Eco-Anxiety and Mental Health in 2020-2021: The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic, The U.S. 2020 Presidential Election, Recent Social Justice Uprisings, and Climate Change on Mental Health

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Topic/Abstract

Eco-anxiety can be described as anxiety that arises from events or changes that occur within one's environment. Within the past year, the United States has experienced a significant amount of change within its environment that will undoubtedly have significant effects on the mental health of individuals of all walks of life and the mental health profession as a whole. This study examined the effects of eco-anxiety surrounding relevant current events that have occurred in 2020-2021 including the COVID-19 Pandemic, Social Violence, United States government affairs and climate change on the mental health of the clients that are currently seeking mental health treatment. This study plans to assess mental health therapists at Evelyn Brandon Health Center to see if the themes of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Social Violence, United States government affairs and climate change are or have been present in sessions with current clients. This research will be important in helping plan for future public health crises, adapting to a changing mental health field, and implementing evidence-based practices for eco-anxiety.

Methodology

The research design for this study utilized a descriptive design that focused on analyzing quantitative data collected from EBHC mental health (MH) therapists (and interns) about their clients. The quantitative data collected from this study was used to assess how participating EBMHC clients are currently experiencing eco-anxiety surrounding the COVID19 Pandemic, Social Violence, United States government affairs and climate change. Data was collected from EBHC MH therapists using a survey/grid that asked therapists to recall if any of their clients are citing issues related to the research topics during the client's episode of care. Surveys did not collect any identifying information (from either client or therapist; see survey for details), assuring client and therapist confidentiality. Data was collected from 7 therapists and interns and included data from 446 currently enrolled clients overall. Data collected from this research was analyzed using descriptive statistical analyses.

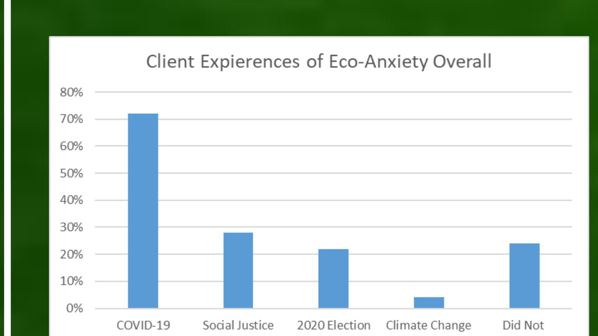
Client	COVID-19 Pandemic	Social Justice	2020 Election	Climate Change
1	x			
2	x			
3	x			
4	x			
5	x	x	x	
6	x			
7	x			
8				
9				
10	x		x	
11	x			
12				
13	x			
14				
15	x			

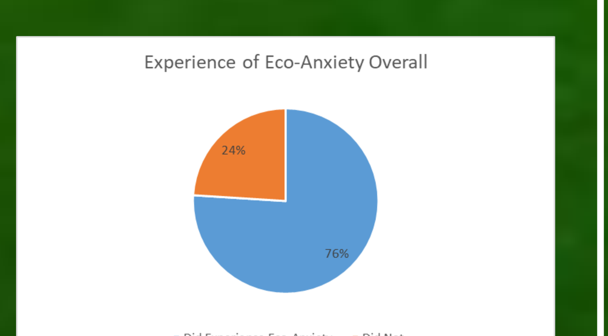
Caption: Example of unidentifiable data collected from a therapist.

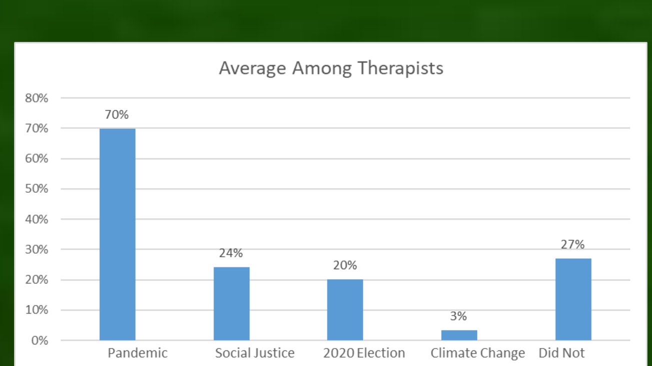
Results

The results of this research showed that overall, 76% of clients had experienced some form of eco-anxiety, and 24% did not report any adverse mental health symptoms associated with eco-anxiety. Specifically, overall 72% of clients reported eco-anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic, 28% of clients reported eco-anxiety about the recent social justice uprisings, 22% of clients reported eco-anxiety about the 2020 election, 4% of clients reported eco-anxiety about climate change, and 24% of clients did not report symptoms of eco-anxiety.

When looking at averages among individual therapists, 70% of clients reported eco-anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic, 24% of clients reported eco-anxiety about the recent social justice uprisings, 20% of clients reported eco-anxiety about the 2020 election, 3% of clients reported eco-anxiety about climate change, and 27% of clients did not report symptoms of eco-anxiety.







Caption: Bar and Pie graphs showing the results of the study.

Scope/Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine how eco-anxiety surrounding the COVID19 Pandemic, Social Violence, United States government affairs and climate change effect the mental health of the clients that are currently seeking mental health treatment from Evelyn Brandon Mental Health Center (EBMHC). Eco-anxiety is defined as anxiety that arises due and in response to events that are occurring in a person's immediate environment. The main question of interest for this research study is: How is eco -anxiety surrounding the COVID Pandemic, recent social-justice movements, United States Government affairs, and/or climate change effecting mental health of clients that seek services from Evelyn Brandon Mental Health Clinic? The primary objectives of this study were:

1. Whether and how much EBMHC clients are currently affected by eco-anxiety the COVID19 Pandemic, Social Violence, United States government affairs, and climate change

2. Whether clients at EBMH are seeking mental health services or some other form of help for issues related to eco-anxiety surrounding COVID Pandemic, recent social justice movements, United States Government Affairs, and/or climate change.

Conclusion/Discussion

The results of this research showed that a significant amount of clients at Evelyn Brandon Health Center experienced symptoms of eco-anxiety within the past year, with the COVID-19 pandemic being the leading eco-anxiety theme expressed during therapy. Although clients did report eco-anxiety about the other themes measured (the social justice uprisings, the 2020 presidential election, and climate change), significantly less clients reported symptoms of eco-anxiety surrounding the recent social justice uprisings and the 2020 election, and even less reported eco-anxiety surrounding climate change.

One main conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that eco-anxiety is a mental health issue that is relevant and regularly experienced by individuals in the Rochester, NY area. Another conclusion from this study is that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and continues to have a significant impact on the mental health of clients at Evelyn Brandon; This can be generalized to say that the pandemic effected the mental health of many individuals in the Rochester, NY area. Although not as significant, the other three measured themes (the social justice uprisings, the 2020 presidential election, and climate change) also affected clients at Evelyn Brandon Health Center, which if anything, should be at least noted.

Implications

Treating clients that present with eco-anxiety is sure to become a larger part of the mental health literature in the future. Currently, there is some literature in existence regarding evidence-based practice for eco-anxiety and symptoms similar in presentation to eco-anxiety (Albertson, Gadarian, & Cramer , 2018; Lee & Lee, 2018; Park & Yang, 2017; Staggers-Hakim, 2016).

When talking about mental health intervention for eco-anxiety related to illness and disaster, Lee and Lee (2018) found that higher understanding of a disaster leads to reduced reporting of depression and anxiety symptoms. Moreover, a similar study by Park and Yang (2017) found disaster-preparedness associated with higher level of education and disaster confidence. Lee and Lee (2018) also found through their disaster research that the kinds of information given out by the media, particularly the kids of details shared about a disaster and what can be done about the situation, effect the levels of anxiety that arise in disaster-like situations (i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic). These are very important things to consider when formulating successful interventions for those experiencing eco-anxiety Surrounding the COIVD-19 pandemic.

The literature that exists regarding eco-anxiety social justice movements, police brutality, and social violence poses some implications for the mental health field as well. a. Staggers-Hakim (2016) found that Black boys found it cathartic to talk about community violence and national police killings, and the boys also indicated the desire to continue conversations in the community. Staggers-Hakim (2016) also found that acknowledgement of the trauma that Blacks experience, especially related to police killing, was significant for alleviating negative mental health symptoms. This is valuable information for mental health professionals seeking effectiveness in providing interventions to marginalized populations and those experiencing eco-anxiety related to police brutality and systemic racism.

Some of the existing literature on eco-anxiety and politics has a slightly different take when it comes to implications, but still an important one: Albertson, Gadarian, & Cramer (2018) found that eco-anxiety surrounding politics can actually motivate individuals to engage in more community-based behaviors such as community advocacy and an increase in voting behaviors. This may be important with clients that are experiencing eco-anxiety about politics and have issues with motivation.

As with most topics being researched today, continuing research will allow us to better understand the phenomenon of eco-anxiety as well as better-formulate and evaluate interventions tailored at addressing and treating eco-anxiety.

Literature

Eco-Anxiety from Illness and Disease

There have been many studies that have linked feelings of anxiety to illness and disease (Bults et al., 2011; Lau, 2003; Lee and Lee, 2018; Leung et al., 2005; Xu and Peng, 2015; Winter, 2018). However, when looking at anxiety associated with epidemics and pandemics, it is beneficial to consider the subject from a disaster perspective. A disaster can be defined as "a crisis that can cause large-scale damage to a community and hinder its ability to recover" (Lee and Lee, 2018). From this lens, it is easy to see how an epidemic or pandemic can be considered a disaster. Additionally, there are several studies that have examined the effects of epidemic illness on mental health from a disaster perspective (Fullerton, Ursano, & Wang, 2004; Lee et al., 2016; Lee, Han, &Cho, 2016; Lee and Lee, 2018; Neria & Sullivan, 2011; North and Pfefferbaum, 2013; Tolin and Foa, 2006; Wayment, 2004)

Fullerton, Ursano, & Wang (2004) found that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the most common disorder experienced by disaster victims, followed by acute stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and anxiety disorders. Several studies have also found females at a higher risk of developing symptoms from disaster-related anxiety (Lee et al., 2016; Lee and Lee, 2019; Tolin and Foa, 2006; Wayment, 2004). In addition to direct exposure to disasters, indirect exposure to disasters (such as through stories or social media) can also cause symptoms associated with disaster-related anxiety (Neria & Sullivan, 2011). Specifically, Lee and Lee (2019) found that as indirect exposure to disaster increases, so does the possibility of experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, some studies have linked more news exposure to disaster to increased anxiety (North and Pfefferbaum, 2013; Lee, Han, &Cho, 2016).

One study that focused on the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone in 2014 found the epidemic associated with feelings of anxiety, threat, guilt, and shame (Winter, 2018). Moreover, the anxiety that was experienced by individuals during this study had resulted from the "unconstrucuability" of the virus (Winter, 2018). The people assessed in this study had experienced a total dissolution of core structures as well as a constant threat of death, and some described feeling as if "things were upside down" (Winter, 2018). Given the current state of the United States during the COVID19 Pandemic, this information about eco-anxiety experienced by those in Sierra Leone in 2014 seems extremely relevant.

Risk perception and anxiey. Studies have shown that perception of risk plays a major role in how anxious some individuals feel about illness, epidemics, and pandemics. (Bults et al., 2011; Lau et al., 2003; Lee and Lee, 2019; Leung et al., 2005; Xu and Peng, 2015) Lee and Lee (2018) found that a higher perception of risk of disaster is associated with higher reporting of depression and symptoms. Additionally, some studies have found that the number of "epidemic-related risk perception and protective behaviors increased or decreased consistently with the rising and falling number of new cases" (Bults et al., 2011; Lau et al., 2003; Leung et al., 2005; Xu and Peng, 2015).

In a study focusing on the A(H7N9) flu epidemic in Hong Kong in 2014-2015, Liao et al. (2019) found that psychological responses and behaviors may change "in parallel with the evolution of the epidemic". In the case of the Laio et al. (2019) study, greater number of responses to the epidemic (such as stocking-up on supplies, self-quarantining, and mask-wearing behaviors) were seen in older individuals as compared to younger individuals, and worry was strongly correlated with protective behaviors. Other studies have linked responses to illnesses to herd behaviors (Smith, 2006; Syed et al., 2003).

Eco-Anxiety and Politics

Emotions have been linked to both politics and political beliefs. (Glaser & Salovey, 1998; Marmor-Lavie & Weimann, 2006) Similarly, physical anxiety has been linked to political issues (Renshon, Lee, & Tingley, 2015), such as immigration, that have the potential to cause measurable spikes in physiological reactivity. Additionally, it has been said that people get anxious when their homes are threatened (Heath Kelly, In Press), which can be a popular topic among politicians. Furthermore, Lipzynka (2017) found that political unrest can create mental health issues for existing mental health sufferers. Similar studies on children have found that living in places of high political violence can negatively affect the mental health of children, causing symptoms such as depression, anxiety, community stress, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD (Cummings et al., 2009; Cummings et al., 2011; Moussa et al., 2015).

Politics and existential anxiety. Some research has suggested that political issues can cause a type of existential anxiety (Browning, 2018), with people using self-identity and "regular routines" to combat existential anxiety surrounding political issues (Giddens, 1991). It has been theorized that this is because humans live for normal routine and tend to concentrate on things they can control (Browning, 2018).

Anxiety on both sides of the political divide. Studies have shown that anxiety is used and experienced by those on both sides of the political divide (Albertson, et al., 2018; Altemeyer, 1996; Crouse & Stalker, 2007; Dollard et al., 1939; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Latkin & Curry, 2003; Kessler and Cohrs, 2008; Napier & Jost, 2008; Pihkala, 2018; Roccato & Russo, 2017; Tajfel, 1981; Whitley, 1999; Zhang, et al., 2015). Democrats and other liberals have used eco-anxiety to push their agenda and make change around issues such as climate change (Albertson et al., 2018). Although considered extremely important by many due to it's ability to create change, this kind of eco-anxiety can also cause significant distress (Pihkala, 2018)

Eco-Anxiety Surrounding Social-Justice Uprisings

There is a wealth of research and literature surrounding anxiety and social justice issues. Because the current social justice movement in the United States is focused on the treatment of people of color (most notably Black individuals and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement) and police homicide, the research and literature reviewed in this section is focused on these same subjects.

Social violence, police brutality, and Black individuals. Social violence and police brutality have been directly linked to physical and mental distress in Black men and boys (Staggers-Hakim, 2016). Homicide continues to be a leading cause of death for Black men (Heron, 2015), with police homicide being a significant factor to the mortality of Black men (Juzwiak & Chan, 2014). Johnson et al, (2014) found that Black men were killed on average of about twice a week in 2014, and that Black individuals are three times as likely to get killed by police than any other racial or ethnic group. Additionally, Swaine, Laughland, & Lartey (2015) found that out of those Black men killed by police in 2015, more than one in five were unarmed.

People of color and the effects of social inequalities on overall health. People of color, Black in particular, are the most vulnerable to the effects of social inequalities on health (La Veist & Isaac, 2012; Lee et al, 2017; Staggers-Hakim, 2016). Racism causes social inequalities such as unemployment; poor housing quality; neighborhood and community underdevelopment; crowding; poverty; and violence (Staggers-Hakim, 2016). Furthermore, stress from racism (perceived racism, internalized racism, and experienced racism) is related to health difficulties such as obesity; hypertension; physical inactivity; diabetes; heart disease; cancer; mental health concerns; sleep disturbance; breast cancer and premature mortality. (Harrell et al., 2003; Paradies, 2006; Staggers-Hakim, 2016).

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