Reframing climate change as a public health issue

Communication about climate change could benefit from reframing it as a public health issue, according to new research. A health perspective could make climate change more relevant and understandable to the public, whilst information about the health benefits of mitigation policy could provide a positive vision for the future.

The impact of climate change on health has been recognised by national and international health organisations, for example, the WHO has developed a Climate Change and Health workplan'. However, the effect on health has received little attention in the public eye or in the media.

The study investigated the reaction of 70 American adults to an essay on climate change that was framed within a public health perspective. The participants represented all groups of attitudes about climate change that were identified in ‘Global Warming’s Six Americas’ report’. These attitudes are: alarmed, concerned, cautious, disengaged, doubtful and dismissive indifferent. After reading the essay, the respondents were interviewed to elicit whether they responded positively to the essay and how helpful they found it.

There was clear evidence that the more alarmed and concerned participants responded positively to the public health essay, whereas the cautious and disengaged showed a mixed response. The study emphasised that it is the four groups in the middle of the continuum - concerned, cautious, disengaged and doubtful – that are more likely to benefit from a reframing because they are not certain that they understand the issue and are more open to learning.

Comments from nearly half (44 per cent) of the disengaged participants and 39 per cent of the doubtful participants indicated that the essay reflected their personal view, was informative or thought-provoking, or offered valuable information. It is important to note that all groups agreed with the essay's opening statement that “good health is a great blessing” which indicates that health and wellbeing is a widely shared value.

Looking more specifically at the comments, roughly a third of statements given by the alarmed and concerned reflected a personal agreement with the essay, whilst those categorised as dismissive were likely to view the essay as biased or alarmist. Considering the different parts of the essay, all those except the alarmed perceived the section that outlined the health benefits associated with mitigation policy actions as clearer and more helpful than the section which outlined the threats of climate change to health.

The results can be interpreted as providing partial support for framing information about climate change in a way that considers human health. This could provide a new way to engage with climate change and address the increasing problem of “issue fatigue” around climate change. It could add personal relevance by making connections to familiar problems, such as asthma, allergies and infectious diseases, and also provide a more positive message in terms of the health benefits derived from mitigation policies.

However, not all aspects of mitigation may be attractive to the public, such as eating less meat. Further research is needed to help predict examples or associations that trigger negative reactions. Additional research is also needed to determine if these findings apply across nations and other populations.


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