

# How gratitude for nature can rein in your existential angst about climate change

April 8 2021, by Barbara Jane Davy

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Credit: Marcin Jozwiak from Pexels

We're all going to die. This is the [repeated warning about climate change in some media](#): if we don't change our ways we face an existential threat.

So why haven't we got a policy solution in place? Reducing emissions is in our best interest, but despite widespread [popular support for government action](#), implementing policies and programs continues to be difficult. Social science research shows that [the more we hear about climate change, the less inclined we are to take action](#).

Talking about climate change reminds us that we are going to die, and that our modern way of life is killing our environment. Research in social psychology shows that [hearing about climate change often prompts people to go out and buy more stuff](#).

However, participating in rituals that inspire gratitude for nature can reduce the desire to over-consume—and thus reduce the greenhouse gas emissions that fuel climate change. My research indicates that [unconscious motivations and ritual practices may be more effective in shifting our behavior than rational arguments](#) in the fight against climate change.

## **The science is clear**

We have lots of data on climate change, and there is scientific consensus on its accuracy. The topic is constantly in the press, yet most governments have been unable to put effective policy solutions in place. The reason for this is fear.

Death awareness makes people want to [defend the worldview their sense of self-worth is vested in](#). Despite the fact that most people consciously endorse a scientific worldview and think that protecting the environment is important, [we unconsciously believe consumption produces happiness](#).

It is this consumerist worldview that we unthinkingly defend when confronted with evidence of environmental threats such as climate change.

## Motivations are tricky

Science tells us about environmental problems, but it does not necessarily motivate us to do anything about them. Research in behavioral economics and social psychology demonstrates a variety of unconscious factors that continue to influence us no matter how educated we are, or rational we think ourselves to be.

When people feel threatened, they tend to double down on their existing views. This is sometimes referred to as the boomerang or [backfire effect](#), and it [contributes to climate change denial](#).

Talking about climate change can be counterproductive to getting people to reduce emissions because providing more information only further convinces people that they are right. Threatening images and rhetoric can do more harm than good.

When climate change feels like too big a problem, we tend to shut down or blame others. Talking about it is overwhelming—it makes us feel guilty, afraid and apathetic.

One of the most common effects of making people aware of their mortality is the scapegoating of others. Mortality awareness increases out group hostilities. It instigates attempts to displace blame and increases polarization in society.

We like to blame industry and corporations for climate change, but individual and household contributions have a substantial impact, [accounting for 72 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions](#), mostly from food and its production, heating and cooling homes and the fuel used by private vehicles. Our personal actions matter.

Former chief of staff of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Michael Vandenberg reports that [individuals are the largest remaining sources of climate change emissions](#). Household emissions rise with increases in household income.

## Strategic actions

Raising awareness about climate change should not be an end in itself. Bringing the problem to mind is not necessarily helpful, and without a solution, it may do more harm than good.

Environmental protection is widely supported, but talking about climate change and global warming can be negative triggers that tune out the people we want to reach. Framing the message in terms of the shared values of the target audience is effective.

Research shows a [range of possible responses to climate change messaging that arouses mortality awareness](#). Threats make [environmentalists act in defense of their identity as environmentalists](#), but campaigning against air pollution can be a more pragmatic strategy for motivating [climate](#) change deniers. To use the effects of death awareness to promote pro-environmental behavior, we need to activate shared norms from which people's sense of self-worth derives.

We can use behavioral economics and other psychological effects to promote pro-environmental behavior. These sort of psychological effects can nudge people toward better civic actions.

Implementing a "choice architecture"—the way choices are presented—that defaults to better environmental options makes people more likely to make pro-environmental decisions. The options available, and how they are presented, influence people's actions. For example, [walkable neighborhoods reduce emissions by making walking and cycling pleasurable choices, while winding suburban streets and big](#)

[parking lots prompt people to drive to more.](#)

When talking about environmental concerns, avoiding the use of economic language such as costs and drawing attention to gratitude can help keep environmental values top of mind instead of triggering the psychological effects that stimulate consumerism.

Expressing appreciation for what we have been given and publicly sharing our gratitude inspires a sense of contentment that makes people want to give in turn. Practices of praising ancestors (ancestor veneration) are surprisingly pro-environmental because they prompt people to want to pass on what they have been given rather than consume more themselves.

Raising awareness of these unconscious effects does not make them go away. We continue to be affected by these psychological effects even after learning about them, so we would do better to use them constructively.

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