

Q&A: Fighting climate despair—what to do to make a difference

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Individual action may seem like a drop in the bucket when it comes to tackling climate change. The scale of the problem is so immense that [a poll reported](#) that more than half of young people in 10 surveyed

countries, including the U.S., feel helpless, believing humanity is doomed because of climate change.

But there are still many opportunities for people to take action to avoid the worst impacts of [climate change](#), said Amanda Carrico, an associate professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at CU Boulder. Carrico shares her take on how to engage the public and encourage more pro-environmental behaviors.

How has Americans' mindset about climate change shifted over the past decades?

We've known about the role of greenhouse gas emissions in shaping Earth's climate for nearly a century. But the understanding that anthropogenic forces were threatening the stability of the climate system took serious note in the 1980s and 1990s. Still, there was a lot of debate about how big of a problem climate change was going to be.

The narrative changed starting the mid- to late-2000s. There was a recognition of understanding how our [collective behaviors](#) are contributing to the problem, in addition to large industrial sources. Americans began to realize that their lifestyles and behaviors are linked to substantially more carbon emissions than people living in other parts of the world.

Some of that shift was related to the momentum that was accumulating around the Copenhagen COP (The United Nations Climate Change Conference) in 2009.

For the most part, Americans are quite concerned about environmental protection and global warming. While there's not a lack of concern, there are a lot of different viewpoints on the extent to which one's personal

actions are contributing, could be modified to address the problem, or should be modified.

What influences one's decision to change their behaviors for a better environment?

One thing that affects behaviors is the values people hold. People who strongly value [environmental protection](#) are generally more willing to make personal sacrifices for the well-being of environmental resources and climate stability.

However, the most overwhelming factor of anything is how difficult certain behaviors are. Is it easy for me to engage in an action that would, for example, have relatively less [carbon emissions](#)? Ease also includes cost, both in terms of financial expenses and time investments.

If you think about a distribution of values, most people care about the environment, and they're willing to do something for it. But they might run out of energy or attention after a little while. Among the people who are at the positive end of the distribution in terms of having strong environmental values, you do see them go above and beyond to implement systemic changes in their lifestyles to reduce their carbon footprint more often.

What can we do to encourage pro-environment behaviors?

We can convince people to care about the environment more and offer them ideas on what they can do. But what we see in the literature is that if we can't find ways to make these behaviors easier for people, the adoption and persistence of [behavior](#) change tend to be lower.

Recycling is probably one of the most successful examples from a pure behavioral standpoint. The key reason that it's successful is because there was a lot of investment and recycling infrastructure put in place. When I was a child, my family had to collect our recyclable materials in the kitchen and bring them to the recycling facility once a week. That is no longer necessary for most families in the U.S. Most [urban areas](#) offer curbside recycling, which made that behavior far easier.

Proper infrastructure has allowed a behavior to grow, evolve and, to some extent, become the norm. People nowadays actively look for opportunities to recycle.

A lot of people see climate change as a huge problem that is out of their hands. Can you recommend some behaviors that we can adopt that will have an impact on our emissions?

A lot of people are taking action against [climate](#) change, but some actions are more meaningful and impactful than others.

If you ask people what's an example of green behavior, they will probably mention turning off lights. It's good that people are thinking about conserving energy. But in the larger scheme of things, even if the behavior is adopted widely, it wouldn't have a substantial impact on the U.S.'s greenhouse gas emissions. One reason is that our light bulbs have become more efficient.

Dietary change is something that will optimize your environmental impact. Reducing meat, especially red meat consumption is among the most important. Research has shown if there's a large-scale adoption of cutting red meat consumption even just by 15% to 25%, equivalent to perhaps a meal or two, the impact is very meaningful.

Food waste is another opportunity. Agriculture contributes to a lot of greenhouse gas emissions, and there is a high discrepancy between the calories we produce and those needed to feed our population.

How should we shape our messaging campaigns?

While I think educating the public is important, education alone will not get us to where we want to be when it comes to emission reduction.

There needs to be strong financial or regulatory instruments in place. For example, taxing things and behaviors that emit carbon, such as gasoline, makes it easier to change behaviors because we are making certain behaviors more expensive and encouraging systemwide change.

Education is still necessary because if we do put in place a regulation, we need education as a tool to explain why a tax is adopted, how the tax was decided and what impact it has. But for now, some regulatory tools such as taxes are just not a politically available option.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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