

A chat may help convert a peer to a pro-sustainability stance

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Changing the mind of someone who is dismissive of efforts to protect the planet could be accomplished by sharing a pro-sustainability point of view during a conversation, new research suggests.

In three experiments, researchers found that exposure to a pro-sustainability opinion in a [conversation](#) or written exchange helped coax people who held anti-sustainability views toward support for an environmentally friendly initiative.

Results also showed that people with a pro-sustainability viewpoint were not persuaded to change their commitment by talking to someone with an opposing point of view.

The researchers noted that many sustainable behaviors—lowering the thermostat, recycling or buying fewer disposable products—are household or community endeavors that follow discussion and consideration. And so it follows, they say, that persuading others to adopt [sustainable practices](#) could be achieved through a common social activity: talking about it.

"There has been research showing that when it comes to divisive issues, people can get entrenched in their views, but we find that this is not always the case, at least in the context of sustainability," said senior author Nicole Sintov, associate professor of behavior, decision making and sustainability at The Ohio State University.

"If I am anti-sustainability and I'm talking to another anti-sustainability person, then I'm not going to take more action to protect the environment. But if I talk to somebody who is pro-sustainability, I'm going to move to match what their values are, essentially.

"I think that is a particularly juicy finding, especially in today's political climate."

Sintov completed the study with first author Kristin Hurst, a former Ohio State postdoctoral researcher now at Southern Illinois University, and Grant Donnelly, assistant professor of marketing at Ohio State. The

research was published online recently in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.

In the first study, the team set out to determine whether having a conversation about a sustainability topic could influence actual sustainability behavior—on top of making a commitment to engage in the behavior.

A total of 568 college student participants read a statement about a university policy to expand plant-based food options in campus dining halls. Pairs of participants were randomized to either share their stances, thoughts and feelings about the plant-based foods policy or, as a control, to try to guess the name of a famous person described in a biography they were given to read.

For the last 30 seconds of the interaction, researchers gauging participants' commitment to the planet-friendly cause told students in two of three groups—one discussing the policy and one the famous person—to decide how much effort they would put into performing a task that would generate financial support for the plant-based foods policy. The task involved clicking a computer mouse; reaching a specific number of clicks in a set amount of time would trigger a donation toward the university's investment in the plant-based food policy.

Results showed that having a sustainability conversation before committing to take action in support of the issue increased sustainable behavior—the clicking—above and beyond the conversation or commitment alone. The conversation's effect on behavior could be traced in part to inducing a sense of psychological safety by having the students show vulnerability when disclosing how they felt about the plant-based food policy.

"Having this conversation where you self-disclose and take more

interpersonal risks elevates your sense of psychological safety, which increases the strength of your commitment to click with your partner," said Sintov, a faculty member in Ohio State's School of Environment and Natural Resources. "Among the people who had the sustainability policy conversation versus the actor conversation, the commitment was stronger—the students were more engaged and came up with more ideas about how to maximize the clicks."

In the second study, 302 students were told about the policy and rated on a 7-part scale how supportive they were of providing more plant-based foods in campus dining halls. They were then paired with trained research assistants—acting as student participants—who verbally expressed a scripted opinion either in support of or opposing the policy. A third study involving 545 students had an identical structure, except that the interactions were in writing.

In both studies, individuals initially unsupportive of the policy who interacted with someone supportive of the initiative were more likely to engage in behavior supporting the [policy](#)—again, by clicking a mouse to generate a financial donation.

"If you were paired with a pro-sustainability person, you're going to click no matter what, compared to if you were paired with a con person. What is most interesting, I think, is that this held for people who were initially unsupportive," Sintov said.

Pro-sustainability participants, on the other hand, could not be swayed to lower their commitment by a conversation or written exchange with someone expressing the counterpoint.

Organized efforts to talk about behaving sustainably could have real-world applications in college roommate selections, the workplace and other sectors, Sintov said, and ideally would spark stronger commitments

than those that people tend to make to ambitions set by a third party—think taking 10,000 steps a day or saving 5% on an energy bill.

"Some goals come out of the ether and we'll say, yeah, OK, I guess I'll do that," she said. "Rarely do we think to ourselves or, even rarer, start a conversation by asking: 'What are our energy goals?' Just by having a few prompts, we might see some movement."

More information: Kristin F. Hurst et al, Increasing sustainable behavior through conversation, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101948](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2022.101948)

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