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CHANGE

Policy Brief

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Older adults mental resilience to climate change: understanding needs and harnessing resources

Context to the study

- Older adults are disproportionately at risk of experiencing mental health effects from climate change-related events.
- Responses so far often focus only on older adults' vulnerabilities and deficits.
- Research studies focusing on coping mechanisms and resilience usually limit their scope to a small pool of factors, mainly centred round social support.

Summary of findings

- Older people are resilient in the face of climate change in multiple ways, can contribute to building community and societal resilience and should be recognized as active agents in the climate discourse.
- Different levels of analysis, individual, community and societal/environmental should be considered in their interactions to foster mental resilience of older people. These are not mutually exclusive and synergistically contribute to climate resilience.
- Policymakers should align healthy ageing and climate resilience agendas to deliver co-benefits, from heat-ready housing and cooling access in places where socialization is fostered, to access to green spaces and providing outlets where older people can contribute to designing resilient communities.

Introduction

Climate change harms mental health via long term exposure and experience of acute climate-change related events (Lawrance et al., 2022). Older adults face heightened risks and should be a priority in climate–health planning (Romanello et al., 2022). They experience disproportionate impacts – from heat-related illness and mortality to isolation and service disruption – accordingly responses often focus only on their deficits (Mavrodaris, 2023). Evidence clearly points to the importance of strengthening intrinsic capacity and resilience, not just addressing vulnerability (Prina et al., 2024). However, interventions specific to older people and climate are limited, underscoring the need to scale and evaluate practical solutions (Patrick et al., 2025). A balanced, inclusive approach can protect mental health while avoiding ageist framings and ensuring older adults are partners in resilience-building (Ayalon et al., 2022). Policymakers can act now by aligning healthy ageing and climate resilience agendas to deliver co-benefits, from heat-ready housing and cooling access in places where socialization is fostered, to improving access to green spaces and providing outlets where older people can contribute to designing resilient communities.

Summary of Research

To guide action on older adults' climate resilience, we used a mixed-methods approach: a systematic review identifying resilience factors, synthesized into a practical framework refined through interviews with cross-sector experts – climate activism in ageing, architecture, food policy, medicine, medical sociology, pedagogy, physiotherapy, psychology, and sociology – to identify missing elements and refine the model. The outcome is an up-to-date map of strengths, actionable resilience factors, and their interconnections, highlighting priority areas for policy interventions and flagging underexplored issues that warrant targeted research and implementation.

Research Findings I – literature review

The analysis of the literature revealed that older adults' mental resilience to climate change is based on six elements, centered around the individual and society:

[1] **Behavioral resilience** refers to resilience-building actions and includes nature-connected activities, applying one's skills and knowledge, social participation, help-seeking, maintaining routines, and pro-environmental behaviors – supporting hope, control, and recovery.

[2] **Emotional resilience** involves managing emotions, channeling distress into constructive action, having emotional connections to others and building solidarity, as well as drawing strength from attachment to place.

[3] **Value- and attitude-related resilience** includes aspects such as spirituality, positive outlook (gratitude, hope), and a sense of meaning and purpose, which buffer psychological impacts and sustain adaptation.

[4] **Cognitive resilience** draws on learning from past events, cognitive reframing (including acceptance and goal focus), and climate/environmental literacy, including use of local and Indigenous knowledge.

[5] **Economic resilience** – financial stability and insurance coverage – reduces stress and aids recovery but is understudied and reported mainly in high-income settings.

[6] **Social resilience** depends on kinship and community support, age-appropriate assistance from health and social care professionals, and reciprocity; many older adults prefer to both give and receive support, suggesting the need to formalize roles for their contribution.

Conclusions

The expert-informed refinement of the categories extracted from the literature confirms that older adults' climate resilience is multi-layered and interdependent. At the individual level, factors such as nature contact, learning from past events, and cognitive reframing reinforce one another, turning coping behaviours into emotional recovery and growth. At the meso level, intergenerational exchange emerges as a powerful but underused asset that strengthens mental health, counters ageism, and enhances agency through shared activities and collective action. At the macro level, resilience depends on systemic, place-based conditions: the quality of the lived environment, opportunities for social connection, and access to nature. Nature-based solutions, such as community gardens, offer a practical, integrative approach; they promote intergenerational contact, social cohesion and engagement with nature, whilst also contributing to food security. Overall, building older adults' climate resilience requires such integrated strategies that connect micro-level strengths with supportive community infrastructures and age-inclusive policies. Cross-sector collaboration and sustained investment are essential to operationalize this framework and to put scalable, equitable interventions into place.

Policy Recommendations

This research study shows that older people are potentially resilient in the face of climate change, can contribute to building community and societal resilience and should be recognized as active agents in the climate discourse (Setti et al., 2025). It also highlights that different levels of analysis, individual, community and societal/environmental should be considered in their interactions to foster mental resilience in older as well as across generations. The following recommendations for concrete actions on policy level can be drawn:

- **Invest in age-inclusive, nature-based and mobility infrastructure**: develop community gardens and accessible public spaces that foster intergenerational contact and nature engagement; address rural–urban mobility gaps with shaded routes, cooling access, and proximity to care.
- **Strengthen community and health system supports before and after climate events**: formalize age-appropriate outreach by health and social care professionals, expand community hubs, and institutionalize opportunities for older adults to both receive and provide support to sustain mutuality.
- **Expand digital inclusion for crisis resilience**: fund reliable connectivity and targeted digital literacy programs for older adults to maintain social ties and access health and emergency services during disasters.
- **Build economic resilience through targeted instruments**: implement compensation schemes and grants for resilient housing and infrastructure; promote adequate insurance coverage and financial safety nets.
- **Embed older adults' agency in governance**: use participatory planning to give older people a voice in local adaptation, and promote intergenerational initiatives to combat ageism and support institutional learning on resilience.

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Older Adults' Mental Resilience to Climate Change

Key Results from the Research

Older people are resilient in multiple ways and are active agents in building community and societal resilience.

6 TYPES OF RESILIENCE

1. BEHAVIORAL RESILIENCE

Nature connection, social participation, maintaining routines, help-seeking and pro-environmental actions build hope, control and recovery.

2. EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Managing emotions, turning distress into action, solidarity and connection with others and with place.

3. VALUE & ATTITUDE RESILIENCE

Spirituality, positive outlook (gratitude, hope), and sense of meaning and purpose sustain adaptation and buffer stress.

4. COGNITIVE RESILIENCE

Learning from past events, reframing (acceptance and goal focus), and climate literacy including local and Indigenous knowledge.

5. ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

Financial stability and insurance coverage reduce stress and support recovery (understudied area).

6. SOCIAL RESILIENCE

Support from family, community and services, with opportunities to both give and receive support.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Align healthy ageing and climate resilience agendas to deliver co-benefits.

Create heat-ready homes & cooling access

Invest in safe, affordable housing and accessible cooling in places where social connection is fostered.

Expand access to green spaces

Protect and improve parks and nature spaces to support mental well-being and connection to nature.

Enable older people to contribute

Include older adults in designing resilient communities and policies. Value their knowledge and experience.

Strengthen social connection & reciprocity

Support community networks and programs that enable older adults to both give and receive support.

Integrate health & social care with climate action

Deliver age-appropriate support services that address climate risks and mental health together.

Consider individual, community and societal levels together – they interact and synergistically build the mental resilience of older adults to climate change.