

Struggling to discuss climate change with older relatives? These three scenarios can help

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Have you ever felt it difficult to express your climate anxiety in conversation with older relatives? You are likely not alone, as climate

change is a topic rife with high stakes, differing views and strong emotions. Discussions can devolve into arguments, and arguments invite fallacies.

Climate change is making communication harder as [temperatures flare tempers](#) and we struggle with the [right words to describe our global circumstances](#). These factors can further help explain why you might find it difficult to discuss the climate crisis with people, particularly older loved ones, who may hold views that differ from your own.

While most [people of all ages believe the climate crisis urgently requires action](#), in the United States, [Millennials and Gen Z people are those far more likely](#) to take that action.

In Canada, [young people are choosing more walkable neighborhoods, supporting public transit and donating proportionally more of our incomes to environmental organizations](#). Still, [younger generations](#) are [pessimistic about the future](#), and we largely hold previous generations responsible for our anxiety.

These three scenarios reveal common argumentative fallacies. You may want to be aware of them before your family's next summer get-together.

Fallacies

[Fallacies are invalid arguments](#) that can be extremely hard to spot and decipher.

As someone [whose work looks at the climate crisis](#), I have lately made some behavioral changes and talked about them with older loved ones. Not surprisingly, these conversations have frequently given way to fallacious argumentation.

Below are three fallacies you may encounter in conversation about the climate crisis. Grounded in theories surrounding [interpersonal communication](#), I share three strategies for response that transcend the trappings of the argument by focusing on the relationship.

'Planes will still fly whether you are on them or not.'

Trying to convince me to come to California earlier this year, my mother argued that flights will be full, regardless of whether I choose to fly. This is a classic example of the bandwagon fallacy: everyone else is doing it, so why shouldn't I?

You have likely heard numerous variations of this fallacy in a variety of contexts, from "everyone else is buying cars, so what's the problem?" to "millions of people eat meat, so why can't I?" The bandwagon argument is problematic as it taps into latent doubt among [Millennials and Gen Z](#) that any of our actions will amount to meaningful change.

In the end, I chose not to fly out of personal integrity, not impact. I want my children to know that I look at my own behavior first. Explaining this rationale to my mother allowed me to practice something communication theorists and [psychologists refer to as disclosure](#). Theories of disclosure hold that the more we share about ourselves, the more trusting and connected our relationships become.

Disclosure is an especially fitting response to the bandwagon fallacy because it provides the opportunity to describe specifically who you are rather than dwell on what everyone else does.

'So, you would rather pay more for books?'

My parents find my choice to boycott Amazon and "pay more" for a

book from a locally owned shop to be incomprehensible.

My refusal to shop at Amazon, however, has nothing to do with money and is instead driven by the company's [employment practices](#) and the [ecological impacts of its supply chains](#).

Turning money into the key talking point distracts from the other issues on the proverbial table. For this reason, it is a [red herring fallacy](#). The red herring fallacy introduces something that is diversionary to the topic at hand and is a go-to move in many political discussions.

Noticing when the fallacy appears in personal conversations can cue us into anxieties the speaker has about their [self-concept and identity](#). For example, when I appear to make a choice that is misaligned with my parents' values, they ask themselves, "Did we not do a good enough job, as parents?"

We can meet anxieties with assurances. Suspecting my parents worry about their parenting, I can tell them they taught me to value community, health and justice (if not the lowest price). I could also have shared that I learned the importance of sorting my own ethics and using them as a basis for my decision-making.

'Don't you just have to live your life?'

In the last couple of years, my older friends and family have felt increasingly compelled to ask, "Don't you just have to live your life?" This question is a thinly disguised version of the false dilemma fallacy.

The false dilemma fallacy often takes the form of an either/or statement: either you do X, or you do Y. The fallacy's capacity to eliminate viable options makes it particularly deceptive.

In the example above, people contend I face a choice either to move forward with as much normalcy as possible, or risk making my life (and perhaps theirs) very difficult. In reality, there are a host of other possibilities we could discuss—understanding "normalcy" as a social construct, for one.

Usefully, however, the [false dilemma indicates the speaker's preference](#) for what should come next. It also signals an anxiety that the preference may not be shared between speaker and listener. In this way, the false dilemma's invocation can be thought of as an invitation to pause and to consider what might be at stake to both parties.

When I hear, "Don't you just have to live your life?," I can respond with, "that's an interesting question. Does it feel like my current life choices are at odds with how you want to live yours?" In other words, we can think of the false dilemma as the point at which the current conversation stops, and a new one, grounded in curiosity and questions, starts.

The best-case scenario

At worst, communication with loved ones about the [climate crisis](#) is divisive, and relationships suffer. At best, your older family members may see your point of view and begin to work harder for a livable future.

Most realistically, the best any of us can hope for in any single conversation is mutual understanding and respect.

To do this, it helps to stay out of the weeds by recognizing fallacies for what they are and keeping eyes on what ultimately matters most of all: maintaining good relationships with the people you love.

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