

Climate crisis and mental health nursing

Lucy Colwell and Heather Baid

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How is the climate crisis relevant to mental health nursing?

Mental health and the climate crisis are inextricably linked. Mental health nursing appreciates and works with the biological, social and psychological aspects that are prominent in times of mental distress and mental illness (Barker *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, the climate crisis is characterised by significant adverse biological and social changes, such as the extinction of certain species and the displacement of people due to climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). Both are recognised public health priorities that include directives for considering mental health and climate change through a sustainability lens (World Health Organization, 2021a; Page and Krzanowski, 2022). Mental health and climate change are also influenced by widening social inequalities that adversely impact the trajectory of mental illness and the continuing decline in planetary health (Marmot *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Thirdly, for mental illness and the climate crisis, the journey through recovery meanders through a plethora of interventions requiring multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working. Mental health nursing skills for empowering service users, promoting mental and physical health and taking a reflexive and reflective position on the value of interventions have a strong allyship with the mechanisms for improving sustainability (Hummelvol, Karlsson and Borg, 2015; Nursing & Midwifery Council, 2018). Mental health and planetary health promotion both emphasise the importance of attention to individual and subjective experience, whilst also acknowledging the benefits of collaborative action. Finally, the high carbon footprint of current healthcare practices, which then further damages the planet, means that all professionals, including those working in mental health, need to make urgent changes for a more environmentally sustainable healthcare service (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021).

What can mental health nurses do about sustainability and health?

A mental health nurse will work with service users from the moment of admission to discharge. At whatever stage, the mental health nurse's focus is primarily on the therapeutic rapport that is created. It is through empathy, congruence with affect and the development of authentic

relationships that a service user may be able to discover and appreciate parts of themselves that had been ignored (Rogers, 2003; Nyström, 2007). This will include the spaces and connections between self and environment and therefore extrinsic factors evidenced to promote mental well-being, such as access to blue and green spaces (World Health Organization, 2021b), along with sustainable food, energy and transport. Intrinsic concerns include anxiety, low mood, thoughts of suicide, depression, distressing flashbacks and nihilistic beliefs. Communication and a shared understanding indicate what support may facilitate a person towards recovery within a specific context (Hummelvol, Karlsson and Borg, 2015). Therefore, the collaboration between a mental health nurse and a service user becomes an exploration of self and the environment and an opportunity to consider how to support citizenship with community, the world and our earth. This aligns with earlier suppositions of mental health recovery that identify how health services need to “move beyond the traditional models of providing healthcare and of measuring health system performance”, paying “greater attention to system design, financing mechanisms and the focus and process of care”(World Health Organization and Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2007, p.6).

Scientists and activists resist pathologizing rage, anxiety and depression occurring from a person’s concern for the ecological wellbeing of the planet, seeing all as reasonable responses to the current climate crisis (Cunsolo *et al.*, 2020; Ojala *et al.*, 2021). However, within a clinical mental health setting, the interest includes how a person is functioning within everyday life. Assessment involves observable behaviours such as sleep, eating and interpersonal interaction. However, the source of emotional instability, lability, anxiety, anger, frustration, depersonalisation, depression, and nihilism is not always known. Given that distress associated with climate change and environmental adversity may also contribute to an exacerbation of mental illness (Singh, Xue and Poukhovski-Sheremetyev, 2022), it makes sense to understand these interactions in more detail. There is a possibility of considering the environment in a way that promotes hope and a trajectory toward personal and clinical recovery. This means developing a shared language with service users, carers, colleagues and peers that includes both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Recovery dialogue accepts that one can regain hope and mature through adversity (Hummelvol, Karlsson and Borg, 2015).

For example, a person detained under a section of the *Mental Health Act* is admitted to a Mental Health Unit. At this point, the mental health nurse’s priority is the service user’s safety which includes orientating the person to the immediate care available (Barker, 2003). Here begins the conversation as to how the environment interrelates with the person’s experience and includes the values that the service user holds at that time in terms of food, water, nature, planetary health and prescribed medications – together they begin to consider how the context supports the person. The mental health nurse is then also able to bring service user needs to the wider context of the milieu

and dialogue expands to include other staff and service users as to what is good for all, including the wider community. Considerations for the natural environment can be brought into regular 1:1 meetings with the service user, community meetings with other service users and peers with shared lived experiences, clinical supervision and reflective group discussions to embed planetary health topics into a culture of mental health recovery.

Mental health nurses aiming to become ‘greener’ through more environmentally sustainable practices can draw from these four key tenets endorsed by leading mental health organisations within their pledge to promote sustainability (Mortimer, 2015):

1. **Prioritise prevention** – avoiding the use of unnecessary resources through preventative health promotion is the most sustainable action for healthcare professionals.
2. **Empower individuals and communities** – self-care, independent living and community projects and social networks for people to manage their own health already resonate with nursing models and are key to more sustainable use of healthcare resources.
3. **Improve value** – high-value care that is authentically what each person needs at that time in the most suitable way reflects the Goldilocks principle in healthcare of ‘not too much, not too little, but just right’).
4. **Consider carbon** – where possible, low-carbon alternatives should be provided for a reduced environmental footprint that is also financially affordable and socially responsible.

What sustainability resources are available for mental health nurses?

There is a growing body of information developing for improving the environmental sustainability of healthcare services with Table 1 outlining suggested resources, organisations, tools, reports and videos for mental health nurses seeking guidance on reducing their nursing carbon footprint.

Table 1 – Sustainability resources for mental health nursing

Item	Weblink
Mental health and sustainability	Psych Susnet Planetary Health Alliance – Mental Health Royal College of Psychiatrists Sustainability and working sustainably Mental health and our changing climate: impacts, inequities and resources
Sustainable healthcare initiatives	Green Nurse Network Centre for Sustainable Healthcare

	Health Care Without Harm Nurses Climate Challenge Global Consortium on Climate and Health Education United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
Education and quality improvement tools	Planetary Health Report Card NurSuS TOOLKIT SusQI framework Green Social Prescribing
Reports	Health Care’s Climate Footprint Delivering a ‘Net Zero’ National Health Service NHS Wales Decarbonisation Strategic Delivery Plan NHS Scotland – Sustainability Action
Events	Sustainable Mental Healthcare course SHARE conference (Sustainable Healthcare Academic Research and Enterprise)
Videos	Green Space and Health Mental health in a planetary crisis Why climate change is a mental health issue

Call for action

There is a role for all of us to play in addressing the climate crisis, including mental health nurses working in clinical practice, education, management or research. Using a ‘sustainability lens’ for all that we do, that also includes environmental considerations, is urgently needed for nursing to remain fit for the future (Goodman and East, 2014). We owe it to the people we nurse, ourselves and the planet.

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