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# Climate change is coming — time to prepare

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In the YMCA locker room the day after President Trump announced he was pulling the United States out of the Paris climate accord, many people expressed fear about the future. Their concern is valid.

We have precious little time to slash carbon emissions far enough to prevent disastrous climate change, and Trump's action will slow the process. It is now more imperative than ever to prepare for what lies ahead. But solutions require expanded thinking.

Scientists believe that limiting the rise of global average temperatures to 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels will minimize the horrific wind and rainstorms, floods, droughts, heat waves, rising sea levels, and other effects of human-induced climate change, and hopefully will prevent uncontrollable planetary warming. That's why the ultimate goal of the Paris accord is to limit the global temperature increase to 2.7 degrees.

Research published in May in *Geophysical Research Letters*, however, suggests a sustained period of rapid warming is likely over the next few years. In the absence of external cooling influences such as volcanic eruptions, the study concluded that our planet could be 2.7 degrees warmer within just nine years. Other studies have concluded it will happen in 10 to 15 years.

We must get our heads around the reality that the 2.7 degree threshold will likely be crossed in just a few years.

Barring a worldwide agreement to leave most fossil fuels in the ground, which is nowhere in sight, the sluggish pace of global emission reductions — now made

even more difficult by Trump's self-destructive actions — means that temperatures will certainly rise far more than 2.7 degrees.

Humanity is entering an era of dramatic changes in the Earth's climate and ecological systems that will produce gut-wrenching shocks and overwhelming stresses. Yet rather than preparing, our response has almost exclusively focused on external technological and physical adjustments. It is now imperative to place a major emphasis on preparing humans for the psychological and social effects of a warming world.

A growing body of research shows that the consequences of the disasters and toxic stresses generated by rising temperatures often include increased anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, suicide and other mental health problems. Psychosocial maladies also increase, including hopelessness, child and spousal abuse, interpersonal aggression, extremism and violence.

The United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee states that mental health, psychosocial and humanitarian crises are often closely connected. The reason is that disasters and overwhelming stresses can erode vital personal and social protective systems, aggravate existing mental disorders, amplify existing social justice and inequality problems, and generate many unexpected psychosocial difficulties.

Indeed, left unaddressed, the harmful human reactions to climate change will threaten the safety, health and well-being of families, communities and entire societies. Because fearful people often retreat into a self-protective survival mode that leaves them uninterested in external issues like emission reductions, the adverse human reactions will also make it even harder to minimize the climate crisis.

We are colossally unprepared for the unprecedented psychological and social challenges that lie ahead. To the extent that these issues have been acknowledged, the focus has been on beefing up disaster mental health programs. While important, most of these programs are already fragile and will be increasingly overwhelmed as temperatures rise. Disaster mental health programs are also short-term interventions that do not help people deal with ongoing critical stresses.

In fact, most disaster preparedness programs are inadequate for the challenges of climate change. They tend to zero in on specific risks and respond to discrete short-term crises with the goal of returning to pre-crisis conditions.

A warming planet, however, will produce a mixture of disasters and relentless stresses that will continue for decades or more. It will be increasingly difficult to “bounce back” to previous conditions.

Effective responses must therefore be ongoing, involve entire communities, focus on building and maintaining personal and collective strengths, and seek to help residents use adversity to create new and better conditions for everyone. These are the keys to making wise and skillful decisions in the midst of ongoing adversity.

Under Trump, the federal government has abrogated its legal and moral responsibility to protect people and the planet. States, cities and the private sector must take the lead in aggressively cutting emissions. Equally important, a top local and national priority should be to launch initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacity of individuals, families and entire communities to prepare for and respond constructively to the psychological and social impacts of a warming planet.

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