Tip of the iceberg

Through community-led, participatory research in the Circumpolar North, Dr Ashlee Cunsolo Willox has uncovered how climate change is degrading the land, and with it, impacting Inuit livelihoods, sense of cultural identity and, subsequently, mental health.

What sparked your interest in the impact of climate change on mental health?

My passion emerged from listening to hundreds of testimonies and stories from Inuit about the ways in which climate change impacts them mentally and emotionally – stories full of heart, wisdom, emotion, pain, hope and survival.

How did you become involved with the Inuit communities of Labrador?

In 2008, Inuit in Nunatsiavut were becoming increasingly concerned about the ways in which the rapid changes they were experiencing in weather, temperature, and snow and ice conditions were impacting the health and wellbeing of the community. The Rigolet Inuit Community Government decided to lead a project to understand the impacts of these changes on health, and discover ways to move forward with adaptation. I was lucky enough to become part of the project team. This led to a case study of the effects of climate change on the mental health of Rigolet Inuit, the first to examine the linkage between climate change and mental health in the Circumpolar North, and one of the first such case studies globally.

In 2012, the other four communities of Nunatsiavut partnered with the Rigolet Inuit Community Government and the Nunatsiavut Department of Health and Social Development to conduct a regional case study of climate-sensitive mental health impacts. I was privileged to be the Principal Investigator on this project, and to work with all five communities.

To what extent are changes due to climate change impacting the day-to-day lives of Labrador Inuit populations?

Inuit in Labrador have been observing changes in climate, environment, weather and land for almost two decades. They have identified many health and food security-related consequences that impact mental health: decline in physical health and food security, unsafe and unpredictable travel conditions and declining access to hunting grounds, loss of intergenerational knowledge, cultural skills and land-based knowledge, and disruptions to land access. Inability to go out on the land increases ‘empty time’, leading to greater potential for substance abuse and suicide ideation. The effects also magnify and exacerbate existing stressors.

What methodologies do you use?

All of my research is community-led, community-based and participatory. We employ strategies that resonate with Inuit traditions of oral history and storytelling and work to disrupt power imbalances between researchers and research participants via a decolonising lens. In addition, we use in-depth conversational interviews, group discussions, dialogue and participatory digital media.

Most recently, we mobilised filmmaking as a way not only to gather data about the psychological impacts of climate change in Nunatsiavut, but also for the Inuit of Nunatsiavut, Labrador, to share their experiences with other Circumpolar Indigenous populations, and begin dialogue and knowledge sharing through a combination of stunning visual scenery and powerful and emotional narratives.

What do you consider to be the most challenging aspect of your research?

It is not the research itself, but rather trying to move it into the policy realm and increase awareness of the linkages between a changing environment and mental wellness. Early on, there was a lot of scepticism. Some did not believe that climate change and mental health could even be linked. However, I’m heartened by increasing interest around the globe.
Arising from the IMHACC project, Dr Ashlee Cunsoolo Willox and her team have produced a documentary film entitled Atlutaunijuk Nunami/Lament for the Land ([www.lamentfortheland.ca](http://www.lamentfortheland.ca)), a moving account of the Nunatsiavut experience. “Inuit experiences with climate change point to the need for us all to find ways to connect to the land and fight to mitigate human impacts on the environment,” Cunsoolo Willox declares.

In the new documentary film, which is currently in post-production and slated for release in 2023, Willox and her colleagues form a story circle, with Elders in the role of guides, to tell the story of Nunatsiavut, and to explore ways for communities to find meaning in the loss of parts of the environment and the landscapes of the past.

**IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

**OBJECTIVES**
- To work with the five Inuit communities of Nunatsiavut, Labrador, to discover, analyse and synthesise the climatic and environmental determinants of mental health and wellbeing
- To discover and support protective factors and locally appropriate and culturally relevant indicators of and pathways for supporting mental wellness

**KEY COLLABORATORS**
- Based in Canada: Jack Shiwak, Charlotte Wolfrey, Rigot Inuit Community Government • Inez Shiwak, Marilyn Baikie, ‘My Word’ Storytelling & Digital Media Lab • Herb Jacque, Gemma Andersen, Makkovik Inuit Community Government • Diane Gear, Rebecca Brennan, Postville Inuit Community Government • Wayne Piercy, Juliana Flowers, Hopedale Inuit Community Government • Anthony Andersen, Noah Nochasak, Nain Inuit Community Government • Michelle Wood, Department of Health & Social Development

**PARTNERS**
- Rigot, Makkovik, Postville, Hopedale and Nain Inuit Community Governments • ‘My Word’: Storytelling & Digital Media Lab • Nunatsiavut Government Department of Health & Social Development

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**SUMMARY**

Dr. Ashlee Cunsoolo Willox is a community-engaged researcher, working at the intersection of place, culture, health and environment, with an emphasis on the determinants of Indigenous health. She is a pioneer in climate change and mental health research, and has given over 150 presentations and received wide media coverage. In 2014, she was inducted into the Royal Society of Canada’s College of New Scholars, Artists, and Scientists.