

Cocktail of Doom: Hopelessness and Paralysis in Younger People in an age of climate change

Research on Climate Change Concerns:

The psychological burden of climate change on young people is well-documented. According to a study by the American Psychological Association, climate change anxiety, or eco-anxiety, is particularly prevalent among young people, leading to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (Clayton et al., 2017). This anxiety stems from the uncertainty and fear about the future, as well as the perceived lack of control over the situation and a growing awareness that profit is no longer sustainable growth model..

The newly elected US president is an unapologetic climate denier who has already, in the first few days in office, pulled out of the Paris Climate agreement and brought in a raft of measures for unregulated fossil fuel licensing.

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Case Studies:

- **Australia:** The Australian Psychological Society (APS) has reported that climate change anxiety is affecting the mental health of Australian youth, with many feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the issue (Australian Psychological Society, 2021). Young Australians are increasingly voicing their concerns, participating in climate strikes, and demanding action from their government. However, the slow pace of policy changes leaves many feeling frustrated and powerless.
- **Global Examples:** Globally, movements like Fridays for Future, led by Greta Thunberg, demonstrate the high level of concern among young people. Despite their activism, many feel that their efforts are not leading to significant change, resulting in frustration and paralysis. In countries like the United States, the UK, and India, young activists are vocal yet often face opposition from political and industrial entities resistant to change.

Cognitive Dissonance and Denial

Definition and Theory: Cognitive dissonance refers to the mental discomfort experienced when holding two or more contradictory beliefs, values, or attitudes. This theory, proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957, is relevant in understanding how people cope with the reality of climate change. When individuals recognize the severity of climate change but continue behaviours that contribute to the problem, they experience cognitive dissonance.

Forms of Denial:

- **Explicit Denial:** Some individuals outright reject the scientific consensus on climate change. This form of denial is often politically motivated or influenced by economic interests.
- **Implicit Denial:** Others accept the reality of climate change but deny its severity or their own responsibility to act. This is often due to the perceived inconvenience or economic impact of making lifestyle changes.

Examples:

- **Explicit Denial:** Certain political groups and media outlets continue to question the validity of climate science, despite overwhelming evidence. For instance, some

conservative factions in the United States promote scepticism about climate change, influencing public opinion and policy decisions.

- **Implicit Denial:** Many individuals acknowledge climate change but fail to make significant lifestyle changes. This can be seen in the reliance on fossil fuels, excessive consumption, and resistance to adopting sustainable practices due to perceived short-term economic costs.

Framework for Encouraging Long-Term Benefits

Behaviour Change Models:

- **COM-B Model:** The COM-B model identifies Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation as key components that influence behaviour. By enhancing these components, it is possible to promote sustainable behaviours.
- **Trans-theoretical Model (TTM):** The TTM outlines stages of change, including pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. Understanding these stages helps in designing interventions that are stage-appropriate and effective.

Strategies:

- **Education and Awareness:** Increasing public awareness about the long-term benefits of sustainable practices is crucial. Educational campaigns can highlight the positive impacts of behaviour change on the environment and society.
- **Incentives and Policies:** Implementing policies that provide financial incentives for adopting eco-friendly practices can encourage behaviour change. For example, subsidies for renewable energy, tax breaks for green technologies, and penalties for high carbon emissions.
- **Community Engagement:** Encouraging community-based initiatives that promote collective action is essential. Local communities can organize sustainability projects, such as community gardens, recycling programs, and renewable energy cooperatives.

Implementation: A step-by-step guide to implementing these strategies, tailored to different demographics and regions. This includes identifying key stakeholders, setting measurable goals, and providing resources and support for behaviour change initiatives.

Initiatives in Australia and Worldwide

Australia:

- **Climate Council Initiatives:** The Climate Council of Australia runs several programs aimed at increasing climate literacy and supporting local action. Programs like the "Cities Power Partnership" help local governments and communities transition to renewable energy and reduce emissions.
- **School Programs:** Initiatives like the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) empower young people to lead climate action in their communities. The AYCC provides training, resources, and support for youth-led campaigns and advocacy.

Global Initiatives:

- **United Nations' Youth Climate Summit:** An international platform for young people to discuss and propose solutions to climate change. The summit brings together youth leaders from around the world to share ideas, collaborate on projects, and advocate for stronger climate policies.
- **Green New Deal:** Various countries, particularly in Europe, are adopting comprehensive green policies aimed at reducing carbon emissions and promoting renewable energy. The European Green Deal, for example, aims to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050 through investments in clean energy, sustainable industry, and biodiversity conservation.

Research on Climate Change and Behaviour across Age Groups

Understanding Youths' Concerns about Climate Change: This study explores how children and adolescents in the United States and France experience and respond to climate change, highlighting emotions like anger, hopelessness, guilt, and sadness.

Climate Change-Related Worry in Children and Young People: This article summarizes research on climate change-related worry among children and young people, discussing its mental health effects.

Do Younger Generations Care More About Global Warming?: This report examines age differences in global warming beliefs and engagement across four generations in the U.S., finding that younger generations are more concerned about climate change but less engaged in civic actions compared to older generations.

Who Cares About Climate Change? Attitudes Across the Generations: This study from the UK shows that there is no significant generational divide in willingness to make lifestyle changes for the environment, but younger generations are more fatalistic about the impact of their actions.

Resistance to Change and Misinformation

Resistance at the Individual Level: Resistance to change at the individual level can be driven by various factors, including personal convenience, economic concerns, and ingrained habits. Individuals may resist adopting sustainable behaviours due to the perceived inconvenience or cost associated with these changes. For example, switching from a car-dependent lifestyle to using public transport may be seen as less convenient, despite the environmental benefits.

Misinformation plays a significant role in reinforcing resistance to change. Misinformation about climate change can lead individuals to underestimate the severity of the issue and the necessity of taking action. Social media platforms and certain media outlets often disseminate misleading information that downplays the impacts of climate change or promotes false solutions. This can create confusion and erode public support for necessary changes (Lewandowsky et al., 2013).

Resistance at the Government Level: At the government level, resistance to long-term climate action can be attributed to political and economic interests. Governments may prioritise short-term economic growth and re-election over long-term sustainability. Policies that require significant investments in renewable energy or reductions in carbon emissions may be seen as politically risky, particularly if they are perceived to negatively impact the economy or result in job losses in certain industries.

Misinformation and lobbying by vested interests, such as fossil fuel companies, can further hinder governmental action. These entities often fund campaigns that spread doubt about climate science and promote the idea that climate policies will harm the economy. This can lead to a lack of political will to implement stringent climate policies (Oreskes and Conway, 2010).

Impact of Continued Inaction: If resistance to change persists and misinformation continues to mislead the public, the consequences for the environment and society will be severe. Failure to mitigate climate change will result in more frequent and intense natural disasters, loss of biodiversity, and widespread displacement of communities. The economic costs of inaction will far outweigh the costs of taking proactive measures. For instance, the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change estimates that the cost of inaction could reach 5-20% of global GDP annually, while the cost of action would be around 1% of global GDP (Stern, 2007).

To combat resistance to change, it is crucial to promote accurate information about climate change and its impacts. Public education campaigns, transparent communication from scientists and policymakers, and the regulation of misinformation on social media platforms are essential steps in this direction.

9. Conclusion

Summary: The psychological impact of climate change on young people is profound, leading to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Cognitive dissonance and various forms of denial further complicate the issue. Resistance to change, both at individual and government levels, exacerbated by misinformation, poses significant barriers to effective climate action. However, by leveraging behaviour change models and implementing strategic initiatives, it is possible to galvanise populations towards long-term sustainable benefits.

Householders' Options to Protect the Environment (HOPE) believes It is imperative for individuals, communities, and governments to take immediate action in addressing climate change. By supporting and participating in initiatives, we can create a more hopeful and sustainable future for the younger generation.

Governments must prioritise long-term sustainability over short-term political gains, implementing policies that support climate action and protect future generations. Individuals can make a difference but without government proactive policies, there is little prospect of change until emergencies world-wide, wreak irreparable environmental, agricultural and cultural damage.

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