

The human side of climate science

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How are you? What challenges are you facing? How are you experiencing climate change and what can we do to support you and climate action?

These are not the usual ways climate change discussions begin. But according to Psychologist and founder of [Project InsideOut](#), Dr. Renee Lertzman, this is how we should be framing our conversations around climate change, to catalyze action more effectively.

“People need to be heard, they need to be guided and not pressured or shamed into action,” Dr. Lertzman explained in our most recent [Facebook Live event](#).

The way we have historically communicated about climate change is falling short, “climate scientists are not typically experts on communicating,” explains Dr. Carolina Vera, Full Professor at the University of Buenos Aires. “We have spent many years researching the negative impacts of climate change and we have been communicating the bad news.”

News, according to Dr. Lertzman, can trigger a myriad of responses in different people: from feeling concerned, motivated or engaged, to feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed.

“For some people, the information itself is triggering. It can invoke a fight or flight response. When we’re experiencing this response, we can’t engage and we can’t process what climate scientists are communicating,” said Dr. Lertzman.



Photo: Climate march in Washington D.C.

More recently, scientists like Dr. Vera have been sharing information on how to mitigate climate change’s negative impacts. “We have been co-producing knowledge, involving other actors in our society and cultures who have given different and valid perspectives and expertise to develop solutions. This helps us communicate our results more effectively to a wider audience,” she said.

“How do we bridge the high-stakes situation we’re in with being able to be attuned to those that we’re communicating with?” asks Dr. Lertzman.

“We cannot be naïve,” continued Dr. Vera, “we live in a world where not everybody has the same opportunities. So usually in developing countries, people have more urgent problems to solve rather than climate change. The solutions need to be integrated across multiple issues communities face.”

We need to think collectively and in an integrated way to produce solutions that will see a greater uptake and, therefore, impact on driving long-term change.

Isaac Adabire is on the front line of science communication on the ground as Climate Justice Ambassador for the successful Plant-for-the-Planet project. “It has been an emotional journey over the past six years,” he revealed. Mr. Adabire reported that everyone he has met understands the urgency of climate change in one way or another. Still, some of these people feel overwhelmed by other problems affecting them, like migration, nutrition, food, and water security, economic insecurity, and conflict.



Photo: Students planting trees in rural Ghana.

“We use framing to let them know about the benefits of tree planting,” said Mr. Adibire, “we ask them, do you believe planting trees brings food, medicine, and shade? These people say yes. It has been a very long journey, but we are getting more people on board.”

Effective climate science communication puts people and their experiences first. We must communicate with empathy: we need to engage people in the conversation and give them safe spaces to respond to and process their feelings about the data and information. Climate science communication must support their growth and learning, and foster ongoing opportunities for engagement.

“We are talking about trauma,” explained Dr. Lertzman, “climate change is traumatic on numerous levels.”

The approach of climate science communication must be trauma-informed and person- rather than data-centric. “We need to address all of our emotions about the climate crisis, not only for our mental wellbeing but also to remove roadblocks to action. If we can’t look at how climate change makes us feel—along with the dilemmas and difficult choices we face—we can’t solve it,” said Dr Renée Lertzman.

You can learn more about the [Guiding Principles](#) developed by Project InsideOut on their website and by attending their two-day [Summit on Oct 7-8](#).

Transformational change takes time, something our climate doesn’t have. However, if we come together and acknowledge our collective trauma and empathize, share and reflect, we can co-produce solutions that will turn the tide on the climate crisis.