



Using scare tactics: does it work?

There is no getting around the fact that climate change is scary. For people who live in countries where the environmental conditions are already challenging, and are getting worse, fear of the effects of climate change is a very immediate concern.

But for citizens of most developed countries, climate change still represents a future threat. Many early climate change communication strategies by NGOs and government agencies drew the reasonable conclusion that because the threat of climate change was perceived as something to worry about in the future, increasing the ‘fear factor’ might be a good way of getting people to be more concerned.

This approach was not completely misguided – studies have found that if the ‘psychological distance’ between an individual and the impacts of climate change is reduced (for example, because they experience a flooding event that is representative of the sort of impacts climate change will bring), they are more likely to express concern over climate change and show a greater willingness to save energy (Spence, Poortinga, Butler & Pidgeon, 2011). So linking individual experiences with climate change is one way of increasing the chance that people will want to do something about it. There is also no merit in ‘dumbing down’ the scientific evidence that the impacts of climate change are likely to be severe, and that some of these impacts are now almost certainly unavoidable. Accepting that climate change is happening, and will cause significant problems for human and natural systems is a scary prospect. But research has shown that deliberate attempts to instil fear or guilt in people carry a considerable risk of backfiring.

Studies on ‘fear appeals’ show the potential for fear to change attitudes or verbal expressions of concern, but often not actions or behaviour. The impact of fear appeals is context – and audience – specific. For those who do not yet realise the potentially ‘scary’ aspects of climate change, people need to first experience themselves as vulnerable to the risks in some way in order to feel moved or affected (Das et al, 2003; Hoog et al, 2005; Spence et al, 2011). While fear of a negative outcome (e.g. lung cancer) *can* be an effective way of promoting behavioural changes (e.g. giving up smoking), the link between the threat and the behaviour must be personal and direct (Hoog et al, 2005). Typically, climate change is perceived as neither a direct nor a personal threat – and so shocking people into doing their recycling is not necessarily the right idea.

As people move towards contemplating action, fear appeals can help form a behavioural intent, providing an impetus or spark; however such appeals must be coupled with constructive information and support to reduce the sense of danger (Moser & Dilling, 2007). The danger is that fear can also be disempowering – producing feelings of helplessness, remoteness and lack of control (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole, 2009). The right kind of fear-based message is “We know this is scary and overwhelming, but many of us feel this way and we are doing something about it”.

Unless carefully used in a message that contains constructive advice and a personal and direct link with the individual, fear is likely to trigger barriers to engagement with climate change, such as denial (Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2001; Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole & Whitmarsh, 2007). Similarly, studies have shown that guilt can play a role in motivating people to take action but can also function to stimulate defensive mechanisms against the perceived threat or challenge to one's sense of identity (as a good, moral person). In the latter case, behaviours may be left untouched (whether driving a SUV or taking a flight) as people defend themselves against any feelings of guilt or complicity through deployment of a range of justifications for the behaviour (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010).

A recent study by psychologists at Berkeley, California (Feinberg & Willer, 2010), found that 'apocalyptic' messages about climate change impacted on different people in different ways. For those who believe in a 'just world' – that bad things don't, by and large, happen to good people – messages that ended in dire consequences actually increased their scepticism about climate change. The researchers suggested that the conflict between the negative impacts of climate change and their belief in a just world led to the message being ignored – and even used as evidence that climate change was not occurring. The lesson for climate change communicators is that scare tactics must be used with caution: there is the possibility they will backfire.

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