

CLIMATE WELLBEING SERIES



# Flooding, Mental Health and Community Wellbeing



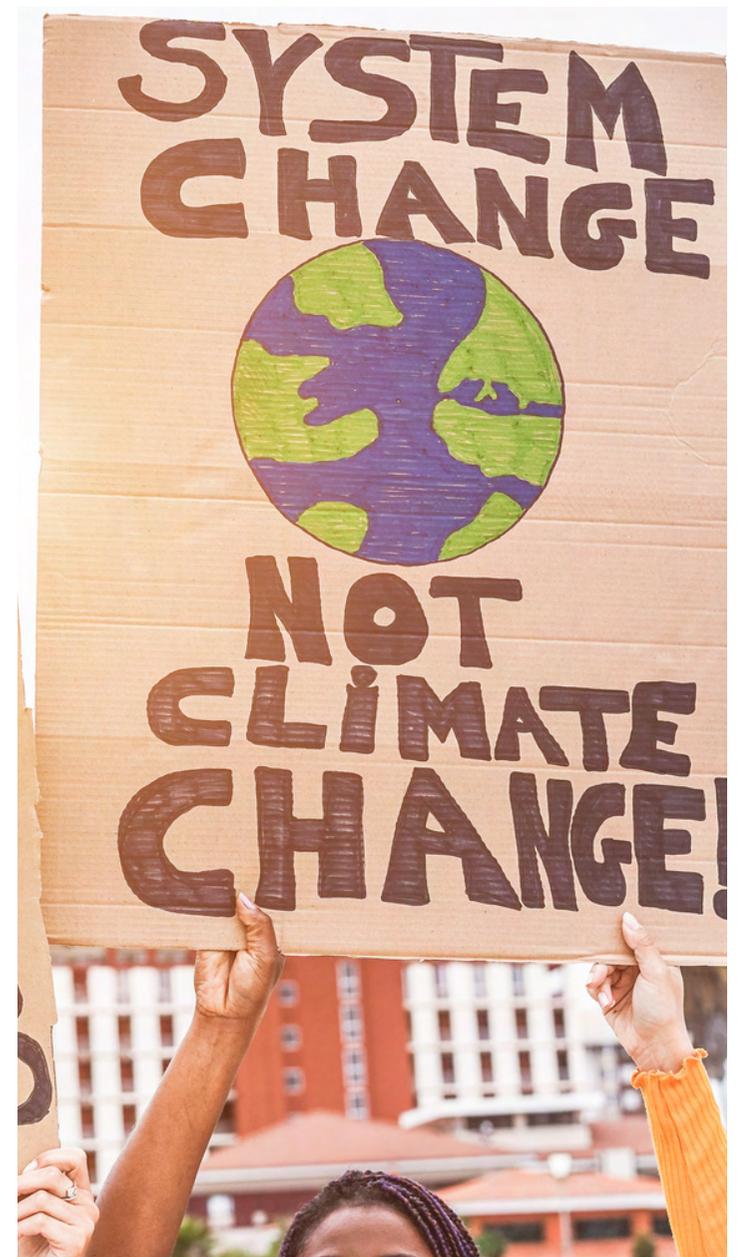
Artwork by Meghan Wise

# Climate & Flooding

**FLOODING** is one of the most frequent climate-related disaster events.

Rapid human-generated climate change, deforestation, destruction of wetlands, expanding paved roads and urban sprawl have increased the magnitude and frequency of major flooding events.

Climate change related sea-level rise, storm surge, extreme rain events, rapid snowpack melt and hurricanes stalling out over land masses due to a changing climate, are generating devastating community impacts.



# Flooding Impacts on Community

Flood impacts may include loss of life, property, crops, or livestock. It may damage communication links, power supply, roads or bridges. Economic activities may halt and people may be forced to leave homes as normal life is disrupted.

Flooding affects people of all ages. It can cause bereavement; economic challenges for families; behavioural distress in children; increased substance use/misuse; increased domestic violence; and exacerbate/provoke existing mental health challenges.

Increasing climate disaster impacts, like flooding, stress the importance of community planning and providing effective and timely networks of public mental health supports, mutual aid, and fostering community climate resilience.

# Mental Health, Wellbeing & Flooding

Rates of anxiety, PTSD, bereavement, substance use, domestic violence, and depression often rise when a population or community has experienced flooding and displacement.



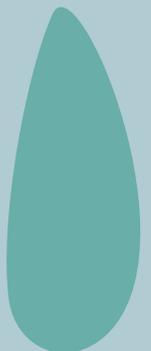
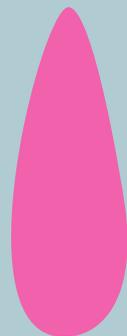
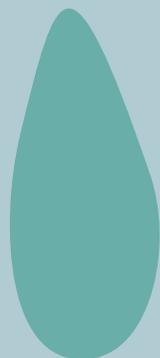
Floods can also spread water-borne diseases that can trigger respiratory, skin, neurologic, and gastrointestinal illnesses. Post-flood mold growth can also generate allergies and asthma issues.



Post flooding, rates of heart attack, stroke, and dehydration tend to increase as services and systems may struggle to cope with local medical needs or demands.



Coming together in acts of care, mutual aid and community support after a climate shock can foster a sense of community spirit, cohesion, shared purpose and resilience. Community care and planning is an important balm for navigating mental health and wellbeing impacts of flooding.



# Managed Retreat

Ongoing sea-level rise also means some low-lying coastal communities face a need for “**planned**” or “**managed**” retreat from high-risk areas.

Flood displacement can impact a community’s sense of belonging and place.

This may include feelings of loss, grief or **solastalgia** - a psychological phenomenon of emotional pain and distress due to losing local environment or community spaces.

Indigenous communities forced to relocate due to sea-level rise or flooding may also experience unique community impacts to culture and relationships to land.



# Learning From Lived Experience

Nations, like Bangladesh, have long faced climate magnified flooding. This has led to community-wide innovation and centring traditional Indigenous knowledge for sustainable community climate solutions.

Adaptive and mitigating strategies have included:

- Planning and building communities up and away from flood zones
- Restoring and preserving key wetlands and marshlands that act as local natural built flood control systems
- Using building materials for roads and community infrastructure that can withstand prolonged water immersion
- Managing controlled breaches of swelling river systems
- Learning to plan for climate magnified flooding as part of community resilience planning



# Short Term



As communities face increased climate flooding, sharing knowledge and coping strategies for action can empower and prepared communities for flood risks and impacts on mental health and wellbeing.

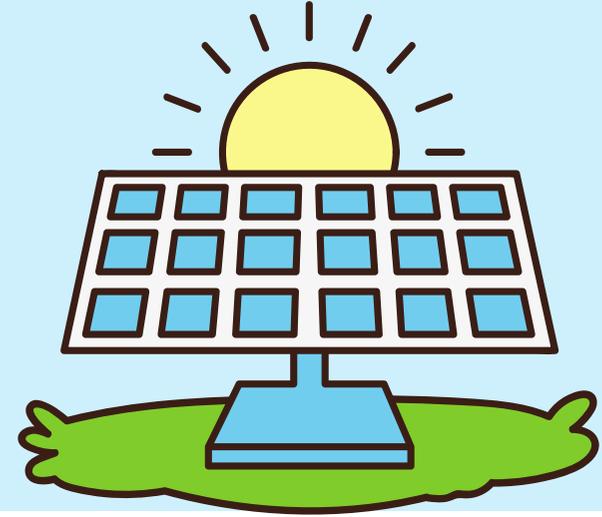
- Mobilize CLEAR public messaging and education on flood risks and how to stay safe in and after a flooding event.
- Have a personal flood plan outlining needed essentials, evacuation routes, how to stay in touch with family if separated, a place in mind where you could stay, and a plan to support folks with a disability.
- Research indicates advanced warning about flooding functions as a protective factor against psychological distress for those impacted by floods.
- Individuals who do not receive advance warnings about potential flooding tend to experience higher rates of PTSD and depression than those who received warnings.



# Medium Term

- Promote community flood resilience by listening to community voice and lived experience.
- Build collaborative partnerships with local Indigenous communities to develop local flood planning and policies.
- Create climate flexible built environments and infrastructure.
- Build trust in community preparedness and confidence in community capacity to handle difficult flood challenges through clear messaging and practical collaboration.
- Ensure community members have a shared understanding of important terms, language, and expectations for flood events.
- Develop effective public health response plans and support networks that address the mental health and wellbeing impacts of flooding in the short and long term.

# Long Term



- Address inequity. Invest in and create systems that empower and protect those most at-risk during flood events, including the unhoused, those left in poverty, LGBTQ2+, BIPOC, children, women and the elderly.
- Building community equity creates a ripple effect that builds wider community strength, capacity, cohesion, and wellbeing.
- Start a community's "planned retreat" from flood zones early to give people time to process large-scale community transition. Prioritize centring community voice and engagement in decision-making and planning.
- This can help alleviate fear, anxiety or PTSD about planned relocation of a community.
- Transition communities away from fossil fuels by developing resilient renewable energy systems and practices to address the root causes of climate change.

# References

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Community Resilience & Wellbeing Amid Climate Crisis:  
Meghan Wise  
<https://sustain.ubc.ca/about/resources/community-resilience-wellbeing-amid-climate-crisis>