

# Climate change psychology: Coping and creating solutions

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Psychologists are offering new insight and solutions to help counter climate change, while helping people cope with the environmental, economic and health impacts already taking a toll on people's lives, according to a special issue of *American Psychologist*, the American Psychological Association's flagship journal.

Climate change "poses significant risks for – and in many cases is already affecting – a broad range of human and natural systems," according to the May-June issue's introductory article, "Psychology's Contributions to Understanding and Addressing Global [Climate Change](#) ." The authors call upon [psychologists](#) to increase research and work closely with industry, government and education to address climate change.

The role psychologists can play may be different from what many people expect. "Psychological contributions to limiting climate change will come not from trying to change people's attitudes, but by helping to make low-carbon technologies more attractive and user-friendly, economic incentives more transparent and easier to use, and information more actionable and relevant to the people who need it," wrote Paul C. Stern, PhD, of the National Research Council.

In the United States, "motor vehicle use and space heating are the most significant causes of climate change and therefore the most important targets for emissions reduction," according to Stern's article, "Contributions of Psychology to Limiting Climate Change."

"People's individual and household action has a larger aggregate climate impact than any other economic sector, with as much as 38 percent of carbon dioxide emissions from direct energy use by households," Stern wrote.

Psychology is essential to understanding the human causes and consequences of climate change, according to the introductory article's lead author, Jane K. Swim, PhD, of Pennsylvania State University and former chair of the APA Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change. "Moreover, psychology can play a significant role to help limit or mitigate climate change," she wrote.

Researchers analyzed human consumption and population as two globally significant factors accelerating climate change and emphasized how different cultures and ethical issues must be considered in an article entitled, "Human Behavioral Contributions to Climate Change," by Swim, Susan Clayton, PhD, of the College of Wooster, and George S. Howard, PhD, University of Notre Dame. "Cultural practices influence psychological factors by defining what are considered needs versus mere desires and by making particular behavior options possible, feasible and desirable," they wrote.

Climate change is a particularly challenging issue to confront because it evokes a different human response compared to other global crises, according to Thomas J. Doherty, PhD, of the Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling, and Clayton.

"Altruistic or community-supportive responses are associated with natural disasters, whereas uncertainty and divisiveness are associated with technological disasters. The human response to climate change blurs the distinction typically found between responses to natural and technological disasters," they reported in a piece entitled "The

## Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change."

Psychologists can use interventions drawn from disaster psychology and support long-term adjustment that recognizes varied responses to natural and technological disasters, the article states. They identified psychological impacts of climate change as acute and direct mental health injuries associated with extreme weather, natural disasters and degraded environments; indirect impacts, such as anxiety and uncertainty; and psychosocial impacts, including heat-related violence, conflicts over resources, migrations, dislocations and chronic environmental stress.

The issue updates and builds upon the findings and recommendations of APA's 2009 Task Force report, *Psychology and Global Climate Change: Addressing a Multi-faceted Phenomenon and Set of Challenges*.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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