Psychological factors help explain slow reaction to global warming

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While most Americans think climate change is an important issue, they don't see it as an immediate threat, so getting people to "go green" requires policymakers, scientists and marketers to look at psychological barriers to change and what leads people to action, according to a task force of the American Psychological Association.

Scientific evidence shows the main influences of climate change are behavioral - population growth and energy consumption. "What is unique about current global climate change is the role of human behavior," said task force chair Janet Swim, PhD, of Pennsylvania State University. "We must look at the reasons people are not acting in order to understand how to get people to act."

APA's Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change examined decades of psychological research and practice that have been specifically applied and tested in the arena of climate change, such as environmental and conservation psychology and research on natural and technological disasters. The task force presented its findings at APA's 117th Annual Convention in Toronto in a report that was accepted by the association's governing Council of Representatives.

The task force's report offers a detailed look at the connection between psychology and global climate change and makes policy recommendations for psychological science.

It cites a national Pew Research Center poll in which 75 percent to 80 percent of respondents said that climate change is an important issue. But respondents ranked it last in a list of 20 compelling issues, such as the economy or terrorism. Despite warnings from scientists and environmental experts that limiting the effects of climate change means humans need to make some severe changes now, people don't feel a sense of urgency. The task force said numerous psychological barriers are to blame, including:

- Uncertainty - Research has shown that uncertainty over climate change reduces the frequency of "green" behavior.
- Mistrust - Evidence shows that most people don't believe the risk messages of scientists or government officials.
- Denial - A substantial minority of people believe climate change is not occurring or that human activity has little or nothing to do with it, according to various polls.
- Undervaluing Risks - A study of more than 3,000 people in 18 countries showed that many people believe environmental conditions will worsen in 25 years. While this may be true, this thinking could lead people to believe that changes can be made later.
- Lack of Control - People believe their actions would be too small to make a difference and choose to do nothing.
- Habit - Ingrained behaviors are extremely resistant to permanent change while others change slowly. Habit is the most important obstacle to pro-environment behavior, according to the report.

The task force highlighted some ways that psychology is already working to limit these barriers. For example, people are more likely to use energy-efficient appliances if they are provided with immediate energy-use feedback. Devices that show people how much energy and money they're conserving can yield energy savings of 5 percent to 12 percent, according to research. "Behavioral feedback links the cost of energy use more closely to behavior by showing the costs immediately or daily rather than in an electric bill that comes a month later," said Swim.

Also, some studies have looked at whether financial incentives can spur people to weatherize their houses. The research has shown that combined strong financial incentives, attention to customer convenience and quality assurance and strong social marketing led to weatherization of 20 percent or more of eligible homes in a community in the first year of a program. The results were far more powerful than achieved by another program that offered just financial incentives.

The task force identified other areas where psychology can help limit the effects of climate change, such as developing environmental regulations, economic incentives, better energy-efficient technology and communication methods.

"Many of the shortcomings of policies based on only a single intervention type, such as technology, economic incentives or regulation, may be overcome if policy implementers make better use of psychological knowledge," the task force wrote in the report.

The task force also urged psychologists to continue to expand that knowledge. Environmental psychology emerged as a sub-discipline in the early 20th century but didn't really gain momentum until the 1980s, according to the report. But the task force said studying and influencing climate change should not be left to a sub-discipline; many different types of psychologists can provide an understanding of how people of

different ages respond to climate change. "The expertise found in a variety of fields of psychology can help find solutions to many climate change problems right now," Swim said. "For example, experts in community and business psychology can address the behavioral changes necessary as businesses and nonprofits adapt to a changing environment."

Source: American Psychological Association (news : web)