 | Concerns related to food safety and eco-anxiety

Modifications in the air and water quality due to climate change (Delpla et al., 2009), may lead to reduced food safety, itself associated with emerging forms of EDs such as orthorexia nervosa. In orthorexia nervosa, concerns do not center around weight and shape but rather on the quality of foods and their capacity to affect health (Dunn & Bratman, 2016). In addition, poor mental health is associated with broad concerns regarding climate change, that is eco-anxiety (Ogunbode et al., 2021), which may therefore also impact EDs. In contrast, externalizing stances such as anger and, later, activism have been associated with more positive wellbeing and therefore may be protective of EDs (Schwartz et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2021).

In addition, aspects of the agricultural and food industry have been identified as main contributors to carbon emissions and implicated in climate change such as meat farming (Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2017). Individuals wishing to change their diet to reduce their carbon footprint may try to restrict their consumption of such products. While this may have positive effects on the carbon emissions, through promoting a plant-based diet as encouraged by many climate activists, it may also increase cravings that might in turn promote binge-purge cycles. However, while data exist regarding a relationship between vegetarianism and greater risk of EDs, the mechanisms underlying these relationships are not clear (Heiss et al., 2017; Sergeantanis et al., 2020). Given the climate benefits of environmentally sustainable diets, clarifying specific mechanisms and moderators of relationships between plant-based diets and ED risk is critical, and longitudinal work is needed.

2.3 | Indirect pathways through trauma, adversity, and increased mental health concerns

EDs are highly comorbid with trauma, and anxiety and other mental disorders such as depression (Keski-Rahkonen & Mustelin, 2016). By all predictions (Charlson et al., 2021; Ebi et al., 2021; Lawrance et al., 2021; Palinkas & Wong, 2020; Sharpe & Davison, 2021), climate change will be associated with increased mental health concerns, including EDs, through both direct and indirect pathways.

Furthermore, extreme weather events may disrupt pathways to care (Ebi et al., 2021; Stanke et al., 2013), exacerbating the effects of these events for individuals with ED.

Trauma and vicarious trauma related to natural disasters has been shown to be associated with ED symptoms (Convertino et al., 2022; Rodgers et al., 2012). In addition, ED symptoms have been conceptualized as maladaptive coping strategies in response to uncontrollable and traumatic circumstances (Convertino et al., 2022). Climate change creates numerous traumatic experiences associated with natural catastrophes (Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2019; Massazza et al., 2022), and these types of traumatic experiences are likely to become more common, thus increasing risk for EDs. Moreover, climate-change related trauma will by affect entire communities, thus affording vicarious trauma, decreasing community resilience, and impacting social support and other relationships, all of which may also increase risk for EDs. Finally, climate change has been suggested to increase risk of future pandemics (Marazziti et al., 2021), and through this pathway could potentially pose additional indirect risk for EDs (Linardon et al., 2022; Rodgers et al., 2020).

3 | DIRECTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Empirical data regarding climate change and EDs are almost nonexistent despite several hypothetical pathways underpinning these associations. Given the urgency of understanding the effects of climate change on EDs to prevent and minimize them, increasing research is critical. Below, we outline areas of research priority.

3.1 | Identifying the mechanisms of the relationship between climate change and EDs

Rigorous research including longitudinal and experimental work capable of elucidating mechanisms and modifiable intervention targets is needed. For example, it would be useful to link epidemiological surveys that assess ED outcomes to geographic and climate data. Identifying mechanisms is crucial to formulating interventions as well as to optimizing the delivery of resources to populations most at risk. Of note, epidemiological data on EDs are most scarce in the Global South, an area disproportionately impacted by climate change, migration, displacement, limited mobility and related vulnerabilities (McMichael, 2020; Romanello et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Research also is needed to determine whether the impacts of climate change vary by ED diagnosis, and to examine the emergence of new presentations.

3.2 | Developing programs to increase accessibility of sustainable eating patterns

Given the role of food insecurity, efforts to increase accessibility and affordability of nutritious foods while mitigating impacts of

degradation of the food environment would likely be a useful focus, and might aid in the prevention of EDs in food-insecure populations. Because those with the fewest resources may be the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change on EDs, collective action towards assisting these groups to access a sustainable high quality food would be critical (Ackerman et al., 2014; Bruening et al., 2012).

3.3 | Developing interventions to decrease the impact of climate related anxiety and trauma

Future work should focus on examining potential relationships among climate related anxieties, trauma, and EDs. If confirmed, a second important area of research will be development of interventions capable of buffering the effects of these experiences on EDs. For example, interventions such as youth engagement in climate justice and activism and promoting sustainable diets could be examined as risk mitigation approaches. Prevention programs helping youth to identify ways in which they can contribute to minimizing the effects of climate change, and develop sustainable diets, may be useful. In addition, integrating current interventions that focus on EDs with comorbid trauma (Brewerton, 2019) with those developed for refugees and those with histories of traumatic displacement (Rafieifar & Macgowan, 2022; Reeb et al., 2020) would be fruitful in view of the increasing likelihood of population displacement. As other risk pathways are explored and additional modifiable targets identified, the field should focus on swift translation of these findings to practice.

3.4 | Strategic research into policies and practices regarding food security, access, and safety

The food industry's role in increasing risk through multiple mechanisms has been neglected by the field of EDs (Rodgers & Rodgers & Sonnevile, 2018). Given the magnitude of the financial interests related to the impact of climate change on the food industry it is an important area of focus moving forward. Strategic research (Brownell & Roberto, 2015) will be important to evaluate how the response of the food industry in the context of climate change impacts ED risk. Developing pro-active partnerships and communicating with stakeholders regarding the effects of food industry practices on EDs would be helpful.

3.5 | Focusing on global health and climate and food justice

It is imperative that research proposed here is conducted in collaboration with communities most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, with sensitivity and attunement to local priorities, and through a lens of climate and food justice. Climate change evolves in a context of a history of colonization, capitalism, and current

neoliberalism (Leane, 2021). Work to minimize the effects of climate change on EDs should be conducted from a stance of social justice, with a view to minimizing inequities that exist due to the factors that have contributed to climate change.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

We have described factors potentially implicated in relationships between climate change and EDs; including food prices, food availability and quality, concerns regarding food safety, environmental impacts on food production and supply, climatic changes and related trauma, and the effects of climate change of physical and mental health. Save for food insecurity, there are no data examining any of these proposed pathways. This knowledge gap impedes our capacity to anticipate and minimize the effects of climate change on EDs, and future work is imperative.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Rachel F. Rodgers: Conceptualization; writing – original draft. **Susan J. Paxton:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Jason M. Nagata:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing. **Anne E. Becker:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares there is no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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