When it comes to climate change, what motivates us to act?

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Comprehending the scope of climate change can feel like trying to connect an ever-expanding set of dots. Disparate indicators, such as rising global temperatures, retreating glaciers and increasingly severe

weather events, are frequent reminders that life on Earth is shifting.

This constant influx of worrying news can make people feel overwhelmed, confused and fatalistic, unsure of how—or if—they can help offset transformations taking place regionally, let alone half a world away.

Scholars at USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences are conducting research to better understand how people obtain and process information on climate change and make decisions regarding energy use.

By examining the role that external factors—such as the pricing and availability of alternative sources of energy—and internal motivations, including self-identity and personal beliefs, play in driving these choices, they are finding valuable insights to help shift the conversation.

"Individual behavior change in the direction of more climate-friendly decision-making is crucial for the future of our planet," says Joe Árvai, Dana and David Dornsife Chair and Wrigley Institute director. "To encourage positive action, we need to look at what motivates people to make important daily changes, such as investing in non-fossil fuel-based vehicles or cutting back on things like eating meat."

A balanced approach

Árvai, professor of psychology and biological sciences, explains that good decision-making often involves a balance of analysis and emotion. For people to make environmentally friendly energy decisions, these ways of thinking need to inform one another.

Having the critical thinking skills necessary to discern good information from false, and being able to process data to understand how individual behavior can contribute to—or mitigate—climate change are two

abilities necessary for calculation.

At the same time, engaging our emotions helps us determine what we do or do not like, what does and does not excite us, and what feels like the right thing to do for our neighbors and the planet.

Once people understand the interplay between analysis and emotion, organizations such as companies and governments can work to develop strategies that trigger both so that people can make better decisions in their daily lives.

"We are looking at decision support tools, ones you might find in a showroom or in a search engine, that help people understand the range of goals in play when they are contemplating a 'green' decision," Árvai says.

"What kinds of data, comparisons and trade-offs are going to help people make the choice that makes the most sense for them given their values and financial realities?" While not everyone can afford an electric vehicle, almost everyone can make small steps in a greener direction, he adds.

"You need to figure out who you're talking to, what they care about, and what trade-offs they are willing to make given their current situation. And then you need to show what's possible within that range of opportunities and constraints," Árvai says. "If we're going to promote and facilitate a more climate-friendly lifestyle, the most important thing we can do is respect people and meet them where they are."

Appealing to a broader consumer base

Diversity in energy messaging is necessary to reach a broad swath of the population. But one of the issues in this arena is the fact that renewable energy items like electric vehicles and solar panels do not fit seamlessly

into the lives of most people, particularly those at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, says Dean's Professor of Psychology Daphna Oyserman, professor of psychology and education.

Currently, Oyserman explains, "living green" is still packaged and viewed as a luxury lifestyle choice, available to those who can afford to buy a luxury electric vehicle or hire a landscaping team to craft a garden filled with native plants.

Measures such as rebates for electric vehicles and tax breaks for the installation of solar panels have helped increase affordability, but people on lower incomes—who likely live in a rented home with no access to a vehicle charging station or solar panels—are often left out.

In addition, decisions such as whether to purchase an energy-saving appliance can be economically challenging for low-income households, since many of these devices cost more than their wasteful counterparts.

"If energy-efficient appliances and cars are more expensive, then taking care of the environment is being framed as a kind of boutique identity," Oyserman says. She adds that there is a double impact to such a situation: Those who cannot afford to adopt these measures may end up feeling that environmentalism is not part of their social identity, but something that is owned by people who do not look like them.

That is why some activists have tried to connect environmentalism with pollution concerns—having access to clean air and water is not something people can do alone; it requires active engagement in the political process.

Financial incentives that give property owners, including landlords, an impetus to install energy-saving items such as electric vehicle chargers and solar panels are one step toward greater adoption of environmentally

friendly behaviors, Oyserman says.

But this will take time, given that more alternative energy infrastructure will need to be developed before the cost can start to decrease. Individual choices are important, but engaging in the political process is often overlooked as an efficient way to engage in environmentally friendly behavior.

In whose backyard?

Developing this infrastructure, however, is not without its own complications and requires the acquiescence of another set of individuals: those who live in communities adjacent to proposed renewable energy plants. Jennifer Bernstein, a visiting scholar at USC Dornsife's Spatial Sciences Institute, says that individual and community sentiment regarding such projects is often complicated and tricky to gauge.

"There's a dichotomy between the fact that we all want renewable energy, but folks who advocate the most for the renewables are often the ones who think that they need to be developed somewhere else, far away," she says.

Bernstein notes that when determining where to locate renewable energy plants, spatial scientists focus not only on quantifiable metrics, such as waste or pollution output, but also on how such factories affect—and are received by—people living nearby. Some lower-income areas respond well to the prospect of extra jobs, Bernstein explains, while wealthier retirees might need to be persuaded that the impact on their lives will be minimal.

Although people may have an initial, knee-jerk negative reaction to an industrial solar or wind plant in their own neighborhood, these concerns

may not last, she says.

"I've looked at attitudes toward nuclear power, and there's something called a 'good-neighbor effect," where the people who live closest to nuclear plants are the most supportive of them," Bernstein says. "I think communication between residents, developers and scientists would go a long way toward dismantling these presumptions people have about industrial energy development."

Engaging the emotions

We can publish data on severe weather events, wildfires and rising temperatures all day long, but until we connect with people emotionally, they are unlikely to take consistent steps toward fighting climate change, Árvai says.

"A lot of people in government or at private companies look at climate change as a math problem that can be 'solved' by looking at things like cost or carbon footprint," he says. "But viewing it in this way increases psychological distance from it, which may make people feel less compelled to act. We need to look at climate change not just as a math problem to be solved, but as a human problem we can work through together."

Provided by University of Southern California

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