Understanding time may be the key to the race against climate change

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Something has to change. Politicians and environmental organizations have invested millions trying to influence people's behavior and [tackle the climate crisis](#). But it's not working. No G20 country is on track to [meet their climate goals](#).

So instead, [researchers](#) are turning their attention to the link between [people's perception of time](#) and the action they take on climate change.

One of the main areas [researchers are exploring](#) is how people interpret the vast [time](#) scales needed to comprehend climate change.

People represent their [life experiences](#) on a [mental timeline](#) of past, present and future. But that timeline is not as straight as you might think. The nature of an event can influence how close or far into the past or future someone perceives it to be.

Traumatic past events can seem [nearer in time, or more present](#), than neutral events. However, people seem to take the threat of negative events [they anticipate in the distant future](#) less seriously and perceive them as less risky compared to events closer to the present.

It's happening in your back yard

People who have suffered directly from climate change through floods, fires and [extreme heat](#), often perceive the climate crisis [as part of their present](#). However, people whose lives are just beginning to be touched by climate change perceive the time distance to be large. The crisis is still in their future.

This doesn't mean people won't act unless their homes are devastated by extreme weather. But now-focused communication strategies that are highly localized may encourage more people to act. We should be tailoring adverts to show how [climate change](#) is affecting people in their city, their local beauty spots, and how this is happening right now.

Warping our sense of time

Clocks and calendars are systems to measure, record and manage time, which makes time seem like an objective concept. But [research shows our experience of time](#) is subjective, like our mental timeline.

For example, our sense of time changes as we age, often resulting in the sensation of time passing [more quickly as we get older](#). [Thoughts, feelings and actions](#) affect our experience of time too.

It typically passes quickly when we are busy, happy and engaged, and slowly when we are sad, bored and isolated. This means we may be more perceptive to climate messaging depending on our mood and what's going on in our lives.

Our experience of time's cadence varies too. Some of the main rhythms include linear (I'm only getting older), cyclic (it's Monday again), progressive (look how much I've learned) and degenerative (we're hurtling toward the end times).

Researchers are trying to understand whether apocalyptic talk sparks action or nihilism. It's worth considering whether people would be more engaged in climate action if we framed the present as the bottom of a cycle, that, with the right intervention, can set humanity on a new upward swing, rather than a march toward Armageddon.

Context is everything

Culture also influences [how people perceive time](#). Close your eyes and imagine a mental timeline of past, present and future. Is the past on the left or the right?

If you grew up in a left-right reading and writing household, chances are the past is on the left and the future is on the right. If you grew up in a right-left reading and writing household the past will be on the right and

the future on the left.

Similarly, while in some cultures the [future](#) is always ahead, for others the direction of the flow of time depends on the direction someone is facing. For example, Pormpuraawans', an Aboriginal Australian group, represent time as flowing from left to right if facing south, [but right to left if facing north](#).

Metaphors for time, such as "keep moving forwards", [are not universal](#), which means you can't create a global public messaging system.

Time feels different depending on who you are, where you come from and what you happen to be doing. While many people are motivated to engage in [environmentally friendly behavior](#), we need to frame time in a more informed and nuanced way if we want more people to change.

Time is precious

[Time is scarce](#). Digital technology is speeding up the pace of life for many people and "hustle-culture" means some groups [view busyness as an indicator of success](#).

While sorting recycling may only take a few minutes, you need to feel like you have those minutes to spare. So we need to focus on reducing the time burden associated with environmentally friendly behavior. We should be researching [how to make this behavior take less time](#).

The solution may be a societal change. This may mean a switch from productivity driven models of time, in which "time is money" and free time is rare, to a softer relationship with time to open up space in our schedules. A shift to a slower pace of life may also provide the time to reconnect with nature and notice the impact of the [climate crisis](#) in our own back yards.

Together, these changes may help to bring [climate](#) awareness into people's present day, increasing the urgency to act, and preserving the planet for generations to come.

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