

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Letter to Congress: Climate Action Now to Prevent Severe Mental Health Risks

As psychologists and other mental health professionals from across the United States, we are deeply concerned about the psychological effects of climate change on our children, families, and fellow citizens. We ask you, as a national leader, to take urgent action now to prevent the growing risks from climate change to our psychological health and the fabric of our society.

Climate change already appears to be having devastating environmental effects in the U.S.:

- Searing heat and home-destroying forest fires throughout the West and Rocky Mountain states.
- Storms and floods tearing apart lives and the infrastructure of communities along the coasts as well as in the nation's bread basket.
- Droughts in the Southwest that are stressing families, businesses, and local governments.
- Worsening air quality from ozone associated with climate change that is contributing to thousands of new cases of asthma, especially among our nation's children.

The psychological responses to those effects can also be devastating. Many Americans are already anxious about what climate change portends. The greater risk is that millions of people will develop severe and persistent anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, aggression, and other troubled behavior if the U.S. does not quickly lead the way to dramatically reduce carbon emissions.

Without such action, the impact of heat waves, extreme storms and floods, droughts and water shortages, food production problems, lessened air quality, sea level rise, and displacement from homes and communities is likely to pose significant mental-health challenges to millions of Americans and billions of others worldwide. The resulting stress and increase in mental illness would, in turn, be likely to harm interpersonal relationships, make people less able to work constructively or do well in school, and ultimately injure the day-to-day functioning of our society and our economy. Hurricane Katrina demonstrated all of these outcomes in microcosm to the American people, and an ample body of research strongly predicts such severe psychological and social consequences. For citations from relevant research, see the attached document, [*Climate Change and Mental Health: Evidence for Action*](#).

As members of Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) and other groups with expertise in mental health and behavioral research, we are united in urging the U.S. Congress to take the following immediate legislative actions to prevent climate change's psychological harm:

1. Legislate cuts in carbon dioxide emissions swiftly and boldly to prevent the greatest psychological harm from climate change.

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The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a bill that would cut greenhouse gas emissions by about 80% below 2005 levels by 2050. However, recent data indicate that target will lead to 450 parts per million of carbon emissions in the atmosphere, which may engender climatic repercussions that create significant harm to our citizens and environment. PsySR and other signers below echo leading climate scientists in calling for stronger cuts that allow emissions to peak by 2015 and rapidly decline thereafter to return atmospheric carbon emissions to a safer 350 parts per million.

2. Preserve the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's authority to regulate carbon dioxide emissions under the Clean Air Act.

The House legislation reduces the Environmental Protection Agency's ability to regulate carbon emissions, which historically has been an effective tool via the Clean Air Act to monitor industry and promote cleaner technologies. Without strong EPA oversight, reduction of carbon emissions will be more difficult to attain and climate change will be exacerbated.

3. Reduce U.S. dependency on policies and programs that promote coal and nuclear power for electrical generation.

Coal combustion produces about half of the nation's electricity but also contributes to a third of the nation's carbon dioxide emissions and a host of deadly pollutants, including mercury, sulfur dioxide, and particulates associated with both psychological and physical harm. Nuclear power is excessively expensive, fraught with risk to millions of Americans through radioactive processes and waste, and takes far too much time to bring on line to be a feasible alternative to coal for reducing carbon emissions as fast as climate change requires. The money and time would be better spent rapidly developing renewable energy sources. We ask Congress to end subsidies for nuclear- and coal-fired power plants, place a moratorium on the building of new plants with a plan to phase them out altogether, and, in the meantime, increase regulation of existing plants.

4. Increase funding and public incentives for more sustainable and healthy means to power our economy and to reduce our energy consumption.

Greener technologies, such as wind, solar, and geothermal, create far less harm to humanity and the planet than our current means to fuel our economy, so they must be priorities in U.S. climate and energy legislation. Moreover, legislation must describe the excesses of our economy that allow the misuse of our scarce natural resources to the detriment of our climate and, in the long run, our psychological and physical well-being. PsySR asks our political leaders to help create a new social norm, through their words to the public as well as their legislation, that bespeaks care for the planet, care for one another, and responsible use of natural resources. This will require a shift from conspicuous consumption to a new emphasis on conservation and on fairness, sustainability, and equity in meeting basic human needs in the U.S. and around the world.

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Conclusion

We thank you for taking the time to consider the potentially catastrophic psycho-social repercussions of climate change and for working to create a more sane and humane climate and energy policy for the United States. We recognize that immediate, bold legislative action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is a difficult step for you to take when faced with constituents who have vested interests, others who simply don't seem to care, and still more who know something must be done but are afraid of what that might look like. But we also honor your role in placing our nation at the forefront of deterring the impending mental and physical peril we will face if our nation fails to act effectively to thwart climate change here and now. We welcome an opportunity to speak with you or your staff on these issues. Please contact Colleen Cordes, Executive Director of Psychologists for Social Responsibility, at 202-543-5347 or ccordes@psysr.org for more information or for help contacting concerned psychologists and other mental health professionals.

Sincerely,



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