

Psychologists' report aims to counter prevailing doom-and-gloom attitudes toward climate change

March 22 2022, by Greg Hardesty

Read the latest story about climate change, and chances are the tone will be gloom and doom, and the report will do nothing to ease your anxiety.

What it likely won't emphasize are the things you can do to keep [climate change](#) from getting worse, or how people can build psychological and social resilience to better cope with its impacts.

Enter the American Psychological Association (APA), which recently released a 64-page report recommending steps psychologists can take to address climate change and collaborate with other disciplines to make a meaningful impact.

The report, "[Addressing the Climate Crisis: An Action Plan for Psychologists](#)," is the result of 15 months of work by a task force led by Gale Sinatra, Stephen H. Crocker chair and professor of education at USC Rossier who has a joint appointment in USC Dornsife's Department of Psychology.

"If there's too much doomsday information in [media coverage](#) about climate change, then people will tune out, and that's exactly the opposite of what we need," Sinatra said. "We need people to tune in, and we need people to be engaged. It's not true that we're completely doomed and that there's no hope. We can make a difference."

12 recommendations

Building on the work of a task force convened by the APA in 2008, the new task force met about 30 times and came up with 12 recommendations—six for strengthening the field of psychology and six for broadening psychology's impact.

The focus, Sinatra said, was on action.

For example, the report called for building psychologists' capacities to support people in working against climate change and making changes to live with its effects, and to promote the engagement of psychologists with policymakers, practitioners and the community at large.

"Many people are aware of the changes we need to make in how we live and work regarding energy use and consumption to address climate change," Sinatra said, "but I don't think people are as aware of the psychological impact.

"We need to prepare for the massive displacement of people, changes in working and living lifestyles, and how we're going to adapt. There's a huge component of adaptation and mitigation that is psychological, and we're not there yet in addressing that."

Sinatra used the analogy of developing vaccines for COVID-19.

"The [scientific community](#) put a lot of amazing work into [medical research](#) and efficacy and safety but didn't put very much work at all into the psychological aspects of vaccine hesitancy," Sinatra said.

'Sorely needed'

The Dana and David Dornsife Chair and Professor of Psychology and Biological Sciences Joe Árvai, an expert on [risk assessment](#) and communication who has done work aimed at helping people adopt more sustainable behaviors, praised the APA report.

"It's one of the first early steps in mainstreaming [behavioral science](#) around climate change," said Árvai, who also directs the USC Dornsife Wrigley Institute for Environmental Studies. "I hope it gets the conversation started so others can build momentum to move us from 'the sky is falling!' mode to 'how are we going to prop it up?' mode."

Árvai, like Sinatra, is dismayed at mainly negative media coverage about climate change.

"There are barely any conversations happening about how to actually make the necessary behavioral shifts that can get us to confront the risk of climate change in a meaningful way," Árvai said. "For this reason, the APA report was sorely needed."

Wändi Bruine De Bruin, a provost professor of public policy, psychology, and behavioral science who has joint appointments at the USC Price School of Public Policy and USC Dornsife's psychology department, was the lead investigator on a recent study with the United Nations Foundation on [how to effectively communicate climate change science to the public](#).

That study, presented to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, was supported by USC Dornsife's [Public Exchange](#), which links academics with policymakers and practitioners so research can make a real-world difference.

Bruine De Bruin said the APA report is right in line with other work USC Dornsife is doing aimed at helping people change their climate-

hurting ways.

"Psychologists are trained to conduct carefully crafted research and test theories of what drives behavior change," Bruine De Bruin said. "If you apply psychology to real-world problems, that can be very powerful."

Spreading the word

Sinatra hopes the APA report will set an example for other disciplines and organizations.

"We believe it can help them examine what they can do to use their unique skill sets to address the [climate crisis](#)," she said. "We hope people will take up the mantle."

The APA plans to spread the word about its report through op-ed pieces in newspapers, and the paper will be presented at the APA's annual convention in August, Sinatra said.

"The task force is pleased to offer these recommendations to APA as a path forward, and to encourage the field of psychology to heed the call," she said.

Provided by University of Southern California

Citation: Psychologists' report aims to counter prevailing doom-and-gloom attitudes toward climate change (2022, March 22) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-psychologists-aims-counter-prevailing-doom-and-gloom.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.