

# 6 Reasons You're Ignoring Global Warming

By Emily Main

what you can do:

Use these 6 tactics to motivate friends and family who aren't taking action against the urgent global warming threat.

RODALE NEWS, EMMAUS, PA—There are lots of reasons people procrastinate—they're too busy, they don't care, or they don't feel an urgency to do what needs to be done. That last reason, it appears, is preventing Americans from taking action to stop global warming, according to a presentation at last weekend's meeting of the American Psychological Association.

The APA's Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change studied decades of research on environmental issues and human behavior, and came up with the factors that are preventing people from taking immediate action.

**Here are the six biggest reasons—and why they shouldn't stop you from taking action:**

## **#1: Uncertainty.**

"Research has shown that uncertainty over climate change reduces the frequency of 'green' behavior."

Scientists have more than enough to make you feel certain. Most recently, a report published in June by the U.S. Global Climate Change Research Program, authored by 31 scientists from universities, government agencies, and nonprofit groups, outlined the evidence for global warming. For instance, concentrations of carbon dioxide are 30 percent higher now than at any period in history, including those measured during natural warming cycles that took place thousands of years ago. Global temperatures, which have steadily increased over the past 50 years, have risen in conjunction with concentrations of carbon dioxide. As have sea levels, which are now rising at rates double those of the last century.

## **#2: Mistrust.**

"Evidence shows that most people don't believe the risk messages of scientists or government officials."

The APA task force notes that scientists and government officials are often mistrusted when it comes to global warming. Because they're proposing changes that cost people money or make them feel as though their freedoms are being threatened. You may never be able to trust politicians or scientists you've never met, but you can listen to groups you do trust. A number of independent medical, religious, and social organizations have come out in support of efforts to counteract global warming, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the American Lung Association.

## **#3: Denial.**

"A substantial minority of people believe climate change is not occurring, or that human activity has little or nothing to do with it, according to various polls."

The next time you encounter someone in this substantial minority, remind them that global warming *is* occurring, as evidenced by numerous reports—like the one released in June, and others published by the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In the IPCC's most recent report, published in 2007, scientists report that "it is 'very likely'—a 90 percent chance or better—that burning fossil fuels caused unnatural temperature increases over the last half-

century.” Coal, oil, and natural gas all emit carbon dioxide when burned, and those carbon emissions increase temperatures.

#### **#4: Undervaluing Risks.**

“A study of more than 3,000 people in 18 countries showed that many people believe environmental conditions will worsen in 25 years. While this may be true, this thinking could lead people to believe that changes can be made later.”

Trying to get people to understand that we have to act now to prevent problems down the road was the crux of the U.S. Global Climate Change Research Program’s June report. If you don’t think the risks are serious enough to act upon now, here are a few numbers that might make them more concrete:

- Between 1960 and 1990, Boston experienced fewer than 10 days per year over 90 degrees. Global warming could raise that to as many as 15 to 20 as early as next year.
- The Southeastern U.S. has had four to seven fewer days below freezing since 1970. Freezing temperatures kill off mosquitoes, but the lack of cold days has already led to a current resurgence of the tropical disease dengue fever in that region.
- As temperatures warm in the Midwest, so does the risk of flooding. Many cities in the region have drainage and sewage systems that feed into the Great Lakes, and when floods place too much strain on these systems, there’s an increased risk for waterborne diseases caused by microorganisms like *Cryptosporidium*. A flood in Milwaukee in 1993 had such an effect and resulted in the deaths of 54 people.

#### **#5: Lack of Control.**

“People believe their actions would be too small to make a difference and choose to do nothing.”

It’s hard to feel like something as small as changing a lightbulb can make a difference when you can’t actually see the carbon dioxide disappearing. But the APA task force noted that people are more likely to invest in energy-saving devices and appliances if they can get immediate feedback. If you fall into that category, buy a [Kill A Watt meter](#), which provides numbers on how much energy you’re saving with any given appliance. Or invest in a gas-mileage calculator that you can plug into your car; once you start seeing how easy it is to change the way you drive to boost fuel efficiency, you’ll be more inclined change your driving habits permanently. And energy savings usually translates to more dollars in your pocket—a tangible difference that you can experience sooner rather than later.

#### **#6: Habit.**

“Ingrained behaviors are extremely resistant to permanent change while others change slowly.” Habit is the most important obstacle to pro-environment behavior, according to the report.

Old habits die hard. We’ve used plastic bags for 40 years, so why stop now? Whenever you order coffee, it comes in a disposable cup, so why bother with remembering to bring a reusable mug? But if you tackle multiple eco-unfriendly habits at once, you may be surprised at how easy it is to change them. A study at Baylor College of Medicine found that when people tackled two bad habits at once, they were more successful in achieving permanent change than people who attempted to change the habits one at a time. So toss your reusable grocery bags and coffee mugs into your car and leave them there—in a few weeks, you probably won’t be forgetting either one.