



FAMILY

The Conversation Everyone Should Have

How to talk about climate change with
(just about) anyone in your life

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

IT'S MORE IMPORTANT than ever to discuss climate change with friends and family—yet the conversation is a surprising source of social anxiety. Will you get into a big blowup with your uncle during an otherwise peaceful family brunch? Will your 7-year-old break into sobs at the thought of those polar bears adrift on melting ice floes?

In case you missed it, climate change has become a hot button issue. Numerous polls tell us that the majority of American adults now believe climate change is happening. What's *causing* it? That's where opinions and passions diverge. Yet only about one in three of us discuss it. "We don't know how to start," says Katharine Hayhoe, PhD, an atmospheric scientist, political science professor, and codirector of the Climate Center at Texas Tech University. But we need to, she notes: "These conversations change the culture, what we all find acceptable. That changes the actions of individuals, workplaces, communities. There's a ripple effect." That may seem like pie-in-the-smoggy-sky thinking. But it works, she says. Remember when cigarette smoking was acceptable everywhere?

Hayhoe often navigates these tricky conversations. "The science is clear, and we need to act. But you don't get anywhere by trying to overpower the other person with data or by shaming them," she says. Instead, find points of connection that can help both sides work together. Here are some strategies.

A deluge of facts rarely changes hearts and minds. But sharing your personal experience can be the start of finding common ground.

HOW TO TALK TO Your Impressionable Kids

Yes, your offspring will inherit the planet. But you may not be sure how to broach such an overwhelming topic without setting off anxiety.

START EARLY Begin the conversation when your kids are little, says Gene Beresin, MD, executive director of the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital. “Even little kids get the idea of ‘The earth is our home, and we take care of it.’” Use specific examples, he advises. Go on a nature walk and talk about how the trees breathe in bad gases and breathe out good gases. Visit a greenhouse and let them feel how much warmer it is inside than out.

EMPOWER THEM Don’t sugarcoat the issue, but do instill hope, Beresin says. “You can say that really smart scientists and inventors are working hard all over the world to turn things

around.” (Read some of their inspiring ideas on page 67.) “I tell my two children that grown-ups really listen when kids speak up. Look at Greta Thunberg!” says Courtney Williams, PhD, a cancer researcher and activist in Peekskill, New York.

DON’T JUST TALK—DO STUFF

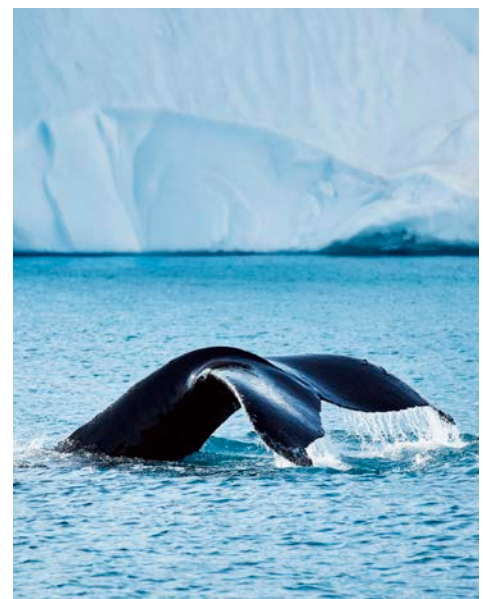
Williams involves her kids in simple climate-friendly activities, such as composting and gardening, and emphasizes the positive. “I’ll say, ‘We’re planting this garden to support bees because they’re important for our food supply.’”

LISTEN Older kids and teens may be anxious or depressed about doomsday scenarios they encounter on social media. “Eco-anxiety is common,” Beresin says. Ask open-ended questions to help them share their concerns: “Are you discussing climate change at school? How do you feel about that?” In the process, you may learn from them too. You might even have a kid at home policing your recycling habits. And that’s reason for hope.

HOW TO TALK TO Your Cousin Who Thinks Climate Change Is a Hoax

About 15 percent of Americans are climate change deniers, the research firm YouGov found. They believe that either climate change is not happening or humans are not the cause of it. You’ll have a better chance of swaying deniers in your life than strangers on Twitter, says Karin Kirk, a geologist in Bozeman, Montana. “We are most likely to be influenced by people we are close to and trust.” Having a discussion can be worth a shot.

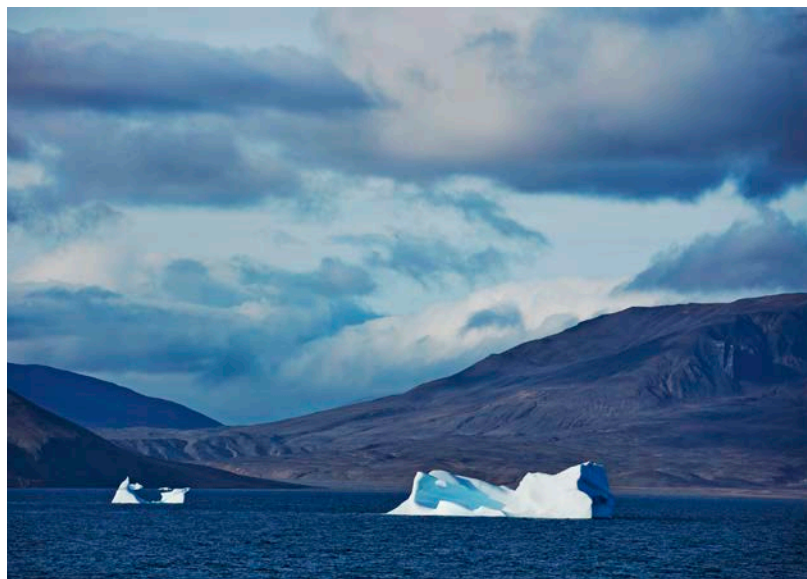
SHOW RESPECT Try this opening, Kirk suggests: “I appreciate the opportunity to have a more interesting conversation. I’m really curious about your point of view.” Then truly listen, rather than just readying a retort. You will set a courteous tone so they’ll be more willing to listen to you.



TELL YOUR STORY A deluge of facts rarely changes hearts and minds. The other person will just counter with their own cherry-picked ones. But sharing your personal experience can be the start of finding common ground. Perhaps you're worried about your cousin who lost her home in the California wildfires, or you grew up downwind of a belching power plant. If you can connect on a more intimate level, you'll both feel more empathetic, says Emma Frances Bloomfield, PhD, author of *Communication Strategies for Engaging Climate Skeptics*.

APPEAL TO THEIR VALUES The other person doesn't have to care about climate change for the same reasons you do. Invoke what you know they hold dear—which often lets you skip debating and jump right to win-win solutions. “For example, their faith might call them to protect the earth and every living thing,” Hayhoe says. If they treasure patriotism, talk about why America would benefit from leading the world in combating climate change. If they prioritize economic growth, cite the research showing that the solar energy field already has more jobs than the fossil fuel industry.

ACCEPT WHEN IT'S A LOST CAUSE Pushing too hard just gets people more entrenched. If the conversation is going nowhere, thank the other person, then move on.



HOW TO TALK TO Your Brother Who Drives a Gas-Guzzler

Many people are concerned about climate change but think it's a problem for the future, or only an issue in a far-off rain forest. As a result, they haven't felt motivated to change their behavior. “This is one place where you can really have a big impact,” says Laalitha Surapaneni, MD, MPH, assistant professor of general internal medicine at the University of Minnesota Medical School.

LINK CLIMATE CHANGE TO THEIR DAY-TO-DAY CONCERNS

Discuss ways it may already be affecting them. Has their favorite beach closed because of erosion? Do their kids suffer itchy eyes and wheezy breathing thanks to worsening seasonal allergies? “Meet them where they are,” suggests Ashley Renne Nsonwu, a vegan cookbook author and sustainability influencer (@heyashleyrenne). “One friend told me it's hard for us Black folks to care about the planet until we've addressed

racial inequality first. I pointed out that climate issues and racial justice are intertwined. It is *our* communities that are being disproportionately impacted by the health effects of pollution. I could see it click for her.”

SUGGEST CONCRETE ACTIONS

Your loved one may feel overwhelmed or have no idea where to begin. Make it simple. Volunteer to help your brother research electric SUVs, for example. Or share how you stopped eating red meat on weekdays to reduce your carbon footprint (and improve your health to boot). “By helping them take small steps, you can show them they have agency. They take one action and get results. That can power them on to the next action,” Surapaneni says.

SHARE YOUR ENTHUSIASMS

Aim to inspire—not browbeat. Research shows that when one person installs solar panels, it often leads to a cluster of adopters in their neighborhood. “My husband surprised me one Christmas by arranging to have solar panels installed on our house,” Hayhoe says. “I was so excited. I love talking to people about them!” ■