

Submission on the Duty of Care Bill

Dear Senator Pocock,

The Australian Association of Psychologists (AAPI) is a values-driven national peak body for psychologists that aims to promote the rich diversity of psychological practice in Australia. We advocate for the wellbeing of Australians, and are motivated to comment on this bill due to the ongoing implications for the wellbeing of young people.

We are writing to submit our views and concerns regarding the Duty of Care Bill, a critical piece of legislation that addresses the urgent issue of climate change and youth mental health and wellbeing. The scientific consensus on climate change necessitates immediate and comprehensive action at the governmental level to mitigate its worst effects. The overwhelming scientific consensus confirms that climate change is primarily driven by human activities, particularly the emission of greenhouse gases, and that urgent measures are required to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. To achieve this, governments must swiftly transition to clean and renewable energy sources, implement stringent carbon pricing mechanisms, and promote sustainable practices across all sectors.

Climate change poses a significant threat to young people in Australia. With rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, and increasing frequency of extreme weather events, Australia is particularly vulnerable to climate risks and disasters. Young people are not only facing the physical consequences of these changes but also experiencing heightened mental health and well-being risks. Evidence suggests that climate change can be a source of poor mental health among young people. A variety of mental health issues, including anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are related to the anticipation and consequences of climate change-related events (Hasini, Patrick, Snell, Garad, Enticott, Meadows & Henderson-Wilson, 2022).

Although the literature is still developing, several studies now suggest that fluctuations in climate affect both the onset and severity of depression at a population level (Majeed, & Lee, 2017). The climate crisis is imposing a heavy psychological burden on children and youth, both from experiencing climate-related disasters and from the knowledge that worse is to come. Young Australians have reported that climate distress has impacted their functioning, their hope for the future and their mental health. Climate distress is not a clinical diagnosis, and likely includes healthy and adaptive responses that can lead to productive action against climate change, as well as clinically-relevant distress that requires greater support.

Young people have recognised that addressing climate distress needs to go beyond a focus on their individual mental health and include a focus on climate policy. While climate distress is often related to distress about the direct impacts of climate change, it can also include distress relating to a lack of climate action (Fava, Gao, & Baker, 2023).

The increasing frequency of extreme weather events are poised to have profound and lasting effects on the mental health of young people.

Firstly, they will be at risk of experiencing heightened anxiety and eco-anxiety as they grapple with the looming climate crisis. Young individuals are acutely aware of the environmental challenges they will inherit, and this constant awareness can lead to persistent worries about their future, the well-being of their loved ones, and the fate of the planet. These anxieties can result in sleep disturbances, difficulties in concentrating, and a sense of helplessness, all of which can contribute to deteriorating mental health.

Secondly, young people will be susceptible to increased stress and trauma due to climate-related disasters. As extreme weather events become more common, youth may directly experience or witness the devastation wrought by hurricanes, wildfires, floods, and other natural disasters. Such traumatic events can lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts. Additionally, the loss of homes, communities, or loved ones can result in complicated grief and prolonged emotional distress, further exacerbating mental health challenges.

As the changing climate can amplify existing disparities, particularly in vulnerable communities, which young people may find themselves a part of. These disparities can manifest as economic hardships, displacement, food insecurity, and health issues. Young individuals facing these adversities are at a higher risk of developing depression and other mood disorders. Furthermore, the constant adaptation to climate-induced disruptions, such as frequent evacuations and unstable living conditions, can lead to chronic stress and maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse, further impacting the mental well-being of young people.

Marginalised communities, including First Nations, LGBTIQ+, disabled, and refugee youth, are disproportionately affected by climate change. They often have fewer resources to adapt to the challenges posed by a warming planet and face exacerbated socio-economic disparities as a result. A habitable and safe climate is not merely an environmental concern but a human rights issue. Every individual, regardless of their background, deserves the right to live in a world where their well-being is protected, and their mental health is not jeopardized by the consequences of climate change.

It is imperative that young people are not condemned to a future where their mental health and overall well-being are compromised to such a degree. As leaders and lawmakers, we have a moral and ethical obligation to take immediate and meaningful action to combat climate change. I implore your peers in Federal Government to ensure a sustainable and secure future for the next generation of Australians. This is not just a policy issue; it is a matter of intergenerational justice and the preservation of our planet for future generations.

References

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