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Climate Change: Everyone, Every Day

Editor's Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column from ecoAmerica whose mission is to build public support and political resolve for climate solutions. NEHA is an official partner of ecoAmerica and works closely with their Climate for Health Program, a coalition of health leaders committed to caring for our climate to care for our health. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA.

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If you follow the polls on climate change, you will discover something interesting: 74% of people in the U.S. are concerned about climate change, with 46% saying they are very concerned. When you ask them if others around them are concerned, however, only 23% say others around them are very concerned. That is one half the number of people who are actually very concerned about this issue (ecoAmerica, 2020). The gap in actual versus perceived climate concern contributes to inaction on the issue and points to the increasingly urgent need for visible climate leadership and engagement.

While 74% of respondents say they are concerned about climate change, 6% report that they hear people they know talking about climate change at least once per week and 13% say it is once a month. That leaves 81% who speak about it a few a times a year or less (Leiserowitz et al., 2021). Why, if so concerned about climate change, don't people talk about it?

Climate change can be a difficult subject. Not many of us can understand the science

behind our computers, our air transportation, or the weather, much less climate change. And climate change has become a politically polarized issue. No telling what will happen when you bring it up—you could be challenged from the right, from the left, or by a scientist. Rather than rise to that challenge, many of us keep our climate perspectives to ourselves.

Also, results from an American Psychological Association (2020) survey show that while 7 in 10 U.S. adults say they wish there were more they could do to combat climate change, 51% say they don't know where to start. If you don't know what to say or do about climate change, it can be challenging to engage with confidence on the issue.

The good news is we can answer the question, "What can I do?" with concrete and tangible solutions. We can each take action at home, in our communities, at our workplaces, and with policy makers. We need to visibly lead on this issue—the biggest challenge in environmental health—and spread climate solutions with everyone, every day.

As environmental health professionals, we all should have climate change as a priority, if not our very top priority. We can all be climate solutions champions. As a core component of the public health workforce, environmental health professionals also have a way to connect with people on climate solutions. We can effectively deliver the message on the climate–health nexus. We can cut through the noise caused by the very vocal antiscience contingent and the political polarization by connecting to people. Research conducted by ecoAmerica shows that protecting personal and public health is the top reason people in the U.S. (76%) select for supporting climate solutions. Health even led jobs, with 71% of respondents saying they would support climate solutions if they increased good paying jobs (ecoAmerica, 2021).

So, what can we do to bring people along to advance climate solutions in our spheres of influence? We can meet people where they are in their climate journeys to accelerate their actions. Let us suggest three steps:

- 1. Learn:** What do you need to know and need to do about climate change? The National Environmental Health Association and ecoAmerica provide simple 2-page guides on what you need to know and what you need to do to address climate change in your personal life, workplace, and community, as well as with policy makers (Climate for Health, 2021).
- 2. Live your values (visibly):** That doesn't mean walk everywhere, go vegan, and wear winter coats in your freezing cold home. It means do what you can to practically and steadily move toward a more sustainable lifestyle. When you insulate your home, get a new car, buy food, and run errands—think about it. Maybe set some guidelines and goals. There are many simple ways to

reduce your carbon pollution that make a lot of sense from a health, financial, and community perspective. The small steps add up. You might consider buying offsets or even eliminating your historical emissions by going positive and using offsets.

3. **Make it personal:** Climate change is about people—move from people to climate, not the other way around. Start from their perspectives and values, and the climate realities all around them, not from the science. Focus on solutions and benefits. We all can make a difference and save money and protect our families and communities at the same time. Tell them how you are making a difference and how they can as well.

When you engage with others on climate change in a positive, personal way it does more than just advance the issue in their minds. Acknowledging and addressing climate change empowers people in a way that helps them overcome uncertainty and anxiety. ecoAmerica and the American Psychological Association released the 2021 edition of *Mental Health and Our Changing Climate*, which outlines the myriad ways climate change impacts our individual and community mental health and well-being, including psychological barriers to action and climate attitudes that can spur action. As it turns out, getting started on solutions can combat any despair or uncertainty you might have been feeling about your inaction (Clayton et al., 2021).

“We knew the science and had solutions years ago, we need to bring people along.”

**Katharine Hayhoe,
Atmospheric Scientist,
Professor, and Author**

The next time you have the opportunity to start or join a climate conversation, jump in. You are not alone in your climate concerns. Sometimes just getting started is the hardest part. Get your climate conversation starter ready and help engage everyone, every day in ambitious climate solutions. 🌱

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