

**Contrary to expectations, drought did not lead to poorer mental health among mid-aged Australian women.**

**What you need to know** Climate change is expected to result in more intense droughts in much of Australia and other drought prone areas of the world. Over the 12 years of this longitudinal study, a third of women experienced drought in 1998 and half the women experienced drought in 2007. Less than one in ten women experienced drought in 1996, 2001 and 2004. Mental health showed a slow but steady improvement between 1996 and 2007. We found that drought did not lead to poorer mental health among mid-aged rural Australian women, or among vulnerable women. We still need to see if these findings apply to men, as well as to women of other ages.

**What is this research about?**

More droughts are expected in drought prone areas of the world, including much of Australia. Drought has damaging effects on physical health, personal and community income and on emotional and social well-being. These effects may lead to higher rates of mental health problems, particularly among more vulnerable people. This study investigated the impact of drought on the mental health of rural Australian women. We also examined the effects on more vulnerable women, including women who were more isolated, poorer and less educated and women who already had long-term illness or poor mental health.

**What did the researchers do?**

The study involved 6,664 women from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH), born between 1946 and 1951, who lived outside of major cities. These women were aged 45-51 at the start of the study and aged 56-61 at the end of the study. Women were sent surveys in 1996, 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2007. At each survey, the women were asked about their mental health and a range of other health, behavioural and demographic variables. These data were linked to information about drought for their area of residence and then used to investigate the relationship between drought and mental health.

**What did the researchers find?**

A third of women experienced drought in 1998 and half the women experienced drought in 2007. Drought was less common in 1996, 2001 and 2004 with less than one in ten women experiencing drought at these time points. Although experience of drought varied over time, mental health showed a slow but steady improvement over time. No relationship was found between drought and poor mental health. This was the case for rural women in general, as well as among vulnerable women.

**How can you use this research?**

Over the 12 years of this longitudinal study, we found that drought did not lead to poorer mental health among mid-aged Australian women. Another study found that women were at less risk than men of suicide during drought. Taken together these studies suggest that rural women are less affected by drought than rural men. These results are average effects and may not hold true for individual women. Further research is needed to see if these findings apply to men, as well as to women of other ages.

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