



## PRESS RELEASE

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# Emotions to fight climate change

A UNIGE researcher has compiled the scientific literature of the last five years linking emotion and climate change, highlighting the main levers that will make it possible to strengthen behaviour in favour of sustainable development.

**Emotions are often the victim of their bad reputation, as they are considered “irrational”, but they play a major role in helping us assess the world and guide our behaviour. What is their role in climate perception and action? To answer this question, a researcher from the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, has systematically reviewed all the literature on emotions and climate change over the past five years, in order to highlight the main levers for action and to guide politicians in their decision-making. This study shows that communication based on fear or hope must be carefully measured in order to avoid any immobility in citizen action, and that actions in favour of sustainable development can trigger a virtuous circle of behaviour by making their authors feel a sense of pride that pushes them to continue on this path. Results can be read in the journal *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*.**

How is climate change perceived from an emotional point of view? What can be done to encourage people to adapt their behaviour in favour of sustainable development, which alone can counter global warming? Around 100 studies have addressed these questions over the last five years. This is why Tobias Brosch, Professor of Psychology of Sustainable Development at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (FPSE) and at the Interfaculty Centre for Affective Sciences (CISA) of the UNIGE, has carried out a systematic review of the literature from 2015 to 2020 dealing with the role of emotions in the perception and action towards climate change, whether positive or negative, in order to highlight the main levers of action on which political decisions should be based.

### **Emotions, the most powerful predictors of sustainable behaviour**

On what parameters should we base ourselves when we wish to communicate on the issue of climate change and encourage sustainable development behaviour: gender? Age? Socio-economic status? Political party? Values? Or should we put these categories in the background and ask people about their emotions?

Recent studies have focused on people’s affective responses to climate change by asking them a simple question: how do they feel about it? “The most frequent answers include fear, concern, guilt, but also hope and sometimes pride,” says Tobias Brosch. The aim of this research was to be able to measure which factors would predict as accurately as possible the responses relating to climate change risk perception, mitigation behaviour aiming to reduce climate change, adaptation behaviour to the consequences of global warming, political support and acceptance of renewable technologies. “It emerges that these responses are best predicted by emotional responses and not by generational factors such as age or political party, as might have been



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**High resolution pictures**

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expected”, notes Tobias Brosch. Emotions capture and explain behavioural differences better than other factors, so they should be used to encourage citizen action through appropriate communication.

### Balancing fear and hope

Communication on climate change is mainly based on an alarmist lexical field that seeks to instill fear and guilt in citizens. But is this the right way to communicate? “Over-emphasising the climate disaster could lead to a sense of powerlessness, leading people to think that it is already too late anyway, so what is the point of changing their habits?” says Tobias Brosch. “However, this negative effect of fear hasn’t so far really been observed in the context of climate change, it seems that negative messages rather strengthen the will to act,” he says.

And what would happen if hope were conveyed? “It has been found that very positive communications conveying hope can also lead to a lack of action, with people giving up on changing their behaviour, because in the end *we are moving in the right direction*”, says the Geneva psychologist.

It is therefore a question of finding the right balance in order to avoid the counterproductive effects of fear and hope. It is therefore important that policy makers work with psychologists of emotion on the design of pro-environmental interventions in order to define the right messages.

### The virtuous circle of sustainable behaviour

The effect of anticipating warm glow, the positive emotion that follows positive behaviour, has already been observed in social science. “This warm glow plays a key role in the mechanism of reinforcing virtuous behaviour,” says Tobias Brosch. Does it work for sustainable development as well? “In fact, yes, people who expect to feel good when they do something good for the environment do behave more sustainably than others. So we need to strengthen this warm glow as a lever for people who already experience it, because it will reinforce their good habits and set in motion a virtuous circle of actions for sustainable development in the long term,” says Tobias Brosch. “In addition, we should try to trigger this virtuous circle in people who do not yet feel it. “The challenge is to create strategies and opportunities for citizens to positively experience this feeling when taking action to combat global warming, so that they want to feel it again. “For example, placing a cigarette butt in the “Messi is the best football player” or “Ronaldo is the best player” compartment is a simple example of this positive reinforcement: you have fun voting while throwing your cigarette butt in the bin”, concludes the Geneva-based researcher.

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