

3rd Place Winner of 2023 PIF New Zealand Essay Competition

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**Essay topic – Whakataukī: Naū te rou rou, Nāku te rou rou, Ka ora ai te iwi.
*With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive.***

With this whakataukī (proverb) in mind, discuss mental wellbeing within the current global climate change?

Thriving, Not Surviving, in this Climate Crisis

By Angad Chauhan

Introduction

The profound and undeniable impact of climate change on human health grows increasingly apparent every year. At a time when survival seems to be a priority for some, the question of thriving in this environment becomes a more distant goal. This essay aims to highlight this issue by discussing the current climate across the globe and its wide range of mental health impacts on communities and individuals. Furthermore, I would like to propose how indigenous knowledge may help formulate solutions for enhancing mental well-being through sharing our resources and looking beyond borders.

The Current Climate

While a small percentage of the warming climate in the last few years can be attributed to Earth's natural variability and weather patterns, the greatest driver of the climate crisis has been human-induced global warming largely secondary to the burning of fossil fuels (Soeder, 2021). Scientists have reported 2023 to be Earth's warmest year on record with a global average of 1.37 degrees Celsius higher than preindustrial levels (NOAA, 2024). As this value approaches dangerously close to the Paris Agreement of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, extreme weather events increase in frequency and intensity. This was evident last year as we saw severe heatwaves throughout North America, South America and Europe, floods across South Asia, storm Daniel over the Mediterranean, cyclones Freddy and Mocha in the Indian Ocean and the continued melting of the Antarctic to record low sea ice coverage (Kong, 2023).

Closer to home, the continent of Oceania remains at the forefront of some of the most surreal impacts of climate change. The complete displacement of nations within the Pacific remains an active and constant threat. At COP27 in 2022, the country of Tuvalu announced their plan to digitalise its nation in a last-ditch attempt to preserve its community and culture while its shores continue to lose the battle against rising sea levels (Hegde, 2023). This is a reality that is faced by many island nations of the Pacific and perhaps best illustrates the gravity of climate change. Like the rest of the world, Aotearoa (New Zealand) has noticed increasing temperatures over the past few decades with the last three years being the warmest three years in the country's recorded history (NIWA, 2024). Therefore, unsurprisingly, Aotearoa also felt the wrath of climate change last year. 2023 started with severe flooding in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) which resulted in the costliest weather-related event in Aotearoa's history (NZ Herald, 2024). However, a few weeks later, this record was broken by Cyclone Gabrielle in Te Ika-a-Māui (North Island) which was Aotearoa's deadliest weather event since cyclone Giselle in 1968 and the costliest cyclone on record in the entire Southern Hemisphere (NZ Herald, 2024). As the Pacific warms up further, these events are predicted to become more frequent and greater in severity.

Climate Change and Mental Well-being

With no end in sight, the burden of climate change and associated events extends beyond the cultural and economic cost. Its impact on human health is indubitable and amplifying with time. As reported in the annual *Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change* report, 2023 saw a significant increase in heat-related deaths in the population aged >65 years old, worsening food insecurity due to extreme weather events, higher rates of transmission of life-threatening vector-mediated infectious diseases and air pollution driven respiratory diseases (Romanello et al., 2023). However, arguably the most widespread yet overlooked health impact of the climate crisis might be its psychological impact on individuals and communities (Padhy et al., 2015).

At a time when the questions and concerns are rising at an overwhelming rate, it would not be challenging to see why the mental health burden associated with climate change is bound to skyrocket. However, despite psychologists and experts warning about the impacts of global warming for a few decades, it was not until 2022 that the link between climate change and mental health was officially recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022). Today, psychiatry colleges around the globe, including The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP), acknowledge that climate crisis can often manifest itself as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and even suicide (RANZCP, 2021). These concepts are also growing in the general population and are evident through the increasing use of neologisms such as 'climate anxiety' and 'eco-grief' (Ojala et al., 2021).

'Solastalgia' is another novel term that has been used in the literature since it was first coined by Albrecht (2006). Imagine that a place you have lived in throughout your life suddenly does not feel the same. The land beneath and the air around does not fill your soul as it used to. The word 'solastalgia' attempts to encompass this loss of place and environment due to the abruptly changing climate. The grief associated with this is often a significant cause of mental distress for those whose homes are impacted most by climate change such as the Pacific nations.

Individuals of Pacific nations also face another battle in the form of forced migration. With the current trajectory of the climate crisis, the need to relocate away from their homes remains to be all but certain for some. Forced displacement is a well-known predisposing factor to mental illness and it is evident through the analysis of indigenous populations that were displaced away from their *whenua* due to colonisation or refugees who have sought shelter in various parts of the world (Shultz et al., 2019). The climate crisis carries the same impact on populations and increases their vulnerability to mental illnesses.

Thriving, Not Surviving

Thriving and flourishing remain concepts that are difficult to describe for individuals and communities, but good mental health remains a well-described marker within literature and through many cultures (Mjøsund, 2021). Although the stress of displacement and loss of land remains a strong driver of mental distress, willingness to share our resources can provide a space for recovery and healing for not only physical well-being but also psychosocial and spiritual well-being.

The proverb "*Naū te rou rou, Nāku te rou rou, Ka ora ai te iwi*" speaks about the strength of the collective in the face of a disaster. A disaster such as the climate crisis. It talks about how one may survive with its own food basket (goods and resources) but sharing resources with others can allow for communities to thrive in the face of adversities. This indigenous knowledge provides a framework to establish solutions to the imminent threat of climate crisis and this *taonga* is most relevant to the challenges faced by the Pacific nations. COP28 in 2023 saw the inadvertent implementation of this philosophy as the Loss and Damage Fund for climate disasters was established to help developing nations facing the consequences of the climate crisis (UNFCCC, 2023).

COP28 also saw the acknowledgement of a necessary move away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy (UNFCCC, 2023). Implications of the above *whakataukī* remain relevant to this declaration as well. Redirecting our food basket or resources towards more sustainable forms of

energy is likely to be the most realistic solution that can lead to our planet thriving in the future and following our goal of keeping global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius. It is important to recognise that the seemingly minuscule difference between 2.0 degrees versus 2.1 degrees could equate to the loss of thousands of lives and be the difference between entire nations going below sea level.

The land remains something that we do not inherit from our ancestors but rather borrow from our children. These indigenous worldviews provide us with novel methods to tackle this crisis and come out better at the other end. The *whakataukī* such as the ones mentioned earlier are more than just allegorical sayings but rather realistic solutions to catastrophic problems. We must continue to look at indigenous ideology for solutions and utilise our humanity as a tool to break the barrier of borders in tackling this crisis.

Conclusion

The human-driven climate crisis has truly arrived and brought along unparalleled extreme weather events. With our current efforts, we are not coping as a nation, as a continent or as a planet. This daunting truth along with the stressors of extreme weather events has established climate crisis as a significant social determinant of mental health around the world. The concerns have ranged from eco-anxiety relating to the future of the planet to PTSD from living through catastrophic climate events and forced migration. At a time when surviving seems to be a challenge, reflecting on indigenous knowledge may provide avenues to thrive. Only by providing shelter, community, and support to those in need can the mental well-being of the vulnerable be protected. This would require looking beyond our borders, especially at our Pacific nations which face the worst of climate crisis. Another *whakataukī* may be considered as we ponder the future: *manaaki whenua, manaaki tāngata, haere whakamua*. This proverb emphasises that as long as we take care of the land and take care of the people, we will take care of the future.

Glossary

Whenua: land.

Taonga: treasure, anything prized - applied to anything considered to be of value including socially or culturally valuable objects, resources, phenomena, ideas, and techniques.

Whakataukī: proverb.

From Te Aka Māori Dictionary

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