

Hold This Space

A minds and hearts approach
to engaging young people
with climate change

common
VISION

About Common Vision

Common Vision is an independent think tank working to change the narrative around our shared future. We use community listening, deliberative dialogue, and public imagination approaches to unite people around long-term intergenerational goals. Our mission is to inspire collaborative action and catalyse collective agency through positive ideas.

This report was published by Common Vision in June 2022

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Foreword

Alison Robinson

Deputy Executive Chair, Natural Environment Research Council

The impacts of climate change are felt beyond changes to our environment.

Many young people are aware of the magnitude of climate change and would like to feel more able to take positive, meaningful actions that tackle climate change so we can all live and prosper in a changing world. Conversation and storytelling are important ways to bring these concerns to the fore to shape the paths we can take to effectively respond to global warming now and in the future.

This is why the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) has supported the 'Hold This Space' project to facilitate two-way engagement between NERC environmental science researchers and eco-anxious young adults, in order to build understanding and find shared solutions.

This report outlines how principles of positive public engagement with environmental science, active hope, and action-based messaging may both support young people to cope with and harness their emotions for positive climate action. It shares valuable insights and tips for public engagement specialists and individual environmental researchers who want to engage with the generation who will inherit the world that we create today, not least in terms of how to engage audiences with environmental science research, how to help process emotions surrounding climate change, and how to enable young people to positively apply climate science to their everyday decision making and outlook on the future.

This report will help us to better understand how we can involve and support young people, whose future is most at risk from our changing climate and who wish to be part of a positive change to bring about climate action.

Foreword

Caroline Macfarland

Director, Common Vision

Many people experience a mix of complex, and sometimes contradictory, emotions when we think about climate change. Emotions are powerful. They can be harnessed for determined action but can also leave people feeling overwhelmed and apathetic. While we might be tempted to dismiss emotions as inherently personal, they influence how we act – or don't act – in response to the climate crisis.

Young people in particular report being more worried and anxious about climate change than other age groups. The growing phenomenon of 'eco-anxiety' amongst young people is recognised by child and adolescent psychiatrists, by teachers and by health providers. However, this is not a 'condition' that needs to be 'treated' – many psychologists view these feelings as natural responses to the biggest challenge of our time.

Instead, we need to think creatively and ambitiously about how emotions can be harnessed as a force for agency and purpose. Whilst acknowledging the very real and urgent threats of climate change and biodiversity loss, we need to move beyond the negative, fatalistic stories that dominate our understanding of what is possible. What if we stop focusing only on a future which we want to avoid, and instead imagine the future we want to live in? Our emotions can help us create new visions for the future, and in turn motivate us to take action to get there.

It is important to note that many young people are already spearheading climate action, providing a source of inspiration to others of all ages. However, many young people feel alone in their concerns or limited in their ability to really make a difference. This report looks at how leaders and decision-makers, campaigners, teachers, scientists, and others who communicate about climate change can use the links between emotions, narratives and agency to support young people to navigate difficult feelings and engage with the climate movement on their own terms. It provides insights and lessons that are relevant for all ages on how build a sense of shared purpose for a better future.

Executive Summary

When we think about the climate crisis, many of us feel worried, helpless and lost. Evidence shows that the growing phenomenon of 'eco-anxiety' and other difficult emotions are more acute amongst young people than other age groups. 84% of 16-24 year olds say they are worried about climate change.

The consensus among mental health professionals is that most of these feelings represent adaptive, or healthy, responses to the climate and ecological threats we are facing as a society, and do not constitute a mental illness in themselves. However, these feelings can undermine wellbeing and act as a barrier to taking climate action. On the other hand, they can also be precursors to committed and determined action if harnessed effectively. Someone experiencing these strong and difficult emotions has more awareness of the problem, but lacks the tools or knowledge to separate rational feelings of worry from unnecessary suffering. By supporting young people to develop and use healthy strategies to cope with and process their emotions, we have the potential to unlock and stimulate powerful climate action.

Chapter One begins by introducing the growing phenomenon of eco-anxiety and how this relates to other difficult emotions experienced by young people. We outline the link between emotions, narratives and how both of these things affect people's confidence and motivation to take action.

In **Chapter Two** we examine in greater detail the drivers and influences behind different emotional responses to climate change. These can be personal, such as our immediate experiences of climate change or climate action, relational, linked to our perceptions of other people's attitudes, or political, intertwined with perceptions of power, responsibility, culpability, and justice. Key themes in the literature focus on eco-anxiety as closely linked to a sense of being lost, powerless and confused about the role of individuals in addressing the enormous global crisis that is climate change. Levels of climate anxiety in young people also seem to correlate with their perceptions of betrayal and abandonment by government and other adults.

Whilst eco-anxiety isn't necessarily something that needs to be 'fixed', it is important to learn how to healthily hold and process these emotions while acting in ways that align with a desired vision for the future. There are a number of different approaches taken by psychologists, neuroscientists, communication experts and climate activists to respond to support emotional processing and coping:

- **Focusing on reflection:** This often involves therapeutic or spiritual approaches based on increasing knowledge of oneself and one's emotions.
- **Focusing on action:** Theories informed by neuroscience suggest that taking climate-positive actions can help generate agency, and through this, more positive emotions and feelings of hope.
- **Focusing on meaning:** These approaches seek to create hope through framing action against a backdrop of values and purpose and supporting people to act in line with these values.

Our emotions do exist in a vacuum and coping with emotions can involve much more than individual reflection. Indeed, studies suggest that the most powerful way to support people through eco-anxiety is to cultivate a feeling of hope and collective agency by connecting an individual's role to a sense of community and a wider system of change. A way of developing and strengthening this sense of shared identity and purpose is through narratives - the collections of stories through which we make sense of the world and our place in it.

In [Chapter Three](#) we look at how supporting young people to recognise, understand and take control of stories and narratives is an important part of helping them to cope with their emotions and driving forward climate action.

When it comes to climate change, there are many narratives which we can draw on to help us make sense of a very complex reality. Much research to date has shown that fear and disaster-based climate narratives have been dominant over recent decades. We outline three dominant narratives which undermine climate action and cause individuals to feel anxious, hopeless, and disengaged from the future of the planet:

- **Narrative One: Other people do not care about climate change.** A narrative that is expressed through continual stories about the (in)action of governments and ordinary citizens. It can quickly lead to feeling that you are alone in your concerns for the environment, that you are somehow different to those around you, or that

unethical behaviour is an unavoidable norm.

- **Narrative Two: Only individual action can save the planet.** A narrative which places the utmost importance on the singular actions of any given person to fight climate change, often focusing on small things like recycling or reducing our own carbon footprint. This narrative makes us feel shame and guilt if we don't observe prescribed behaviours and detracts from the importance of structural change and collective agency.
- **Narrative Three:** It is already too late to do anything substantial about climate change. A fatalistic narrative that fuels the belief that people are powerless in the face of climate change. For individuals, this can lead to a self-limiting belief that "I am just too small to make a difference", limiting our confidence and self-efficacy.

Although narratives can have a negative impact on our expectations and behaviour, they can also be positive and aspirational, fueling feelings of hope and optimism and a sense of solidarity and empowerment. Narratives are interdependent with whether and how we take action and can be important levers in fostering a community with a shared identity, shared values and shared goals about the future. [Chapter Four](#) looks at how narrative change methodologies can be used to effectively influence emotions and action.

- **Approach 1: Changing the narrative about public values.** Narrative intervention can be used to help people see how their values align with others. Tapping into shared collective values such as justice and equity may help unlock emotions that stimulate determined action. By facilitating spaces for young people to come together and engage in crafting their own personal origin stories of why they care about the climate crisis we can counter the narrative that "other people don't care".
- **Approach 2: Connecting the individual with the system.** By finding examples of powerful climate action already taking place around the world, and connecting it to a narrative of systems change, we can support a move away from personal feelings of failure or guilt and move towards constructive, collective action at a systemic level.
- **Approach Three: Hope-based communications.** Hope-based communication is founded on the idea that we need to talk about what we want to see and not just what we do not like.⁶ For young people, it can offer a provocation to imagine the future that we want to live in, prompting collective action to make that future a

A self-guided digital tool for young people

www.HoldThis.Space

The way that we process and cope with our emotions is the difference between whether they leave us feeling powerless and paralysed, or lead to determined action. HoldThis.Space is a digital tool which encourages young people to consider the drivers behind their different responses to climate change. The platform aims to challenge some of the negative narratives which permeate and influence public understanding of climate change, hold space for emotional reflection, aspirational visions of the future, and encourage young people to connect with others in the climate movement.

HoldThis.Space has been developed by Common Vision, Force of Nature and Climate Cares, drawing on the insights and narrative techniques outlined in this report. The activities on the website have been co-designed with young people, climate scientists, and psychologists. It is funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the UK's largest funder of independent environmental science, training and innovation.

reality, and converting feelings of hope and despair into feeling motivated and optimistic.

By understanding and deploying narrative change techniques, we can more effectively support young people to create hopeful, empowering stories about their role in climate action. These three examples of narrative-based approaches demonstrate how stories can build a greater sense of commitment and confidence in our ideals and beliefs, address emotional and psychological impacts, and support young people to turn difficult emotions into a fuel for individual action and collective agency.

In the concluding [Chapter Five](#), we note that climate change campaigning and science

communication has focused on 'raising awareness', in the belief that if people knew the full scale of the problem and were equipped with all the facts they would then rationally make a decision to take proportionate action. But the majority of people of all ages in the UK already accept there is a climate crisis and that we have to do something about it.

Making the space for young people to take their place in the climate movement on their own terms, means understanding their emotions and what they need and want in order to navigate their feelings in a healthy way that allows them to cope and take positive action as a result. Leaders and decision-makers, campaigners, teachers, scientists, and others who communicate about climate change have a responsibility to take young people's feelings seriously and consider the links between emotions, narratives, and agency. This includes:

- [Holding space for emotions](#), acknowledging feelings of eco-anxiety and other difficult feelings towards climate change and helping people to understand that they are not alone.
- [Holding space for a different future](#), recognising that fear-based communications and fatalism have not had the desired effect in galvanising action and instead encouraging young people to share imaginative and aspirational visions about the future they want to live in.
- [Holding space to connect with climate action and with each other](#), by reframing what action is and what it achieves. Here there is a need to recognise that while individual action can feel futile at times, it is the complementary, concerted actions of many individuals that add up to change. This is why it is important to understand where we already have affinity and common ground with other people and take climate action as part of a supportive community.

At the end of this report, we outline a series of top tips: one for [Using narrative approaches to engage people with climate science](#), and another more general [Do's and Don'ts in climate communication](#).

1. Introduction

Climate change is the most pressing economic and social challenge of our time. As well as having profound consequences for our economy, public policy, and the livelihoods of communities around the world, it is also impacting our personal, mental, and psychological wellbeing. As more of us come to understand the gravity of the climate crisis, more of us are also experiencing strong emotions about the future of the planet.

Our emotions are important because they are not simply passive reactions to the crisis; they shape how we engage and disengage with climate action. Emotions can leave some people apathetic and paralysed, while for others they can be catalysts for committed behavioural change and climate action.

This paper starts by looking at the emotional responses of young people – who we broadly categorise as age 15-25 – towards climate change. Evidence shows that the growing phenomenon of ‘eco-anxiety’ and other difficult emotions are more acute amongst young people than other age groups. These powerful and difficult emotions are broader than anxiety alone, ranging from anger, fear, shock, and rage to disappointment, helplessness, guilt, despair, and grief.⁷ In this report we use the phrases eco-anxiety and climate-anxiety interchangeably, sometimes in parallel with these other emotions.

There is no consensus about why young people are more likely to experience these emotions in comparison to other age groups. On the one hand young people report higher instances of mental health problems in general, but it is important to note from the outset that climate-related anxiety, apprehension, anger and grief are not necessarily signs of any underlying mental health issue or disorder. Psychologists describe these feelings as a perfectly rational response to the gravity of the climate crisis. If harnessed in a positive way, strong emotions can be healthy and useful responses to climate change.

One of the key influences on our emotional response towards climate change are the stories and narratives that we draw on to make sense of a very complex reality. Decades of research from multiple disciplines has shown that stories and narratives are easier for the human brain to process and remember compared to statistics and factual

statements. The way we choose to communicate about climate change invokes and foregrounds particular narrative frames that themselves lead to positive or negative emotional responses for an audience. If we accept that emotions are integrally linked with our propensity to take positive climate actions, then we should also recognise that there are a number of dominant narratives which can inhibit young people's confidence and motivation to act. Recognising and being conscious of dominant narratives is crucial to enabling people to build a picture of a future they want to see, and ability to take action towards it.

The way we frame climate action is also crucial - the emphasis needs to move beyond what we can achieve as individuals to what we can achieve together. Individuals who are concerned about climate change – especially young people – can feel that they are shouldering the responsibility of climate change alone or in isolation. Being part of a supportive community is important to both positive mental wellbeing, and being motivated to take climate action. Narratives are also important here, providing key levers in fostering a community with a shared identity, shared values, and shared goals about the future.

The link between emotions, narratives and climate action is already influencing environmental activists, civil society groups, and climate communicators. This report aims to provide a comprehensive review of the theories and methods which can be used to support young people to navigate their feelings healthily, unlock their capacity to drive climate action, and work together towards a just and sustainable future. Understanding how to support young people on this basis also provides valuable lessons for other age groups too.

This paper is the foundation for a wider piece of work being conducted by Common Vision, Climate Cares and Force of Nature, with the support of the Natural Environment Research Council. The project brings together young people and environmental scientists to reflect on their personal emotions, reimagine hopeful stories about the future informed by science, and build understanding of how collective climate action can help realise these visions of the future.

Methodology

This report has been informed by an extensive literature review of academic studies and grey literature across the fields of climate psychology, environmental communications, and narrative change. It is further supplemented by insights from a series of discursive meetings with young people, environmental scientists, climate communicators and narrative change practitioners, to develop the HoldThis.Space digital platform.

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2. The power of emotions

We all have different emotional responses to climate change. Some people feel strong emotions like anger, despair or grief, while others feel numb or indifferent. Our emotions may vary from day to day and change over time.

Polling shows that feelings of climate distress and anxiety are widespread but are particularly prevalent among young people and young adults. Eco-anxiety has been described as a 'second pandemic' amongst young people⁸ – although Imperial College London's Institute of Global Health Innovation found that young people in the UK report greater feelings of distress in relation to climate change than the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

84% of 16-24-year-olds are worried about climate change, with just under half of young people saying their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning.¹⁰ Research by The Royal College of Psychiatrists found that 57% of child and adolescent psychiatrists surveyed in England say their patients have environmental anxiety – quoting helplessness, anger, insomnia, panic and guilt.¹¹ Meanwhile a third of teachers are seeing high levels of climate anxiety in students, with 77% of students saying that thinking about climate change makes them anxious.¹²

The consensus among mental health professionals is that most of these feelings represent adaptive, or healthy, responses to the climate and ecological threats we are facing as a society, and do not constitute a mental illness in themselves.^{13, 14} However, these emotions can be a disabling force in people's lives, undermining both their personal wellbeing and their ability to take part in climate action. It is important not to 'pathologise' climate anxiety and other strong emotional responses, but to consider what young people need by way of adaptive coping methods to understand their emotions and move forward.

2.1. The drivers of climate anxiety in young people

A range of factors influence different emotional responses to climate change. These can be **personal**, such as our immediate experiences of climate change or climate action, **relational**, linked to our perceptions of other people's attitudes, or **political**, intertwined

with perceptions of power, responsibility, culpability, and justice.

There is no consensus about whether young people are more likely to experience these emotions because of a higher instance of mental health problems in general; because climate change will disproportionately affect younger generations; because of young people's distance from formal positions with the power and authority to make large-scale climate-positive changes to society; or because of the ways that knowledge of climate change has been imparted and/ or framed to young people.

Our research has found that the following themes are prevalent in discussions about climate anxiety:

- Eco-anxiety is closely linked to a **sense of being lost, powerless and confused about the role of individuals** in addressing the enormous global crisis that is climate change. The mismatch between the scale and complexity of the crisis, and the ability of any individual to affect it, can lead to feelings of overwhelm and paralysis. A survey of young people by Force of Nature found that only 26% had a clear idea of how they can contribute to solving climate change.¹⁵
- Recent research as shown how levels of climate anxiety around the world seem to correlate with young people's **perceptions of betrayal and abandonment by government and other adults**. In part at least, it is young people's sense of not being listened to, of not having their future protected by the people who are meant to protect it, and loss of faith and hope in the systems, that is appears driving or contributing to despair and anxiety for many young people.¹⁶
- Although some articles have questioned if eco-anxiety is a "a form of white fragility or even racial anxiety", suggesting that privileged perspectives from the Global North about climate anxiety risk shifting attention away from securing systemic climate justice for marginalised communities,¹⁷ many of the young people we have engaged directly have spoken about the **sense of injustice and guilt** they experience in response to learning of the impacts of climate change on communities in the Global South.

2.2. Responding to eco-emotions

Eco-anxiety isn't necessarily something that needs to be 'fixed' or treated, in the way that mental illnesses are. Indeed, it may be a key part of the transition from climate denialism

to the rationalisation of climate change, to acceptance and agency. Climate anxiety has been described by psychologists as a symptom of partially stripping away psychological defence mechanisms like denial, rationalisation, avoidant coping, avoiding grief, cognitive dissonance, and 'splitting' – all of which are barriers to an individual taking climate action – without developing the necessary self-awareness or adaptive coping methods to replace them.¹⁸ In other words, someone experiencing these strong and difficult emotions has more awareness of the problem, but lacks the tools or knowledge to separate rational feelings of worry from unnecessary suffering, and therefore needs support to develop and use healthy strategies to cope with and process these emotions.

There are a number of different approaches taken by psychologists, neuroscientists, communication experts and climate activists to respond to support emotional processing and coping:

- **Focusing on reflection:** Some research calls for specialist interventions to help individuals overcome eco-anxiety.¹⁹ This ranges from secular therapeutic approaches that focus on cultivating self-compassion and self-knowledge – enabling us to respond to our own suffering and the suffering of others without being overwhelmed, fatigued, or stricken by guilt and shame;²⁰ to more spiritual approaches that draw on wisdom traditions and incorporate aspects of mindfulness and meditation.²¹

Often the split between these two strands is more a question of emphasis – even if the theoretical frameworks underlying the approaches are different, both suggest that understanding and healing external problems like climate change begins with self-awareness and personal, emotional transformation.²²

- **Focusing on action:** Often climate action proponents suggest that our behaviours are based on our beliefs and our feelings - we have to believe in climate change and feel hopeful about our ability to enact change in order to take action. However, neuroscientist Dr Kris de Meyer proposes that the dynamic between beliefs and behaviour is often the other way around: "our actions change our beliefs, awareness and concerns through a process of self-justification and self-persuasion". Accordingly, as action drives mindset, eco-anxiety would best be addressed through supporting people to take positive climate actions, as well as recognising the breadth of climate actions that exist, and feelings of hope will follow.

Indeed within the eco-anxiety literature, multiple sources argue that moving from

paralysis and overwhelm to agency through climate action is a powerful way to address eco-anxiety.²³ This means that young people should be supported to take climate-positive actions, in order to believe in their own agency and their power to effect change. On the other hand, the power of individual actions has its limits, and the narrative of isolated individual responsibility can undermine climate science and entrench misplaced feelings of personal guilt. Individual action must be tied to collective responses and bigger structural changes, in proportion with each actor's responsibility and power, to be a meaningful way to address climate anxiety.

- **Focusing on meaning:** We can also see new approaches emerging that use narrative and values-led techniques to change how we relate to climate change and understand our individual agency. Action is part of the equation, but actions taken must be based on a set of values and a sense of meaning, rather than just taking any climate action.

Whilst many of these approaches, including those championed by organisations like Force of Nature and Climate Cares, draw from emotions and lead to action, the process is not about substituting negative emotions with positive emotions (as with therapeutic approaches), or affecting emotions through action (as with action-orientated approaches), but altering the backdrop against which these emotions and actions take place.

These approaches are sometimes deployed as part of a raft of measures by psychologists and civil society groups working with young people. Force of Nature's approach for example, invests in noticing, naming, and accepting difficult emotions before translating them into "agency, determination, community, and vision".²⁴ This translation process is as much about tapping into intrinsic and extrinsic values, self-limiting beliefs, and considering how stories affect mindset and behaviour, as it is about coming to terms with emotions.

Clearly, our emotions do not sit in a vacuum and coping with emotions can involve much more than individual reflection. Indeed, studies suggest that the most powerful way to support people through eco-anxiety is to cultivate a feeling of hope and collective agency by connecting an individual's role to a sense of community and a wider system of change. A way of developing and strengthening this sense of shared identity and purpose is through narratives - the collections of stories through which we make sense of the world and our place in it.

2. The power of narratives

This report uses the term 'narrative' to refer to a collection of related stories, repeatedly told and embedded across society, which amount to shared interpretations of how the world works. It has been said that stories are to narratives what individual tiles are to mosaics.²⁵

As an example of a narrative, consider the Steven Spielberg classic, *Jaws*. *Jaws* tells the story of a killer great white shark. All the stories of man-eating sharks could be said to add up to a narrative that sharks are dangerous and predatory to humans and should be feared. When that narrative is coupled with other similar narratives about deadly insects, catastrophic natural disasters and even viruses, we can see a 'deep narrative' emerge with regards to the relationship between human beings and the natural world: that humans are somehow separate from nature and that nature is something to be feared and thus, controlled.²⁶

As we can see from the *Jaws* example, narratives themselves often exist and operate outside of our rational, conscious minds. They influence us at the gut level and can feel like 'common sense', regardless of facts or evidence.

When it comes to climate change, there are many stories and narratives we can draw on to help us make sense of a very complex reality. Some of these narratives are positive and others less so – either way, they help to guide our expectations, our attitudes, and our decisions,²⁷ ultimately informing whether we believe climate change can be overcome and how.

3.1. Narratives and climate change

Raising public awareness of the climate crisis is not enough to make change happen. Science communications have relied on the idea that if people knew the facts they would feel forced to act. This has become known as the 'information deficit model', a belief that inaction is the result of not having the right information. But in fact, information and fact-sharing alone can often lead to feelings of overwhelm and despair, causing people to turn away in order to avoid the difficult emotions they experience.

To many people without a background in science, the way climate change is typically communicated can be very alienating. An emphasis on statistics and graphs, although often based on solid evidence, can feel very far removed from someone's day-to-day life, making climate change feel abstract and therefore, dismissible. This is compounded through the use of complex, scientific language that distances your everyday person from the crisis at hand.

Human beings are story-telling creatures by nature, which means we are more likely to understand and retain information told to us in terms of personal experience than we are in the forms of statistical data. As such, the stories we tell about the climate crisis, and the role of individuals role in tackling it, play an important part in influencing our emotional responses, our assumptions of what is and isn't possible, and our consequent actions towards climate change.

Our most basic and fundamental beliefs, values, and worldviews regarding human beings' place in the world and potential futures are influenced by narratives and stories. Stories have been used to hand down knowledge and experiences for thousands of years, particularly in Indigenous and traditional cultures. It is through stories that human beings find meaning in the world around them and come to understand their place within it, and thus it is an essential ingredient in any change effort.

While a narrative's power exists in its pervasiveness and intractability, narratives are not static or impermeable – they are actively shaped by our experiences and our actions. Therefore, supporting young people to recognise, understand and reflect on the cultural-level stories we hear and absorb every day, often subconsciously, is an important part of helping them to cope with their emotions and drive forward climate action. Being conscious of which narratives influence us, which we should set aside, and what sorts of narratives we want to shape and contribute towards in the future is a way of empowering young people to take control of their mindsets and their actions.

3.2. Understanding dominant climate change narratives today

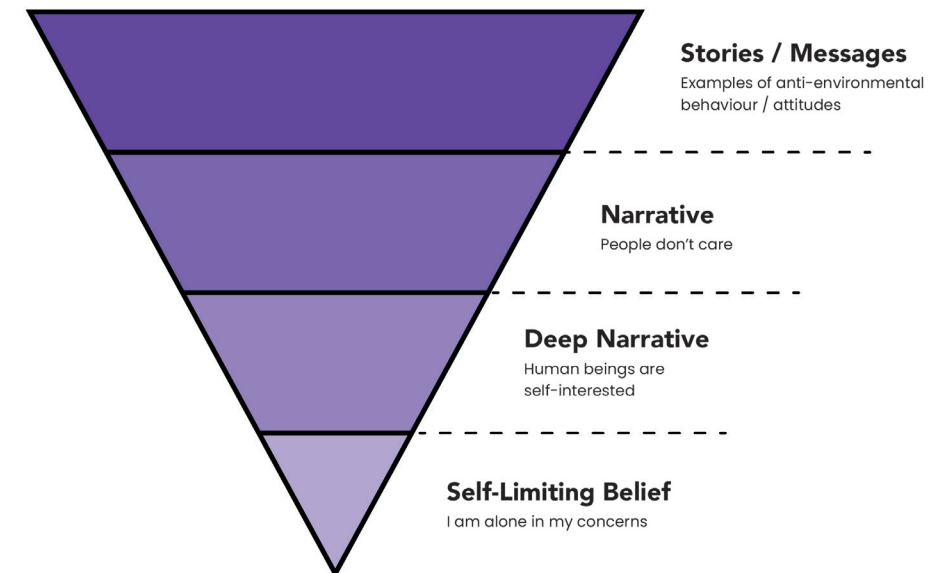
Understanding dominant interpretations when it comes to climate change help identify some of the unhelpful ways of thinking that prevent sustained and committed action.

Common narratives about climate change

- As individuals, we're too small to make a difference
- Other people don't care about climate change
- It is too late to fix the climate crisis
- It is the responsibility of government and big business to fix things
- Previous generations have caused the problem

Here are three examples of problematic narratives that we can consider as exacerbating eco-anxiety in young people and inhibiting their confidence to take action.

Narrative One: Other people don't care about climate change



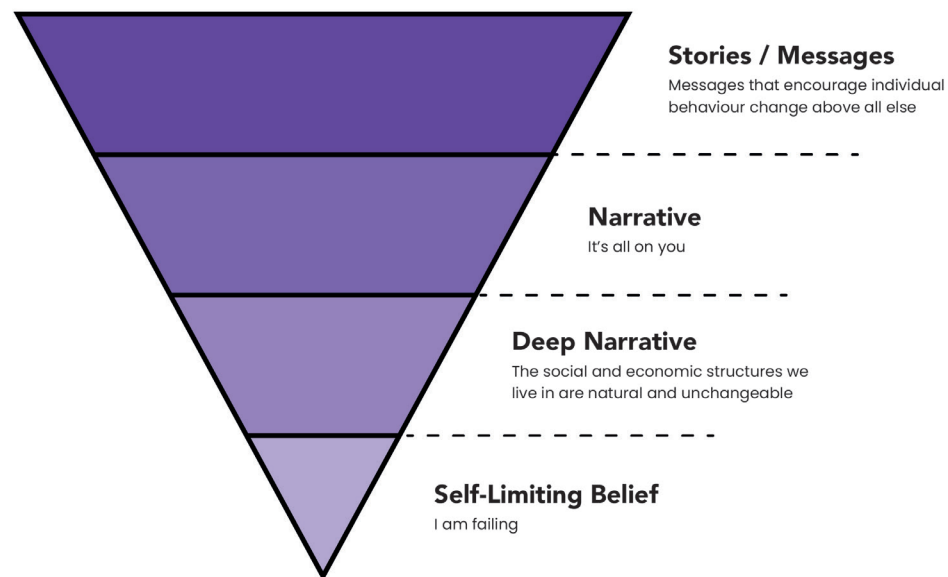
The first narrative is that people simply do not care about climate change. Sustained by continual stories and experiences of the (in)actions of governments, those in decision making positions, as well as ordinary citizens, this narrative is widely embedded across society. As it is reinforced over time, this narrative leads to a perception of human nature as being inherently selfish, while those who do take an active interest in the health of our planet are left feeling alone isolated in their concerns, or that they are somehow different to others.

This narrative may be exacerbated for young people by a generational gap: young people perceive older generations and decision makers to be neglecting the future of the planet, and that the issues they care about and values they hold are very different to those in charge.²⁸ This is likely to entrench the narrative of isolation for young people.

Research conducted by Global Action Plan into the values of young people found that almost all of the 916 individuals surveyed placed importance on caring for nature and other people, but they did not feel that other young people shared their compassionate values. This 'values-perceptions gap' grows as children aged and has a negative impact on both emotional wellbeing and climate action.²⁹ We know from other social psychological research that when someone perceives that their fellow citizens do not place importance on the same pro-environmental values as them, they become less likely to publicly express their values through their actions, and this, in turn, reinforces the narrative that people are driven by selfish motives.³⁰

When we assume that human beings are more driven by greed and selfishness than by kindness or generosity, we can begin to accept unethical behaviour in ourselves and others without question, as an obvious consequence of human nature. If inaction on climate change is understood as a product of human nature, that poses a monumental challenge for the success of activism efforts and is therefore likely to exacerbate anxiety about the future.

Narrative Two: Only individual action can save the planet

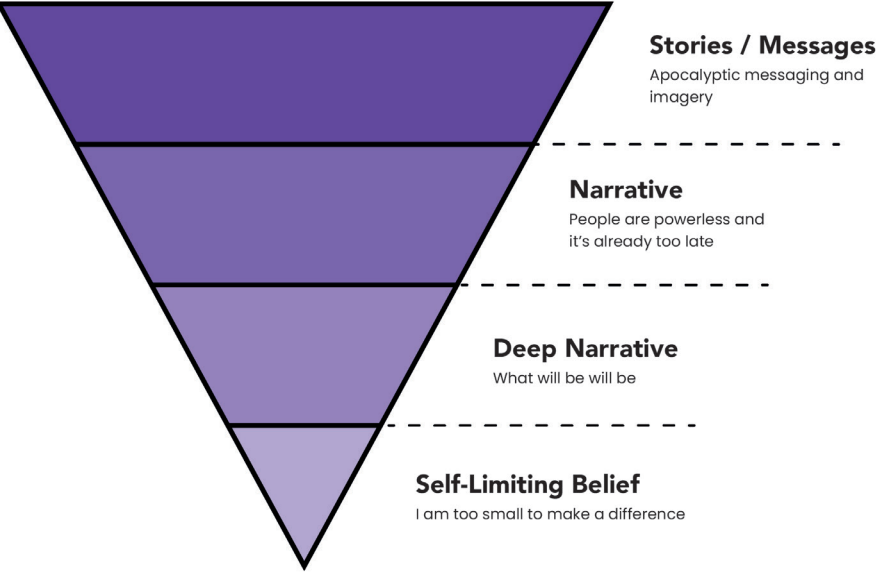


The second dominant narrative is that changing individual behaviours is the most powerful way to save the planet. The vast majority of public messaging in relation to climate action focuses on simple behaviours that an individual can do to live more sustainably, for example, recycling, switching to energy saving light bulbs or eating less meat. Over a sustained period of time this messaging has led to the development of a mainstream narrative that everybody has a responsibility to 'do their bit' to tackle the climate crisis, placing the utmost importance on the singular actions of any given person. A focus on small daily actions can also lead to a belief that the structures by which we order our society, like the economy, are somehow naturally occurring and thus, cannot be redesigned or influenced. It can limit the scope of our ambitions and detract from calls for larger structural change.

From a psychological point of view, it is easy to see how taking on personal responsibility for climate change can have huge implications for our mental health. Not only are we encouraged to pass judgement on the actions of others, but we can internalise feelings of shame and guilt when we behave in a way that does not appear to align with standard guidance on what constitutes environmentally friendly behaviour.

Young people especially have the added pressure of frequently hearing messages that they are the last generation to save the planet, only adding to the immense feelings of responsibility over the future of our natural world. Research conducted by the Public Interest Research Centre and the New Economy Organisers Network found that young people are more likely than older people to name capitalism and colonialism as being causes of climate change, suggesting that the younger generation are perhaps less convinced by the narrative of personal responsibility, despite its prevalence in public and political debates.³¹ This leaves them in a position where they are not provided with pathways to action that feel aligned with their perceptions and values.

Narrative Three: It is already too late to do anything substantial about climate change



The narrative of fatalism, or the belief that it is already too late to do anything substantial about climate change is founded on the near constant apocalyptic messaging and imagery we see about the current effects of climate change. For a generation with access to media like never before, these messages can be completely overwhelming, fueling a belief that people are powerless in the face of a changing climate. Imagery and messaging which highlights changes in weather patterns today,

for example, can lead to the belief that it is already too late to curtail climate change in any meaningful way. The changes we would need are just too big to expect them to take place in the timeframes required.

Whereas in reality climate change is happening, but is the extent of climate change which is still within our power to change, this narrative reinforces black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking. It obscures that there are still a range of potential futures we can choose to work towards.

For individuals, the narrative of fatalism can lead to a self-limiting belief that “I am just too small to make a difference”; the reasoning that any action taken will be so insignificant as to make no difference. For a young person, this narrative should be considered alongside another dominant narratives that young people cannot yet be trusted to act politically and thus should not be provided with decision making capabilities like the power to vote – a narrative which might further instill feelings of worthlessness and insignificance.

4. Harnessing emotions and narratives for action

Although narratives can have a negative impact on our expectations and behaviours, they can also be positive and aspirational, fueling feelings of hope and optimism and a sense of solidarity and empowerment. This chapter looks at how narrative change methodologies can be used effectively to influence emotions and action.

Narrative change is the process and practice of examining common stories and shared interpretations of social and economic issues in order to determine whether they are helpful or harmful to a particular change effort and considering what an alternative narrative could look like. Theories of narrative change look at what it takes to 'unlearn' dominant narratives and replace them with alternatives that are better aligned to cultivate a sense of agency, purpose and resilience.

The process of narrative change is not just about finding the right combination of words to most effectively communicate a message, but about activating the underlying values and beliefs which sit behind these messages and make them meaningful to people. Theories of narrative change highlight the potential to actively drive new stories about the possible, to propagate and showcase stories which contribute to that new vision, and to ensure those stories are meaningful to their intended audience.³²

4.1. The link between narratives and action

Narratives are not static and can be actively shaped. The media, politics, pop culture and social media are all key sites of conversation that shape dominant narratives. But narratives are not simply found in pieces of communication. They can also be experienced directly through our interactions with the built environment and with nature. For example, if when walking down the local high street we encounter numerous recycling bins and messages encouraging us to recycle, this may invoke a more positive narrative of the neighbourhood's identity as one that cares for its local environment.

As such, narratives are not only drivers behind our emotional response to climate change. They are also interdependent with whether and how we take action and can

Positive narratives about climate change

- People all around the world are acting together to address climate change.
- Governments and institutions are taking action to address climate change.
- New advances in science and technology are helping to address the climate crisis.
- As humans, we are a part of nature. Our health and our futures are deeply interconnected.
- Addressing climate change brings a number of other co-benefits to our health and our economy.
- There are a number of possible climate futures. There is always more to save, always work to do for a better future path.

be important levers in fostering a community with a shared identity, shared values and shared goals about the future. This is important because, as previous chapters have shown, over-emphasising the importance of the singular actions of individuals can make those individuals – especially young people – feel that they are shouldering the responsibility of climate change, with major mental health implications.

4.2. Narrative change methodologies

By understanding and deploying narrative change techniques, we can more effectively support young people to create hopeful, empowering stories about their role in climate action. These three examples of narrative-based approaches demonstrate how stories can build a greater sense of commitment and confidence in our ideals and beliefs, address emotional and psychological impacts, and support young people to turn difficult emotions into a fuel for individual action and collective agency.

Approach 1: Changing the narrative about public values

Despite a deeply held narrative that human beings are inherently self-interested and thus do not care about the climate, a wealth of social psychological research has shown that the majority of people do in fact place the greatest importance on intrinsic values – values such as equality, community and care for the environment.^{33,34} This seeming discrepancy between what people actually value and what the majority of us perceive others to value is known as the perception gap. We know that those who have a larger perception gap i.e. those who wrongly believe that other people prioritise extrinsic values, such as wealth, power and social status, over intrinsic values, are less likely to engage in civic participation, like volunteering or voting, and also report higher levels of social alienation.

Research by Global Action Plan has shown that the perception gap exists in children as young as 11 and that it “significantly widens” as they get older. By the age of 14, the majority of young people surveyed believed that their peers were more self-interested than they were compassionate. Furthermore, Global Action Plan found that this misperception in young people led to increased worry about the future and a decrease in likelihood to take climate action.³⁵ Conversely, it would appear that the more an individual is encouraged to place importance on intrinsic values (like compassion) and to feel that others are doing the same (especially those they consider to be ‘like them’) they are more likely to take pro-environmental action and to sustain this behaviour over time.^{36,37} These findings suggest the need to narrow the perception gap of young people, by encouraging them to craft and share their own personal origin stories of why they care about the environment.

Tapping into shared collective values such as justice and equity may help unlock emotions which stimulate determined action. Findings from research on eco-anxiety, eco-depression, and eco-anger suggest that frustration and anger about the climate crisis are adaptive (or enabling) responses.³⁸ Researchers from the Australian National University found that experiencing eco-anger predicted better mental health outcomes, as well as greater engagement in pro-climate activism and personal behaviours, than eco-anxiety and eco-depression.³⁹ Wider psychological research shows that experiences of injustice or unfairness tend to provoke group-based anger, motivating collective (and not individual) action.⁴⁰

Marshall Ganz's public narrative methodology⁴¹

An approach to public narratives developed by Marshall Ganz, a civil rights organiser and senior lecturer in Senior Lecturer at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, involves the development of a public story in three parts – 'a story of self', 'a story of us' and 'a story of now'. The 'story of self' is a personal account of the values and experiences that led someone to be inspired to do what they do. It invites the audience to connect with the storyteller as a person. The 'story of us' is a collective story, which illustrates the shared goal of a group of likeminded people, again situated in their shared values. It actively invites others to identify with the values being expressed and to become a part of the community themselves. Finally, the 'story of now' actively addresses a challenge that a community needs to overcome, and the hope they have for the future. The challenge is established as being a contradiction to the values expressed throughout the first two parts of the story and it invites people to take action to see the challenge overcome. As a methodology, the public narrative approach can offer an opportunity for participants to identify their shared values and to counter the idea that they are alone in their concerns about climate change.

Approach 2: Connecting the individual with the system

Narratives which join the dots between the change happening at a grassroots level, and the larger economic and political system, such as Macy's 'Great Turning' approach, can support young people to feel part of an emerging, global, distributed network of change, which in turn is impetus to transition their energy away from eco-anxiety towards active hope.

The risk of using this narrative approach is that it can become lost in an idea of 'organic emergence', i.e. that change is simply happening. We need to balance this narrative with

Joanna Macy's Great Turning

A narrative-based approach to supporting the emergence of system-related stories can be found in the book 'Active Hope' written by the author and teacher, Joanna Macy.⁴² Macy describes three stories through which we can understand the world. The first story, known as 'Business as Usual', suggests there is little need to alter the way we currently live. The second story, the 'Great Unraveling', draws attention to the disasters caused by 'Business as Usual'. The third story, referred to as the 'Great Turning', recognises the first and second stories, but chooses to focus on transition, healing and recovery. Macy makes clear that all three stories are taking place simultaneously around us, but that we each have the ability to decide which story we wish to invest our energy in.

Macy encourages a recognition that just because we are not seeing examples of the 'Great Turning' through our corporate-controlled media, it does not mean that it is not happening. Indeed, despite the barriers which exist to change, people are banding together and taking action in their own localities. They are not waiting for the powers that be to step up – they are doing it themselves, and in that we can take immense courage. We feel hope, Macy suggests through, only by doing hope and taking action. Therefore to shift from anxiety to active hope, we need to tell stories of taking action and practicing hopefulness in the world.

a continued focus on the responsibility which decision makers must implement large-scale climate policy change and invest in effective climate solutions at a structural level.

At its best, the 'Great Turning' approach offers a way out of black-and-white thinking between the "I'm too small to make a difference" narrative, and the "it's all on me" narratives that underly feelings of powerless and guilt respectively. We can instead learn how to find power in the agency we do have and draw hope from the connections of our actions with those of others.

Approach 3: Hope-based communications

A frequently used model for public engagement focuses on activating fear or shock around a particular problem before identifying a possible solution for people to galvanise around. However, a significant amount of research has shown that fear is generally not an effective means by which to motivate engagement.⁴³ Messaging that makes people feel anxious or depressed about climate change may be unsuccessful as well as potentially dangerous for community wellbeing.⁴⁴

We know that the majority of people already think of climate change as an emergency. Therefore continuing to sound the alarm risks causing panic or disengagement instead of signposting constructive action.⁴⁵ By consistently hearing how drastic the environmental situation is, the odds of overcoming the challenges ahead begin to appear increasingly small. As such, climate communicators need to focus on generating positive, hopeful messages that emphasise the action already taking place.

Hope-based communication is rooted in the idea that we need to talk about what we want to see and not just what we do not like.⁴⁶ 'The Great Turning' described above is just one example of a hope-based communications approach. Others, like communications specialists like On Road Media or NEON, focus on language use, metaphors, framing, or the structure of statements.^{47,48} These methods do not sideline fear and anger, but combines these with hope to fuel action. As a narrative methodology, it provides participants with an opportunity to shape a message to be able to use with others that encourages climate action, whilst also providing a counter to more fatalistic accounts. For young people, it can offer a provocation to imagine the future that we want to live in, prompting collective action to make that future a reality, and converting feelings of hope and despair into feeling motivated and optimistic.

A four-step approach to hope-based communications

1. A hope-based communication model begins by establishing a **statement of shared values**. For example, "most people across the world care about the environment and want to see countries work together in order to find solutions to overcome climate change". This establishes unity from the outset.
2. Next comes a **problem statement**, but instead of being framed in terms of fear, it is framed as a violation of the values just expressed. For example, "But right now, our economy is not designed in such a way as to support communities to make the required changes they seek". The problem statement very clearly defines a structural driver of the challenge and outlines how this poses a problem to our collectively held values.
3. After the problem statement comes an **impact statement** that details the specific ways that people and the planet are being affected by the problem at hand. For example, "climate change is a global challenge, but those who have contributed least to its acceleration are those who are facing the greatest effects".
4. The messaging ends with a **solution statement**, which does not downplay the problem, but instead emphasises concrete and proportionate solutions for the audience to partake in. For example, "by working together, people across the world can partake in solutions to rebalance our relationship with the natural world, such as participating in community-supported agriculture projects". Solution statements can also remind listeners of past and continuing successes in order to build a sense of optimism.

5. Conclusion

To date, much climate change campaigning and science communication has focused on 'raising awareness', in the belief that if people knew the full scale of the problem and were equipped with all the facts they would then rationally make a decision to take proportionate action. This stems from the 'Enlightenment model' of human decision-making, which generally understands decisions to be the result of a 'rational' process of deducing the 'optimal course of action' based on a series of facts. Missing from this understanding is the role of emotion in human decision-making. Importantly, the way we choose to act and what we choose to believe are guided by a set of factors, which are largely unconscious, including how we feel and the stories we use to make sense of the world around us.

Making the space for young people to take their place in the climate movement on their own terms, means understanding their emotions and what they need and want in order to navigate their feelings in a healthy way that allows them to cope and take positive action as a result. Leaders and decision-makers, campaigners, teachers, scientists, and others who communicate about climate change have a responsibility to take young people's feelings seriously and consider the links between emotions, narratives and agency.

Holding space for emotions

The fact that the vast majority of young people today feel worried when they think about climate change shows that they are aware of the threat of the climate crisis and that they care about addressing it. Eco-anxiety isn't necessarily something that needs to be 'fixed' or treated, and can be a normal and necessary part of moving from a state of denial to agency. However, difficult emotions can also be barriers to an individual taking climate action if they have not been supported with healthy strategies to cope with and process these feelings.

It is important to acknowledge feelings of eco-anxiety and make space to explore

where these come from. Everyone feels differently about climate change. Some people feel strong emotions like anger, despair or grief, while others feel numb or indifferent. Acknowledging this helps people understand that they are not alone. Naming, recognising and sharing our emotions is a first step to turning concern for the environment away from a sense of despair and towards hope-based action for change.

Holding space for a different future

The stories we hear about climate change influence how we feel and act in response. Some can leave us feeling hopeless and angry at other people or institutions, while others can make us feel empowered and motivated. When thinking about narrative change, we need to recognise that fear-based communications and fatalism have not had the desired effect in galvanising action. Instead, there are huge opportunities in encouraging young people to be imaginative and aspirational about the future they want to live in.

There is an important message for science communications here, which have generally relied on the idea that if people knew the facts they would be forced to act. This has become known as the ‘information deficit model’; a belief that inaction is the result of not having the right information. As Nicky Hawkins of On Road Media has pointed out, if we are simply trying to raise awareness of climate change we’re doing yesterday’s work, seeing as recent studies have shown that 81% of people in the UK recognise the reality of the climate crisis and want to see increased action taken.⁴⁹ Instead, there is a role for scientists and others to present new stories of the future, the potential co-benefits to our lives, and the positive effects on our wellbeing that taking action on climate change could achieve.

Holding space to connect with climate action and with each other

Many young people are taking up an increasingly visible role in the climate movement, at a national and international level as well as in local communities. Campaigners like Greta Thunberg, Vanessa Nakate, and Isra Hirsj, alongside global youth movements like ‘Fridays for Future’ and the school youth strikers, are carving out a central role for young people on the global stage. Alongside the 26th United Nations’ Conference of Parties (COP26), held in the UK in November 2021, the public and media conversation

highlighted a number of young leaders’ calls for more ambitious and radical change.

However, climate action is much broader than climate activism. While many young people feel inspired and motivated by the achievements of their peers on a global stage, not everyone can or wants to be involved in the climate movement in this way. To engage many more young people to participate in climate action on their terms, we need to have a broader public conversation about what action is and what it achieves. Therefore, there is a need to recognise that while individual action can feel futile at times, it is the complementary, concerted actions of many individuals that add up to change. This is why it is important to take climate action as part of a supportive community. Narrative techniques can help us understand where we already have affinity and common ground with other people, and we should also recognise that telling and sharing personal stories about our emotions, experiences and hopes for the future is an act of agency in itself.

Top tips: Using narrative approaches to engage people with climate science

Research has suggested that climate scientists – like young people – experience difficult emotions at a higher rate. This is likely because their research regularly exposes them to the reality of climate change, exposing them to what some term ‘pre-traumatic’ stress – anticipatory anxieties for the future – about climate change.⁵⁰ This also means that scientists can leverage these shared emotional experiences to engage young people with science in new ways.

- **Making the link between personal values and science:** A public narrative approach could help climate and environmental scientists to speak more authentically about the work they do and why they do it. Polling has consistently shown that many people in the UK trust scientists. Speaking from a position of personal values can help to build on that trust amongst the population, reminding them that scientists are not just experts on climate science, but also individual people who care deeply about the future of our shared home.
- **Science as part of the ‘Great Turning’:** Instead of highlighting all the ways that climate change is currently causing huge risks to people and the planet, the ‘Great Turning’ narrative focuses on transformation and healing. This is not to say that we downplay the urgency and scale of the climate crisis, but that we focus our attention on the positive steps that need to be taken – and in many places are already being taken – to lead to the regenerative future which we need in order to flourish. A number of climate scientists and communicators are already seizing opportunities to link the idea of climate health with conversations about human health, highlighting the ‘co-benefits’ of improved environmental conditions. Climate scientists can use active language related to

health, such as “healing, reviving, treating and curing” to help bring to life the ‘Great Turning’ narrative through their work and help the public understand that although we have harmed the planet we can also heal it.

- **Science and Hope-based communications:** Climate science communication to date has been successful in terms of raising the alarm about our heating planet. Now, the task at hand is to show how tackling climate change is challenging, but possible. When discussing any climate challenge, scientists should also emphasise how they can be curtailed or prevented through reference to tangible and proportionate solutions.

Top tips: Do's and Don'ts of climate communication

These are some well-established guidelines in terms of effectively communicating climate change, so as to encourage hope and engagement instead of difficult emotions such as anxiety, fear and overwhelm.

DO	DON'T
<p>Emphasise people's compassionate qualities and appeal to people's intrinsic values in your communications.</p> <p>Remember that our perceptions of others' values affect how we think and act on climate change.</p>	<p>Don't use villains - if we need to vilify let it be the problem and not a person.</p> <p>Do not reinforce cynicism or mistrust. Actively demonstrate trust in other people through your work.</p> <p>Do not appeal to people's extrinsic values, such as wealth, social status or public image.</p>
<p>Emphasise collective responsibility in the creation of the world that we want.</p> <p>Talk of collective achievement in the past. Pan out to focus on the big picture.</p> <p>Join the dots for people: show the problem, but not just the most extreme end of it, and then show the individual steps we can take to address it.</p>	<p>Do not just focus on the heroic actions of a few e.g. Greta Thunberg or David Attenborough.</p> <p>Do not place full responsibility at the feet of individuals or elites, which can fuel division.</p> <p>Do not get stuck focusing exclusively on individual choices, put individual action in context.</p>
<p>Speak about rotten systems, for example the failure of present structures to address problems.</p>	<p>Do not speak about rotten apples, which detract from the big picture by displacing blame on specific individuals.</p>

DO	DON'T
<p>Show that change is possible, by normalising action which is already being taken.</p> <p>Make change feel tangible and achievable, for instance by using local examples.</p>	<p>Avoid fear-based or threat-based messaging.</p> <p>Avoid talking about 'radical change' and instead talk about 'necessary shifts'.</p>
<p>Talk about practical and proportionate climate solutions and show people how they can engage.</p> <p>Show how individual actions, when seen as a collective effort, shape and drive bigger change.</p>	<p>Do not focus on only small and simple solutions, as this fuels fatalism.</p> <p>Do not belittle our ability to make change, but also do not make it seem impossible or out of reach.</p>
<p>Highlight what you stand for and give space to discussing what you want to see.</p>	<p>Do not simply talk about what you stand against or oppose.</p>
<p>Use words like 'we', 'us' and 'our' to establish a sense of unity and connection with others.</p> <p>Show that the majority of people are supportive of climate action.</p>	<p>Avoid evoking national identity, which can bring about 'us and them' thinking.</p>
<p>Use straightforward, jargon-free messages to be as inclusive as possible.</p> <p>Highlight first-hand experiences of climate change by ordinary people to bring climate change 'home'.</p>	<p>Do not use overly scientific or 'activist' language which can be difficult to understand.</p> <p>Do not just speak of climate change as a problem affecting other parts of the world.</p>

Acknowledgements

The Hold This Space project is led by Common Vision, in partnership with Force of Nature and Climate Cares. It is funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) the UK's largest funder of independent environmental science, training and innovation.

We would like to thank a number of individuals for their contributions to this report, particularly Dr Emma Lawrance, Mental Health Innovations Fellow at the Institute of Global Health Innovation, Imperial College London for shaping the content and editorial, and our other partners Sacha Wright, Research and Curriculum Co-ordinator at Force of Nature; and Pip Batey, Designer at the Institute of Global Health Innovation, Imperial College London. Thanks are also due to Dr Kris De Meyer, UCL Climate Action Unit; Funmibi Ogunlesi, New Economy Organisers Network; James Sutton, Raleigh International; Isla Geis King, The Wildlife Trusts and Luke Wynne, Global Action Plan, for their feedback on this report, and the other members of the advisory group and co-design group who have helped shape the project. We are also incredibly grateful for the support from Hannah Lacey, Senior Public Engagement Programme Manager at NERC.

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About our partners



Force of Nature is a youth non-profit mobilising mindsets for climate action. Alongside creating safe spaces for young people to explore their climate emotions, Force of Nature supports leaders across business, education and policy to centre youth in delivering intergenerational climate solutions.



Climate Cares is a team of researchers, designers, policy-makers and educators working together with the public to understand and support mental health in the current climate and ecological crises. Climate Cares is a collaboration between the Institute of Global Health Innovation and the Grantham Institute at Imperial College London.



The Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) is the driving force of investment in environmental science in the UK. NERC advances the frontier of environmental science by commissioning new research, infrastructure and training that delivers valuable scientific breakthroughs. NERC's public engagement focuses on delivering excellent public engagement with environmental science research.

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