

Study: Believe you can stop climate change and you will

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If we believe that we can personally help stop climate change with individual actions - such as turning the thermostat down—then we are

more likely to make a difference, according to research from the University of Warwick.

Dr Jesse Preston in the Department of Psychology has demonstrated that people are often negatively affected by climate change helplessness—the belief that climate change is so massive and terrifying, as to be out of our personal control, and that our actions are too small to help.

This feeling of helplessness, however, makes people less likely to bother with individual eco-friendly actions - and actually leads to higher energy consumption.

In one study, the researchers tested a group of over two hundred people, and gave different members of the group varying messages about climate change.

Some were given a High Efficacy Climate Change message (that personal actions do make a difference in the fight against climate change); others a Helpless Climate Change message (that personal actions make no difference); and some were given no message at all.

Over the next week, the group reported whether or not they adopted behaviours to help stop climate change - such as driving less, hanging washing on the line instead of using the dryer, using less water, or turning the heating down.

The people who had received the High Efficacy Climate Change message reported 16.5% more of these behaviours than those who read a Helpless Climate Change message - and 13% more actions than the control group which received no message.

Moreover, people in the group which was told their actions couldn't make a difference to climate change actually reported higher energy

usage than before—showing how destructive a feeling of helplessness can be.

The researchers also found that a belief that personal behaviours make a difference enhances the moralisation of our actions - the notion that they are 'good' or 'bad'—and an awareness that the energy we individually consume could either prevent or cause damage to human life.

Public messages about climate change which focus on how we can help make a difference as individuals will be far more effective in encouraging people to consume less [energy](#), according to the researchers.

Dr Preston commented:

"Often climate change messages try to persuade the public by increasing belief that [climate](#) change is real, or through fear of its dire consequences. But mere belief in [climate change](#) is not enough, and fear can backfire if we feel helpless and overwhelmed.

"It is vitally important that individuals appreciate the impact and value of their own [actions](#) for us to make a meaningful change as a whole."

The paper, 'Climate Change Helplessness and the (De)moralization of Individual Energy Behavior', is published in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*.

More information: Erika Salomon et al, Climate change helplessness and the (de)moralization of individual energy behavior., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/xap0000105](https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000105)

Provided by University of Warwick

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