

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because Changing Behavior is Essential to Addressing Climate Change

March 22, 2022

By Corbin Evans, Senior Director of Congressional and Federal Relations, American Psychological Association

Scientists across a wide range of disciplines agree that climate change is one of the biggest challenges currently facing our world. Climate change is now recognized as a dire threat to global public health, with a growing awareness of the [mental health impacts](#). The discipline of psychology can contribute in multiple ways to the response to climate change, as described in the American Psychological Association's recent report [Addressing the Climate Crisis: An Action Plan for Psychologists](#). In this report, APA calls on psychologists to bring their expertise and experience to the fight against climate change and to collaborate with other disciplines and professions to magnify the impact of psychologists' efforts. Psychologists have roles to play in helping society to mitigate climate change and adapt to it, as well as in building public understanding and attitudes and encouraging social action.

Mitigation, which is aimed at preventing further climate change, may involve the development of new technologies, alternative energy sources, and methods for removing greenhouse gases from the atmosphere (e.g., large-scale tree planting, carbon dioxide filtering devices) along with new ways of living and working. New mitigation strategies also present untapped possibilities for incorporating psychological science, including the development of energy-saving [smart home technologies](#) that are sensitive and intuitive, ensuring [ethical deployments of artificial intelligence](#), and identifying and breaking down the mental barriers to [electric vehicle adoption](#). Psychologists will be essential to rethinking our world, from aiding the transition to [remote work](#), to reshaping communities to encourage more [emission free transportation](#), to helping people transition to [plant-based diets](#). More broadly, psychologists can contribute to policy development and [decision-making](#) about climate change to facilitate acceptance and adoption of new technologies, environments, and routines.

Adaptation efforts seek to reduce the current and future negative impacts of climate change and help people to adjust to the impacts. These may include, for example, disaster preparedness, healthcare worker training, population relocation, and changes to agricultural practices. Such initiatives may target individuals, households, communities, organizations, and governments.

“Psychologists have roles to play in helping society to mitigate climate change and adapt to it, as well as in building public understanding and attitudes and encouraging social action.”

Perhaps the most visible form of adaptation is direct mental health assistance to individuals struggling to cope with the impacts of climate change. The climate crisis can evoke a broad range of psychological responses: trauma, anxiety, depression, denial, as well as hope and optimism. The mental and behavioral health workforce needs training and

support to address these responses in an evidence-based fashion. Further, psychologists can provide preemptive services and assistance to [ensure social and psychological resilience](#), encompassing coping and self-regulation techniques, community and social cohesion, and practical preparedness for disasters and other climate impacts. Resilience training has positive impacts on communities and individuals seeking to respond constructively to current challenges.

“The climate crisis can evoke a broad range of psychological responses... The mental and behavioral health workforce needs training and support to address these responses in an evidence-based fashion.”

disasters resulting from climate change will be felt strongly by vulnerable and traditionally disadvantaged populations leading to further inequities.

Population displacement and migration are another area ripe for the involvement of psychological scientists. As increasing numbers of individuals and communities are displaced by climate change, research is needed to understand the patterns, determinants, and consequences of such movements. Building on this research, mental and behavioral health workers can help both migrant groups and the communities to which they migrate adapt and ensure that people’s social and health needs are met. There is already [evidence](#) that

Efforts to improve public understanding about climate change, influence attitudes about climate-related behavior and policies, and implement successful social action to advance new societal patterns and policies can also gain much from psychological science. For example, [assessments](#) by psychologists and their colleagues reveal variations in understanding and attitudes across demographic groups and in the factors influencing their views and behaviors. Psychologists can apply their understanding of the science of motivation, persuasion, and communication to encourage new policies. Crafting [communications](#) to counter misinformation, calls for [social activation](#), and comprehensive [education strategies](#) can all be made more effective by drawing on findings and methods of psychology.

The challenge of climate change is enormous and requires an all-of-science effort. Psychologists must be part of the solution. Psychological science is already making a difference in addressing climate change, but there are numerous opportunities for further contributions by advancing the science and building the capacity to design and implement meaningful climate solutions. All of us in the social sciences have a responsibility to confront this fundamental threat to human existence and well-being.



CORBIN EVANS serves as a Senior Director of Congressional and Federal Relations at the American Psychological Association. He previously served as the Principal Director of Strategic Programs and Policy at the National Defense Industry Association (NDIA). Prior to joining NDIA, Corbin served at the Department of Homeland Security and as the Assistant Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. He received a Juris Doctor at George Washington University Law School and holds a Master of Business Administration and a Master of Public Policy from the University of Missouri. Corbin is a member of the District of Columbia Bar.



@COSSADC • #WhySocialScience
www.whysocialscience.com • www.cossa.org