

Please support action on climate change

Psychotherapy Integration List [mailto:SEPI@LISTS.APA.ORG]
De la part de Hilde Rapp

Dear Sepi colleagues

I would like to invite you to join a campaign to show governments and the United Nations that health professionals are supporting firm action to mitigate climate change.

I was reluctant to post this message to the list as it may, at first sight, sound like a political issue. After a very helpful discussion about this with Glenn Anderson, I have come to the view that it is an issue of very general and wide ranging implications which affect everyone, and it therefore also directly affects our professional practice as integrative psychotherapists.

So please, please, bear with me.

You may know that psychotherapists all over the world, together with other health professionals, have already done much to integrate across approaches and disciplines to assist victims of climate change. As I will argue below, climate change and armed conflict unfortunately go together more often than we would like to think, and this is getting worse. Some of you may remember the Amsterdam conference which Sjoerd Colijn and I organised in 2004, where we included many presentations on work with refugees and victims of war. Increasingly, refugees will be climate refugees, and wars will be wars over resources- many already are.

It is no secret that climate change is rapidly becoming the most serious challenge to global wellbeing and global security. Together with the economic downturn, it brings people to our doors because they are frightened miserable to the point of being clinically depressed and anxious about their future and that of their children and grandchildren.

Many of us are already working in disaster zones by offering various forms of psycho-social interventions to help communities to recover from the pain, suffering, trauma and loss caused by natural and man made disasters. Often the two go together, and climate change factors act both as drivers and as consequences of disasters.

We address the fear and mistrust generated by the protracted armed conflict by teaching counselling skills to the conflict actors. We help to rebuild relationships, trust and understanding, with the prospect of initiating and supporting productive dialogue. We offer empathic listening to grievances and we support the grieving. We facilitate fair processes of participation in political decision making by teaching deep democracy and non violent communication.

We work with aid agencies to support their staff and we help coordinate an integrated response to the disaster. We ask everyone to pay equal attention to the physical, social, educational and psychological needs of stricken communities and individuals, so that a measure of human security may be restored to them.

We not only support and heal the afflicted after the disaster has struck. We also research and analyze how these vicious cycles of interdependent natural and man made disasters operate.

What more can we do to address climate change?

As integrative psychotherapists, our tendency towards holistic thinking has made us well aware that the knock on effects of a high carbon life style are damaging to poor people all over the world. We understand the fault lines that define inequalities between people associated with gender, class, education, age, sexuality, wealth, geography, ethnicity, religion, ideology, nationhood and so forth.

In general, people are becoming increasingly aware of the cost of the way we live not only to our physical but also to our mental health, and we know that both are intimately connected. The practices, products and processes that go into what we make, what we grow, what we buy, what we eat and how we spend our leisure time makes many of us depressed, envious, demoralized and overweight or underweight. At one and the same time as we are driving forward a process of relentless urbanization, and the industrialization of agriculture and livestock management, we yearn more and more for participation in nature and wildlife.

As psychotherapists, we are in a unique and privileged position to help people find the will and the courage to make the necessary lifestyle changes, and to make the leap into a more adaptive and more sustainable future. We can facilitate the realization that living more simply, far from leading to a loss of quality of life, actually brings a return to a politics of meaning, where we invest in values that sustain people and communities.

We know from our academic research as well as from our practical, clinical reflections that participation in socially meaningful relationships and activities is a better road to happiness than material wealth, and that happiness spreads through social networks like virus. A way of life where we waste less, pollute less and communicate and share more is already judged by many to be intrinsically more satisfying than consumerism. These values lead to an understanding of prosperity in which inner riches are at least as important as material wealth.

We can show that exercise improves our mental wellbeing, reduces obesity and that walking and cycling instead of driving also improves air quality and saves resources and reduces health risks, including obesity. We know from our research that eating less meat has a huge knock on effect on saving energy and cutting emissions caused by livestock rearing practices and that, at the same time, it reduces health risks, including obesity and a more vegetarian diet helps to balance our emotions.

In general, we all know that the way we use energy in our daily lives is wasteful. We know how to improve our built environment and our waste management, and how to make transport more energy efficient. We know that much of what we do causes unnecessary pollution. Our colleagues in psychology are already acting as advisers on how we create a greener world, but we, as therapists can help with understanding the motivational factors which will need to be harnessed if this to lead to practical action in the world.

The current economic disaster can become a turning point for a genuine metanoia. We must not pass up this historic opportunity for a real change of heart and mind about who we are and how we might become better stewards of our shared earth.

We, as integrative psychotherapists, have from the outset been inspired by values informed by emotional literacy, which have more recently been articulate through relational psychotherapy. We recognise that better interpersonal and social relationships acts as an antidote to a materialism in which identity is derived from status, affluence, over consumption and one-up-man-ship rather than from enduring human qualities and achievements which pave the road to self realization and self efficacy.

I would very cordially invite you to join me and our colleagues in the wider health field in letting our politicians know that we as integrative psychotherapists are also behind them when it comes to taking hard decisions that have the power to set in motion processes and procedures which tip the odds in favour of our collective survival rather than in favour of run away climate catastrophe.

The Climate and Health Council (more information can be found on the website: www.climateandhealth.org) is an initiative originally started by doctors, but aimed at all health professionals to present the concerns of health professionals to the COP15 climate change conference in Copenhagen later this year. The initiative has high level professional support already, and it is mounting a major research initiative, led by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine which seeks to supplement the Stern Report by quantifying the health effects of mitigation actions in much greater detail. It is also supported by The Centre for International Peacebuilding, of which I am the managing co-director.

It would be wonderful if you were willing to lend this initiative your support by signing a pledge which sets out that health professionals will support action on climate change, putting all their skills, commitment and knowledge at the disposal of society.

Thank you for your patience – I felt I wanted to make a reasonable case- and do please consider signing the pledge www.climateandhealth.org/pledge.

Of course I would be most grateful if you were also willing to pass this message on to other colleagues and networks in the health field.

With thanks and warm best wishes

Cordially

Hilde