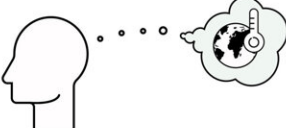
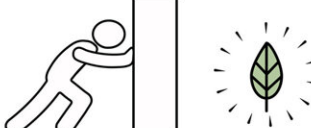



Most people feel 'psychologically close' to climate change, find researchers



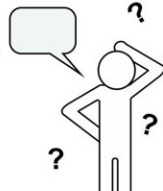

April 21 2023

3 Debunked propositions

The empirical evidence to date indicates that perceiving climate change as psychologically distant is **NOT** a key reason why people do not engage in climate action.

 <p>1 Most people perceive climate change as psychologically distant. ✗</p>	 <p>2 Perceiving climate change as psychologically distant is a key barrier to climate action. ✗</p>	 <p>3 Reducing psychological distance motivates climate action. ✗</p>
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Key findings

<p>20 recent opinion polls showed more than 50% of respondents believed that:</p>	<p>The consequences of climate change are already occurring, or will occur within the next few years.</p> <p>Climate change poses risks to or is already affecting their local area or community.</p> 	<p>Only 9 out of 26 reviewed studies showed a consistent association between seeing climate change as psychologically distant and less climate action.</p> <p>Some studies even show that perceiving climate change as affecting far away locations and distant people can actually motivate people to engage in climate action.</p> 
<p>32 communication guidelines developed by NGOs or other professional organizations mentioned that most people perceive climate change as psychologically distant, and/or offer recommendations for communications.</p> <p>Only 2 out of 32 communication strategies mentioned that the research on this topic is inconsistent or inconclusive.</p> 	<p>25 out of 30 reviewed studies failed to find evidence that experimentally reducing the psychological distance of climate change increases climate action.</p> 	

Perceiving climate change as psychologically distant is not a key reason why people do not engage in climate action. Credit: *One Earth* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.oneear.2023.03.006

When spurring action against climate change, NGOs and governmental agencies frequently operate on the assumption that people are

unmotivated to act because they view climate change as a problem that affects distant regions far in the future. While this concept, known as psychological distance, seems intuitive, researchers report in the journal *One Earth* on April 21 that most people see climate change as an important and timely issue even if its impacts are not immediately noticeable.

"There is no consistent evidence that perceiving [climate change](#) as psychologically distant hinders [climate action](#), with studies reporting mixed results," write the authors, led by Dr. Anne M. van Valkengoed of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

van Valkengoed and her colleagues collected results from [public opinion polls](#) surveying people about their views on climate change, some of which included over 100,000 people from 121 different countries. The polls showed that over 50% of participants actually believe that climate change is happening either now or in the near future and that it will impact their local areas, not just faraway places.

The team also looked at the results of several studies designed to test the relationship between psychological distance and climate action. Out of 26 reviewed studies, only nine found a [positive association](#) between psychological distance and climate action. In fact, some studies showed that viewing climate change as impacting distant places and communities made people want to take more action. The researchers also found that 25 out of 30 studies failed to prove that experimentally decreasing psychological distance increased climate action.

The pervasive misconception about the relationship between [psychological distance](#) and climate action could actually be impeding progress in mitigating climate change due to [social influence](#), suggest the authors. For example, if people think others perceive climate change as psychologically distant and therefore aren't taking action, they might be

less likely to act themselves. Also, they might think that their efforts are futile because real environmental change relies on the combined efforts of many.

"We therefore recommend researchers, communicators, and policymakers instead focus on how to leverage the finding that many people already perceive climate change as occurring here and now," said the researchers.

More information: Anne M. van Valkengoed et al, The psychological distance of climate change is overestimated, *One Earth* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.oneear.2023.03.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2023.03.006)

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