

Scientists suggest appealing to human psychology to create solutions to climate change

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Stanford psychology Professor Lee Ross is co-author of a study exploring the psychological factors that influence people to take actions that harm or help the environment.

Human psychology influences the decisions we make every day, including unwise ones. Our psychological profile can make us reluctant to pay for services that benefit everyone, including those who don't contribute. It makes us focus on achieving short-term gains and avoiding short-term losses. And, most importantly, it prompts us to engage in rationalization and denial rather than tackle difficult challenges.

In a recent publication in *BioScience*, several scientists, including Stanford researchers, explore these barriers and suggest strategies involving education, marketing, norm-creation, use of "default options" and various behavior interventions that could overcome these barriers to meeting the challenge of [climate change](#).

Written by some of Stanford's most eminent scholars and scientists in fields as diverse as biology, psychology and economics, the *BioScience* article addresses the magnitude and urgency of the challenge and points the way to strategies and policies to meet that challenge.

"The costs of inaction could be catastrophic in terms of loss of food production, rising seas, poverty and other threats to human health and welfare," said co-author Lee Ross, a professor of psychology at Stanford.

The team approached these global issues by finding localized examples of psychological intervention that led to environmental action. Small-scale success stories include demonstrations of the power of neighborhood standards. In one provocative study, researchers showed that homeowners would lower their energy usage if they simply were told that they were consuming more than their neighbors.

Small step-by-step changes in the choices and practices of individual families, as well as local measures and incentives that encourage energy conservation, can help to generate new norms and the approval of

sanctions for those who violate them, the authors write.

But the real challenge is the need for collective coordinated action, Ross said, which has significant benefits.

"Effective action, including technology research, could pay huge dividends in terms of new, environmentally friendly industries and jobs that serve our national interests and the well-being of our citizens," he said.

When people are moved to care about the environment in every aspect of their lives, they profit by making their livelihoods sustainable and by relieving the stress that is currently being placed on the natural world.

More information: Lee Ross et al. The Climate Change Challenge and Barriers to the Exercise of Foresight Intelligence, *BioScience* (2016).
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Provided by Stanford University

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