

Capitalise on life transitions to instil better environmental behaviours, say researchers

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Our latest research from psychology highlights why life transitions, such as a house move, present an ideal 'window of opportunity' to make lifestyle choices to live more sustainably.

Interventions intended to encourage green choices among individuals, including for recycling or energy use, would be better targeted at moments of major change in people's lives if they are to stick, according to a new study from our psychology researchers.

In their new paper, published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, behaviour change experts from the University suggest that [life transitions](#), such as a house move or changing jobs, can provide a window of opportunity, during which time habits can be shifted. After this point habits become entrenched and far harder to change.

They suggest these findings could now be used by policy-makers hoping to design more cost-effective interventions to promote sustainable

behaviours. One quick win they highlight is among first-time buyers. With this life transition likely to occur in young adulthood, any shift in environmental thinking is more likely to have long-lasting effects.

Their study tested the so-called 'habit discontinuity hypothesis', which suggests that behaviour change interventions are more effective when delivered in the context of life course changes. Their assumption was that when habits are temporarily disturbed people are more open to new information and ideas and suggestions to make changes in the way they do things.

Involving 800 adults in Peterborough who received either an intervention promoting sustainable behaviours or were in a no-intervention control group and had either recently moved house or not, their results suggest that there is a definite 'window of opportunity' after relocation. In this study this 'window' lasted three months.

Lead author, Professor Bas Verplanken Head of our Department of Psychology explains: "Life transitions, such as moving house or changing jobs present a real opportunity to influence the choices people make. Often, around the time of a major change, life can be up in the air and as such we know that people are generally more open to new ideas and information. Timing environmental interventions to coincide, whilst also reinforcing messages about saving money through such changes, can be particularly effective.

"However we now know the window for this is limited – probably to a maximum of three months. After that point habits begin to get entrenched and become much harder to break. The key, therefore, is to find these opportunities if we're to help people make positive shifts that improve the environment and can save them money for the long-term.

"For policy-makers looking at returns on investment, the clear message

is that targeted investments at these times stand more chance of success than blanket campaigns aimed at everyone."

Environmentally-friendly behaviours studied in the experiment included using less water (taking shorter showers), reducing waste (recycling more) and energy use (washing at 30 degrees), and opting for more sustainable transport choices (not using the car for shorter journeys).

More information: Bas Verplanken et al, Empowering interventions to promote sustainable lifestyles: Testing the habit discontinuity hypothesis in a field experiment, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2015.11.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2015.11.008)

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