Eco Social Work

In practice

"Caring for the environment helps to care for your mental health" *UN Environmental Agency 2021*

Eco Social Work Areas to consider

- Environmental Degradation - Consider the impact of the environment in which people live

- Environmental Hardship - Impact of extreme weather and climate change

- Environmental Transition – Concerns people have about the future. For example farmers fear for policy change, adjustments to working conditions.

- (Payne 2020)

Social Work and The Environment
Building sustainable communities

Social Work and the Environment

"The concept of sustainability relates to the maintenance and enhancement of environmental, social and economic resources, in order to meet the needs of current and future generations"
Brennan

Social and Environmental Justice

Human Rights:

- Worldwide, poorer populations and developing countries are more likely to face the consequences of climate action, air pollution and other environmental disasters.

- Social workers play a unique role among helping professionals as they advocate for social justice and human rights on a macro level

- It is important for social workers to understand the historic patterns of oppression and discrimination and confront them appropriately and effectively.

- Environmental Justice is a human right underpinned by United Nations Treaties

- "Governments shall take measures, in co-operation with the people concerned to protect and preserve the environment of the territories they inhabit" *UN report of the Inter-agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues 2007*

Social and Environmental Justice Human Rights:

- Example of Environmental and Community Social Work in an Irish context

- **Partnership Approaches to Address the Impacts of Environmental, Social, and Economic Injustices on Mental Wellbeing with the Traveller Community in Ireland**

- *By Kerry Cuskelly, Thomas McCann and Nick Murphy*

The impact of Environmental Issues on Mental Health

- *"Mental health and many common mental disorders are shaped to a great extent by the social, economic, physical and cultural environments in which people live. The environment is one of the determinants of mental health outcomes, and hence its significance is still to be further researched and promoted in the context of mental health and wellbeing."*

- Filipova T., Kopsieker L., Gerritsen E., Bodin E., Brzezinski B. and Rubio-Ramirez O. (2020) "Mental health and the environment: How European policies can better reflect environmental degradation's impact on people's mental health and well-being". Background paper by the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) and the Barcelona Institute for Global Health (IS-Global).

The impact of Environmental Issues on Mental Health

- Environmental issues impact on mental health in a variety of different ways. Important to consider the built environment and resources in a community.

- When children don't have access to safe play areas this impacts on their personal and social development.

- In an Irish context this occurred for Traveller children and for young people who grew up in direct provision centres.

- It also occurred in communities where there is no access to a play ground particularly for people with no access to their own car

- Play grounds need to be accessible to every child, including those with disabilities and speech and language difficulties.

The impact of Urban environment on Mental Health

- Poor quality planning, overcrowding in housing, lack of public spaces, light and noise pollution all impact on mental health outcomes.

- Leads to an increase in distress, poor cognitive development, aggression and trauma.

- Urban environments should be built to consider the lifestyle and needs of communities. Promoting active travel, reducing traffic density (Particularly outside of schools) and limiting noise and air pollution.

Air Pollution and Mental Health

- Relatively small increases in exposure to Air Pollution have been linked to an increased severity of mental illness.

- Those with first presentation psychotic or mood disorder attended mental healthcare service more frequently if they had been exposed to higher levels of air pollution

- Relatively small increases in exposure to nitrogen dioxide lead to a 32% increase in needing community based treatment and an 18% increase in risk of being admitted to hospital.

- Newbury, J., Stewart, R., Fisher, H., Beevers, S., Dajnak, D., Broadbent, M., . . . Bakolis, I. (2021). Association between air pollution exposure and mental health service use among individuals with first presentations of psychotic and mood disorders: Retrospective cohort study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 219*(6), 678-685. doi:10.1192/bjp.2021.119

Climate Change and Mental Health

- The impact of climate change will lead to an increase in significant weather events. This will disproportionally impact poorer communities world wide and lead to displacement.

- Worldwide impact already being felt – significant risk of Post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression.

- Evidence suggests that women are more likely to experience the negative health outcomes linked to Climate Change

- Climate change adaption and resilience planning should included measures on preparation and response in the mental health system. (IEEP report 2021)

- This week alone we had red weather warnings for a storm in Ireland and record heat in brazil. With 2023 on track to be the warmest year on record.

Exposure to Toxins and Mental Health

- Lead piping remains in some houses built in Ireland before 1980

- Exposure to lead in the water supply leads to a number of health issues including impacting child development, leading to problems in behaviour and attention.

- Some evidence this continues through adulthood. Children with higher levels of lead in their blood at age 11 are more likely to show signs of mental illness at age 38 (Reuben et al 2019)

- Exposure to other toxins have been alleged to contribute to mental illness. Further research need in this area considering the impact of chemicals and micro-plastics on public health. (iiep report 2021)

Ways to include environmental considerations in assessments

- Get to know the physical environment that you cover in work.

- Ask families about the environment at home, have the adequate heating, is there damp etc.

- Ask families how they spend their time, do they access green or outdoor areas

- Can the family access public transport and if not does this impact on family members that can't drive are they more socially isolate as a result.

Using the Natural Environment in Social Work Interactions

- How can you integrate the natural environment in your interactions with children and families

- Consider the environment in which they live when completing assessments - Is there environmental hardships, does the family have access to green spaces

- Can you arrange some meetings with families in a natural settings - A practice that became much more common during the covid 19 pandemic

- Linking clients into outdoor projects, eco therapies, tidy towns etc.

Nature Based Mental Health

- Access to green spaces has been linked to better mental health outcomes. Access to green spaces should be equitable and fair and taking into consideration in the planning process.

- This is particularly important in the context of the building of new houses and developing new communities.

- Biodiverse urban nature should be a priority to promoting mental health and well being.

- Social work has a positive role to play in tackling the underlying problems contributing to poor mental health outcomes.

Conclusion

- Mental health disorders are increasing in prevalence in society.

- As social workers we can work on these problems on an individual and family basis.

- We should also consider the broader issues at play

- Promoting and advocating for environmental policies is a cost effective way to reduce mental health disorders and improve the quality of life of people of all ages.

- Focus on environmental issues should consider the underlying and interconnected systemic issues.

- A renewed focus should be placed on preventative work and community engagement.

Conclusion