

The elephant in the room – part two

In May this year I started the dialogue about climate change and health. At the risk of irritating more than the one person who emailed me to say that, while she usually enjoyed my mini editorials, she really didn't like the climate change one, and certainly didn't like Chersich's^[1] speculations about climate change and HIV, I am going to write about it again. Across the world, enlightened science journalists and writers are taking up the cudgels and literally bombarding their friends on social media, their editors and readers, and anyone else who will listen on the fact – yes, the fact – of massive, irreversible, catastrophic climate change if we do not make drastic efforts to reduce emissions to zero, stop cutting down forests and change our entire consumer-based economic system.

My good friend Leonie Joubert, an outstanding writer as well as an advocate for the vulnerable and forgotten, has for some time now been writing – in books, newspapers, and on social media – about climate change. Her latest *Daily Maverick* article is one of the most powerful pieces yet.^[2] To quote: 'I'm not usually this frank about my internal dialogues. But maybe it's time to give you an unedited glimpse into the daily psychological grind, as headline after headline bombards me with what the science is now saying unequivocally: we are slipping into runaway climate collapse; atmospheric greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations are now higher than they've been in 3 million years; we have just 12 years in which to bring our emissions down to zero if we hope to avoid slipping across an irreversible threshold that will take us into a new climate regime that is outside the stable state in which modern civilisation emerged; but our emissions are in fact growing year on year, and we're set for a dramatic overshoot of increasingly impossible targets to stabilise our planetary life-support system.' She admits to having started smoking again to counter the stress she is experiencing (I am going to try and persuade her to go back to running).

And she is not the only one. Other climate change activists speak of complete exhaustion and despair, and for the first time, the international medical community are sitting up and voicing their

concerns, specifically about the effects of climate change on mental health. In fact, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is busy with its next global overview, and in 2022 they will include a chapter on the effects of climate change on mental health, predicting an increase in depression, anxiety, substance misuse, interpersonal violence and suicide. This month's guest editorial^[3] looks specifically at the well-known effects of heat on violence, and posits that increasing average temperatures will bring with them increasing violence.

I have no solutions. There is no magic bullet. But as a concerned and aware citizen of this planet, I cannot help wondering, as I go about my daily work and my daily life, whether we are living in a fool's paradise. On the plus side, perhaps I won't have to worry about paying for frail care – on the negative, what about those who will be alive in this collapsing world long after me? Leonie is 24 years younger than I am. She asks whether people like herself are the 'canaries in the coal mine'. And I think they are. We owe it to them and the generations coming after them to take this seriously. Read, listen, lobby – my plea to you all.



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1. Chersich M. Will global warming undo the hard-won gains of prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV? *S Afr Med J* 2019;109(5):287-288. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.2019.v109i5.13988>
2. Joubert L. Climate activists: Canaries in the coal mine of mental health decline. 2019. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-06-12-climate-activists-canaries-in-the-coal-mine-of-mental-health-decline/> (accessed 13 June 2019).
3. Chersich MF, Swift CP, Edelstein I, et al. Violence in hot weather: Will climate change exacerbate rates of violence in South Africa? *S Afr Med J* 2019;109(7):447-449. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.2019.v109i7.14134>

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