

# The #TalkingClimate Handbook

HOW TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT  
CLIMATE CHANGE IN YOUR DAILY LIFE



This report was commissioned by EIT Climate-KIC as a part of a citizen science #TalkingClimate project, a collaboration between Climate Outreach and EIT Climate-KIC.

## Climate Outreach

Climate Outreach is a team of social scientists and communication specialists working to widen and deepen public engagement with climate change. Through our research, practical guides and consultancy services, our charity helps organisations communicate about climate change in ways that resonate with the values of their audiences. We have 15 years experience working with a wide range of international partners including central, regional and local governments, international bodies, academic institutions, charities, businesses, faith organisations and youth groups.

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## EIT Climate-KIC

EIT Climate-KIC is a European knowledge and innovation community, working towards a prosperous, inclusive, climate-resilient society founded on a circular, zero-carbon economy. Supported by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, we identify and support innovation that helps society mitigate and adapt to climate change. We believe that a decarbonised, sustainable economy is not only necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change, but presents a wealth of opportunities for business and society.

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# Executive summary

We should all be talking about climate change – so why aren't we?

Everyday conversations about climate change – with friends, family, work colleagues, strangers – are not always easy. Even if you are concerned about the implications of the climate crisis, you may find yourself hesitating to talk about it, or feeling awkward when you do.

The #TalkingClimate Handbook aims to get the world talking about the climate crisis. It provides practical advice to help anyone and everyone – whoever or wherever you are – have constructive, interesting conversations about climate change.

It is based on the belief that these exchanges are important not just in themselves, but because they are a part of all of us engaging with the challenge of climate change, and driving the wider social and political response.

When you're talking with someone else about climate change, the handbook suggests you follow the principles of **REAL TALK**:

<p><b>R</b>espect your conversational partner and find common ground</p>	<p><b>E</b>njoy the conversation</p>	<p><b>A</b>sk questions</p>	<p><b>L</b>isten and show you've heard</p>
<p>Find out what you have in common with the person you are talking to and show them that you respect their concerns, priorities and values. Many people feel blamed and judged when they talk about climate change, which is likely to make them defensive or withdraw from the conversation.</p>	<p>If you enjoy yourself, you are far more likely to be authentically engaged with, and connected to, the person you are talking to – and they are more likely to feel positive about the conversation too.</p>	<p>Rather than lecturing your conversational partner about your views, ask about what climate change means to them. Give them the space to reflect on their own experiences and views on the issue.</p>	<p>Stop talking! Concentrate on genuinely listening to what the other person is really trying to say – and take the initiative to check you've understood them correctly.</p>
<p><b>T</b>ell your story</p>	<p><b>A</b>ction makes it easier (but doesn't fix it)</p>	<p><b>L</b>earn from the conversation</p>	<p><b>K</b>eep going and keep connected</p>
<p>You don't need to know everything about climate science to talk about climate change. Your climate change story – how you became engaged in the issue and why it concerns you – is one of the most powerful communication tools available to you.</p>	<p>Taking some kind of action on climate change can make conversations easier to start – and make it feel less overwhelming. People make decisions about their behaviour partly based on what others they respect and trust are doing, so your actions will influence others. You may still struggle with the size of the problem, and it can help to acknowledge that in your conversation.</p>	<p>See the experience as a way to learn about how others think about climate change, about the topic itself – and about how to have a good conversation. Every climate exchange is a small experiment!</p>	<p>Every climate change conversation you have is valuable. Keep having them, and find opportunities to connect with the many other like minded people around the world who are also now talking about, and taking action on, climate change.</p>

## Have you ever...

...tried to start a conversation about climate change with friends or family, only to have it land into an awkward silence, before somehow prompting everyone to start talking about something else?

...felt stuck and frustrated, as you try to explain why you're concerned about the climate crisis, but the person you're talking to doesn't seem to care?

...thought about mentioning climate change, but decided not to, because it seems too depressing and you don't want to seem like you're judging other people?

## This guide is for you

This handbook is for anyone who wants to have constructive day-to-day conversations about the climate crisis. It provides pragmatic and evidence-based guidance on how to talk about climate change with friends and family, acquaintances and strangers – on the bus, at work, at a sports event or at home over dinner. The handbook is informed by the idea that you don't have to be a scientist, or live in a certain place, to care about and want to talk about climate change. It is a topic for everybody, whoever and wherever we are.

## Why climate conversations matter

*“There will never be a point where a vibrant and dynamic public conversation about climate change is not a good idea...at present, this dialogue is almost entirely absent, and as a result, engagement with energy and climate change remains shallow, fragile, and superficial.”* –Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke, ‘Talking Climate’<sup>1</sup>

If the weather seems strange – much too hot for the time of year, perhaps, following the hardest

*Talking about it, in my opinion, actually makes it less anxiety inducing. I am confronting my fears.*

Hilary, UK

*I have realised that lots of people have a lot of knowledge about this issue, whatever their background. Talking about it breaks down the isolated feeling and makes me feel more supported to take action whereas before I felt too afraid of being judged by others or making others feel judged by me.*

Joanna, UK

rain you've ever seen – does it matter if you don't mention that you think it's a result of climate change? If you start chatting to a stranger on the train, what difference does it make if you talk about climate change or not?

People around the world are getting more concerned about climate change.<sup>2</sup> In surveys, a majority of people in different countries agree that it will impact their life and increase the chance of wars and economic damage.<sup>3</sup> In the UK, about 60% of people agree we are facing a 'climate emergency'.<sup>4</sup> Avoiding the worst impacts of climate change will mean many people changing profoundly how we live, eat and travel, within just five or ten years.<sup>5</sup>

Yet many people do not talk about climate change – often, or even, ever – in their daily lives. In America, for example, six in ten people say they “rarely or never” discuss it with family or friends.<sup>6</sup> This informal, silent agreement not to talk about a topic that can feel frightening, distant or uncomfortable is known as ‘climate silence’.<sup>7</sup>

Day-to-day conversations are a part of social change. As people, we are deeply influenced by those around us – what we see them doing, and the conversations we have with them.<sup>8</sup> Democratic governments have the power to change policy, but they usually need evidence of public consent before they will do it, and that consent comes from public discussion.

Achieving the scale of change necessary will require enthusiastic understanding and creative engagement from people all around the world. No-one – whether acting as politicians, business leaders or individuals – can do it alone.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, government-sanctioned atrocities have often taken place amidst a culture of silence – linked to denial, stasis and an inability to take action.<sup>10</sup>

Your conversation on the bus, or in the queue at the post office, may feel small and insignificant. But in reality, it is crucial.

## The evidence for how to have constructive conversations

Since the 1990s, psychologists, sociologists and other social scientists have been investigating how to get people thinking about and acting in response to the crisis. Climate Outreach has been tracking and adding to this growing evidence base, and training people in how to use it, for fifteen years.

The #TalkingClimate Handbook synthesises this considerable evidence base with:

Principles from other initiatives supporting open, non-confrontational conversations. These include Nonviolent Communication (NVC),<sup>11</sup> non-violent direct action,<sup>12</sup> and advice for people talking about their sexuality, politics, faith,<sup>13</sup> and health choices.<sup>14</sup>

Further insights were also gathered from a three month #TalkingClimate citizen science experiment, promoted through social media. Participants undertook climate conversations using a basic set of principles and fed back their experiences and reflections. The data gathered consists of: baseline surveys from 549 people in 56 countries; detailed analysis of 175 individual conversations; and 52 final surveys following 604 conversations (see methodology section

## What does a constructive climate conversation look like?

It's easy to believe that a 'successful' climate change conversation has to include dramatic moments of revelation, where someone who was initially sceptical about the problem changes their position. But this doesn't have to be the case. It could mean a two minute exchange on the bus with someone who has never talked to a stranger about climate change before; helping a friend who has been struggling with the issue shift closer to joining a local action group; or simply gaining the respect of someone who continues to disagree with you.

This handbook provides advice on strategies for deepening a conversation – perhaps moving from a brief exchange or a more profound exploration of ideas. But many conversations will stay on the surface. These conversations are still part of building the momentum for change, breaking the climate silence, and moving people closer to a position where they participate in the global effort to reduce emissions.

As this handbook will demonstrate, this is not best achieved through persuasion or providing more and more data in an effort to change someone's mind. Instead, it is about building a connection between two people, based on mutual respect and a willingness to listen to one another.

*Because people aren't thinking about it, so they aren't acting. Having those conversations can plant seeds. I found that sometimes I only needed to mention the odd thing, then they were more in tune when others mentioned something similar, and it builds.*

Jennifer, UK

at the end of this report for further details). Many of the quotes used in this handbook are from statements made by participants in the #TalkingClimate project.

# REAL TALK about climate change

Good conversations aren't about exchanging information or winning an argument – they are about intimacy, experiencing a sense of connection and feeling you have been understood. Conversations about climate change are no different.

For good climate conversations, follow the principles of **REAL TALK**:

**R**espect your conversational partner and find common ground

**E**njoy the conversation

**A**sk questions

**L**isten, and show you've heard

**T**ell your story

**A**ction makes it easier (but doesn't fix it)

**L**earn from the conversation

**K**eep going and keep connected

In the next few pages, the handbook explains more about what these principles mean and how they relate specifically to having constructive climate conversations.

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## Respect your conversational partner and find common ground

Find out what you have in common with the person you are talking to and show them that you respect their concerns, priorities and values. Many people feel blamed and judged when they talk about climate change, which is likely to make them defensive or withdraw from the conversation.

*“People need to be in the place where their anxieties are recognized, to be able to say, “Yes, this is scary; this is hard,” and only then... can we be truly mature, creative, strategic, and innovative.”* –Renee Lertzman, psychologist<sup>15</sup>

*“The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love.”* –Martin Luther King<sup>16</sup>

When you're having a conversation about climate change, you may be talking to someone whose views and choices you fundamentally disagree with – perhaps someone who

dismisses the climate emergency as a problem, lives a very high carbon lifestyle – or who strongly believes you are in the wrong for worrying about it. Alternatively, they may feel anxious and defensive about their own life choices, and worried about talking about it.

Nonviolent communication (NVC) was developed in the 1960s as a way of helping people to relate to each other more effectively, particularly in situations where there is conflict.<sup>17</sup> Observing the feelings and needs of someone else, without blame or criticism, is core to NVC, creating “a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing”.<sup>18</sup>

This means **not judging or blaming** your conversational partner, whatever choices they have made or views they hold. If the person you are talking to feels respected, valued and safe that will build trust – making them more willing to listen to you and to express their own vulnerabilities and concerns. In contrast, fear, guilt, shame and obligation compromise the quality of the connection between you.<sup>19</sup>

*Sometimes people just did not want to go there, I think the guilt and fear was strong and they were worried that I was going to shame them in some way... I am not the kind of person to do this, but sometimes I was shut down by people who knew me very well.*

Jennifer, UK

Respecting a conversational partner creates the groundwork for **seeking common ground and connecting** with them. Find out what you have in common and what you both care about. Even with someone who is very different to you, you may find you share values about the kindness of their friends, for example, or a sense of being successful in the world.

Approaching the conversation as a process of respecting each other and finding common ground **means not treating it as an argument that you are going to win or lose** – even if you are convinced you are right and your conversational partner is wrong. Arguments emphasise the difference between you, but the quality of your exchange is likely to be deeper and more open if you emphasise your similarities.

*I found [it] easier first to find the common ground... and then connect it to a climate change issue.*

Mauricio, Canada

*Where conflict and differences of opinion came up, which previously I might have found more difficult to deal with, I felt surprisingly well equipped to say, 'OK, that's interesting, I'd not looked at it like that before. Tell me more!'*

Kate, France

*Since [participating in the project] I've toned my attitude down, and tried to speak more helpfully and with less emphasis on shame or humiliation. I have definitely had productive climate change conversations since then...*

Leo, UK

*I think the focus on positive action, and showing that you don't have [to] change who you are in order to act, is really important. And also, grace – a lot of my friends and family are considering climate change as a serious issue for the first time, and they are only at the beginning of dealing with it, and what it means for us.*

Rosie C, UK

## Sample useful phrases

- “I really agree with you on that.”
- “I find that really hard as well...”
- “I hadn't really thought about that before/ thought about it that way before.”
- “That's a good point, I never thought of that.”
- “Like you said...”
- “I respect the way you...”
- “We don't agree on this but...”
- “You know what it's like to have experienced that...”



## Enjoy it!

If you enjoy yourself, you are far more likely to be authentically engaged with, and connected to, the person you are talking to – and they are more likely to feel positive about the conversation too.

*“A good conversation is like having a good meal: You don’t want to race to finish it; you want to appreciate it. Being a good host communicates patience, respect, and goodwill. This creates a strong foundation for a useful and engaged conversation.”*

–Dan Rubin, psychologist<sup>20</sup>

### Relax, and take your time

You don’t have to pack everything into one conversation. It’s better to have an interesting, respectful exchange that leaves you both feeling positive, than to rush towards some kind of conclusion with your partner.

### Pick your moment

If you’re hoping to have a substantial conversation, it’s a good idea to think about the situation and the practicalities. Are you both in the mood to be thoughtful and open-minded? Have you got a comfortable and suitable environment? For some conversations, you may want to ask for consent of your conversational partner first, to make sure you are both ready and willing to engage.

### Use positive body language

Nonverbal communication – our body language, facial expressions and gestures

## Ask questions

Rather than lecturing your conversational partner about your views, ask about what climate change means to them. Give them the space to reflect on their own experiences and views on the issue.

*“You don’t get a Yes or No answer with an open question, and you do get the conversation moving. Open questions also draw out the person’s motivations, their thoughts and their feelings about their behaviours.”* –UK National Health Service advice on talking to doctors about lifestyle choices<sup>24</sup>

– makes up a significant proportion of the information flow when two people are talking face to face.<sup>21</sup> For example, if you say you’re feeling relaxed, but are sitting tense and hunched up, then the person you are with is unlikely to believe you. It can therefore be helpful to consciously reflect on your body language. Positive body language includes, for example, smiling, keeping eye contact, and making positive sounds and movements to show that you’re hearing what the other person is saying.<sup>22</sup>

### Seek to end on a positive note

And, if there’s more you’d like to discuss, perhaps with an invitation to continue the conversation in some way.

### Don’t judge yourself too harshly

Remember that there are lots of different sorts of climate conversations, with all sorts of different people. They won’t all feel good, or end in a satisfying way. It may also be useful to remember that people who are absorbing what you say may resist, argue or reject your ideas to begin with as a threat to their identity.<sup>23</sup> This doesn’t mean they aren’t listening. If you think of occasions when you have been changed by a conversation, how did you react at the time?

In sharing that climate change is something you care about, you may find yourself being pigeonholed as a particular kind of person.<sup>25</sup> For many people, the stereotype of an ‘environmentalist’ has negative associations – someone who is moralising, earnest and ‘not like them’, for example.<sup>26</sup>

One way to overcome this is to ask open questions which cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Give the person you're talking to the space to reflect on what they think, what they are worried about and what solutions they believe in. This breaks any patterns of attack and defence, and creates a sense of shared responsibility. You can ask about their life experiences and story - what personal experiences have led them to form their beliefs? Have they experienced any turning points that have changed their views?

The climate emergency may also feel like a distant problem, separate from day-to-day concerns. Climate Outreach's research shows that people across the political spectrum connect with talking about things they love that may be under threat from climate change.<sup>27</sup> Allowing your conversational partner to explore what they care about can help them to connect with the issue on their own terms.<sup>28</sup>

If someone has less power than you in the conversation for some reason - for example, if they are younger than you, or have a more junior grade at work, then it is even more important to ask questions rather than give your own views, as these may be misconstrued as instructions.

If you feel the conversation is getting stuck, you can also use questions to guide it in a direction you feel will be more constructive (see '[Tell your story](#)').

*I remembered the advice from this study and asked some really open questions, just - what do you think about it all, do you feel like you can do anything, what would you do - and he really stopped to think and I really felt like we moved to a deeper level of understanding.*

Joanna, UK

*My conversational partner had the opportunity to talk about whatever he wanted to, because when I started to talk about the topic, I was very vague and open. I think this way the conversation developed rather quickly.*

Steffan, Germany

*I actually think the ordering of the conversation works best let the other person talk first before offering any of own story. And best ice-breaker I have found is to bring up some latest bit of climate change news e.g. Amazon fires and asking what they thought about this.*

#TalkingClimate participant, 2019

## Sample questions to consider using

- What would you like to happen instead?
- How do you feel about climate change?
- How did you come to feel like that?
- What have you heard about climate change?
- Compared to when you were young, are today's winters any different?

## Listen, and show you've heard

Stop talking! Concentrate on genuinely listening to what the other person is really trying to say - and take the initiative to check you've understood them correctly.

*"The more we listen to them, the more people will start to open up and share increasingly deeper and more personal topics... Listening to people, even simply sharing hardships, is better than empty political banter."* -Book of Radical Love, Turkey, 2019<sup>29</sup>

*"...this Quest [to talk about climate change] I've realised is as much about shutting up as it is about talking."* Transition Network blogs, 2018<sup>30</sup>

Real listening requires a genuine desire to hear and understand what the other person thinks. Try not to be too quick to jump in with your opinions and experiences - even if you think the other person is wrong. 'Deep listening' exercises - where you say nothing at all for a few minutes while your conversational partner talks freely, are useful to try as an experiment.

The practice of active listening, used by counsellors, involves paying attention to the person you are listening to, not judging them, and then repeating back your understanding of what the other person said to show you've heard and check you've understood correctly.<sup>31</sup> If you genuinely listen, that can give someone else the much-needed space to talk about their negative emotions about climate change - for example, their shame, or worry about the issue - rather than simply critiquing your arguments.<sup>32</sup>



Active listening.

Photo by [Bindaas Madhavi](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

*I think people just needed permission almost to express their hopes and frustrations out loud and feel someone was listening.*

Simon, UK

*The conversation my dad started with me blew me away! He started with talking about reusable plastic bottles...and ended with an admission that climate change is probably real... all I had to do was listen.*

Rosie C, UK

*Listening here was key, especially with such a young person, to avoid interpreting what he was trying to say, or jump to conclusions, or simply try to give him a lot of content and information. Asking about feelings also brought up interesting understanding.*

Phil, country unknown

*I found the advice about listening to others and looking for common ground useful and interesting, particularly when talking to people with very different opinions to mine (and I have used these techniques in convos about subjects other than climate change - from Brexit to the role of female football commentators!)*

Frances, UK

## Tell your story

Rather than lecturing your conversational partner about your views, ask about what climate change means to them. Give them the space to reflect on their own experiences and views on the issue.

*“...effective public engagement means telling a story about climate change that is both factually accurate and psychologically compelling.”* -Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke, ‘Talking Climate’<sup>33</sup>

*“It’s not easy to infect the brain of another person with an idea; it can be accomplished only by hitting the small exposed hole in the system. For the brain, that hole is story-shaped...Story not only sticks, it mesmerizes.”* -Dan Egleman, New York Times<sup>34</sup>

We have learned what we know about climate change from scientists. So, if you are not a scientist – it’s easy to think that you are not qualified to talk about the climate crisis, because you can’t quote statistics about sea level rise in 2050, or you’re not sure what you think about nuclear power.

But humans aren’t motivated by statistics. We are motivated by stories. They are core to our survival, and a crucial part of how we learn how to behave and interact.<sup>35</sup> You, like the person you are talking to, have been on a journey, during which you have formed your views. As a result, you have a story to tell. When did you first become concerned about climate change? Was it something you read, someone you met, something that happened to you?

In telling your story, you can demonstrate how you came to be where you are. Your personal story is also unarguable – it is your experience, and no-one else’s. It is a powerful tool of communication, whoever you are talking to – and however much technical information you know.

This doesn’t mean being uninformed about climate change. You can weave what you know about climate change into your story. If it makes you feel more comfortable, do a bit of preparation and research. Map out the stages of your story and look up the relevant facts that fit within it. Create a ‘script’ and look up the

relevant facts so you know you can back up what you say. This can also help identify some anchor points, which you can try to guide the conversation back to if you feel it’s going off-track.

When interacting with others, people tend to strongly dislike it if we think someone else is being inconsistent or hypocritical.<sup>36</sup> So if you are able to show that you are living in line with what you believe about the world, that is likely to build credibility and trust between you and the person you are talking to.

### Ideas for telling your story

Think about your answers to the following questions. Try and explain them to someone else in a few minutes.

- When did you start caring about climate change? Was there a particular moment?
- What action are you taking on climate change now?
- How do you feel about that?

‘I’ statements are powerful, where you explain your own perspective and experience. For example, phrases like:

- I am...
- I agree with you that...
- I have a daughter as well and when she said to me...
- I did not always think this. It really changed for me when...
- I feel like I have to do something because...
- So I am...
- It’s not always easy when I...
- But it really feels to me like I...

But it's not always easy to make changes – you may be struggling with some of the choices you're making and what they mean for climate change. Climate communications research also shows that authenticity is a crucial part of communication.<sup>37</sup> Sharing honestly about the challenges and limitations you have faced or are facing along the way is therefore likely to lead to you connecting further with your conversational partner.

You can also then follow up on your story by asking the person you're talking to more questions about their own experiences and reflections (see '[Ask questions](#)').

*I listened showed empathy (using body language and words) where I could, instead of challenging her – even though she said Climate Change would not affect her as she was childless. I gave her space and didn't respond/ challenge. It seemed that as a result she went on to mention her concern for her nephews and nieces. So I mentioned my concern for my grandkids (true personal story, as you advised) and we then agreed the need for systems change as well as individual action.*

Rosie A, UK

## Action makes it easier (but doesn't fix it)

Taking some kind of action on climate change can make conversations easier to start – and make it feel less overwhelming. People make decisions about their behaviour partly based on what others they respect and trust are doing, so your actions will influence others. That said, you may still struggle with the size of the problem, and it can help to acknowledge that.

***“What we need to fix this thing is rational hope.”*** –Katharine Hayhoe, climate scientist

If we only talk about what a huge challenge climate change is, then our conversational partner's defence mechanisms may cause them to switch off from what we're saying. We also need to talk about the many, inspiring solutions to climate change that already exist.

In our survey, people who were taking some kind of action – even if it felt small, personal and not in line with the extent of the problem – found it was much easier to start a climate change conversation. The idea of doing 'something' makes the topic easier to address, and the intimidating information about climate change easier to cope with.<sup>38</sup>

You can use your personal conversation to discuss any changes you have made to your own life, and how they have made you feel – for example, walking and cycling more, changing your eating habits, or joining an activist group. Hopefully, you will feel positive about what you've done: research shows that around

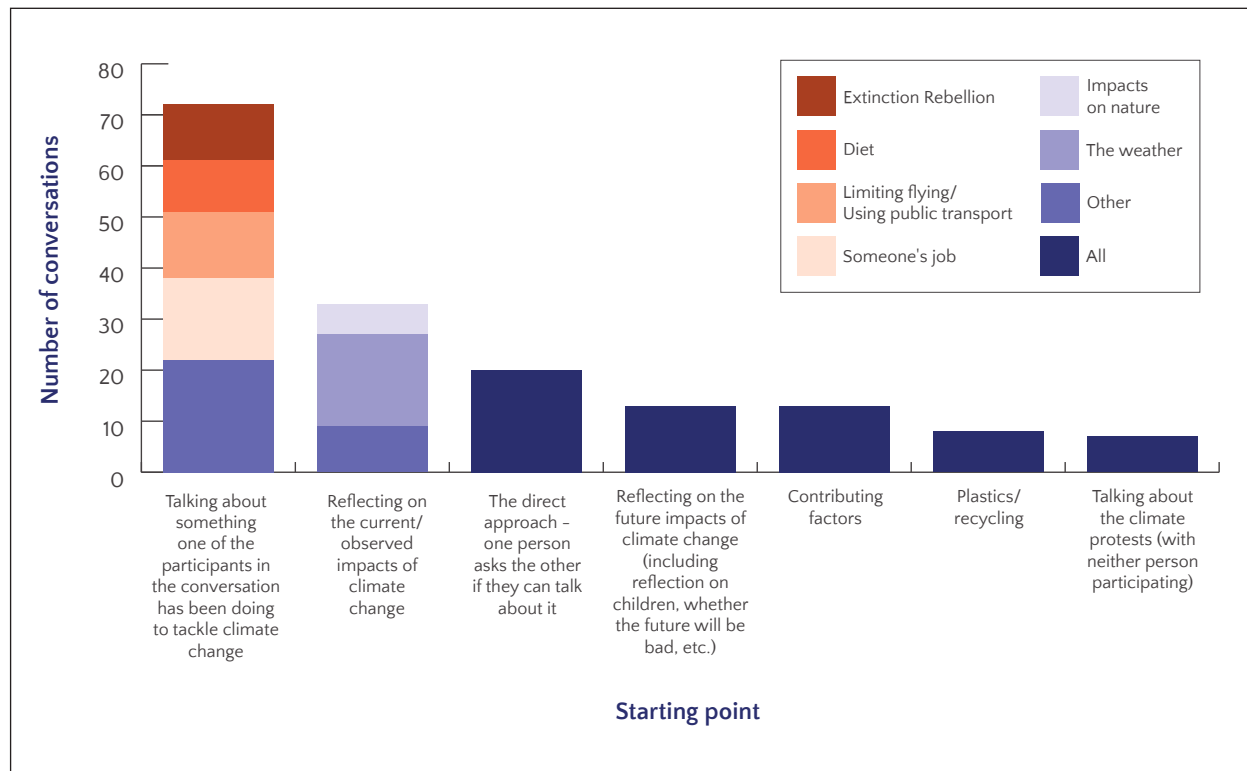
the world, people taking action to reduce their emissions also tend to be happier.<sup>39</sup> It's hard to know for sure why this is – it may be because happy people are drawn to low-carbon behaviours. But a growing body of work suggests it is possible to 'live better by consuming less'.<sup>40</sup>

Another option is discussing large scale solutions to climate change which are already gathering pace. Fortunately there is a lot to talk about – including the huge growth in renewable energy around the world.<sup>41</sup>

People make decisions about their behaviour partly based on what others they respect and trust are doing. So if you have chosen to get rid of the car and cycle rather than drive, that will matter to the people who know you and feel like they share your values. Talking about what you've done may move the person you are talking to closer to a position where they want to do something themselves.

Communications research shows that people need a sense of efficacy in order to take

## How did conversations start?



action<sup>42</sup> - a belief that they can personally do something, and that the thing they will do will be effective. In presenting your own actions, emphasise that they are doable and realistic. But also encourage your conversational partner to reflect on their own path and what makes sense for the person they are.

For different people, 'taking action' will look very different - for some, it could mean joining a community garden; for others, political activism, changing eating habits or pushing for stronger green policies at work. If the person you are talking to is interested in taking action themselves, you could provide them with relevant information - but not too much: take care not to overwhelm them or tell them what to do. Providing too much information about what you think they should do can undermine their sense of autonomy and personal control over their choices.

*My conversations just tended to happen, for the most part without my consciously generating them, because reacting to climate change is just so much part of my day to day life.*

Kate, France

*[In my conversations] I just start telling them about this thing I'm trying to do, to help people take action....People really don't want to feel the weight of this and not have something concrete to do to feel empowered.*

Marna, USA

*I think a lot of [my conversations] started cos I was saying I was taking the kids to nursery on my bike trailer which -> use car less -> reduce emissions -> climate change.*

Leo, UK

## Facing paralysis

Climate change can still feel like an overwhelming problem.<sup>43</sup> In our survey, the most commonly cited reason why participants found it challenging to start a conversation about climate change was ‘not knowing what to do about it’. This could reflect a number of different causes – including lack of knowledge, confusion about the implications of different lifestyle changes or a feeling of individual powerlessness in the face of the need for systemic change.

16% of the recorded conversations in our study also struggled because of a feeling of being overpowered by the size of the problem. If this happens, it may help to explicitly acknowledge the sense of paralysis and helplessness. You may then find yourself talking openly and honestly about it. Speak authentically, but try not to drown in it – and perhaps reflect on how you can build your own sense of resilience.

*I also found in more than one case it was difficult to overcome the feeling of powerlessness: blaming turned to some outer agent (the government, politicians...) and then the conversation felt stuck.*

Deborah, Italy

*[My conversational partners] felt listened to and there was dialogue. The challenges are around talking about systemic change and people feeling helpless about what they can do.*

#TalkingClimate participant, 2019

## Learn from your conversational partner

See your conversation as a way to learn about how others think about climate change, about the topic itself – and about how to have a good conversation. Every climate exchange is a small experiment!

*“Getting people talking about climate change, taking on board the views of their peers, and updating their social misperceptions about others’ views are vitally important: catalysing and maintaining a vibrant public dialogue is an end in itself.” –Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke, ‘Talking Climate’<sup>44</sup>*

You may find that people you open conversations with do not conform to your preconceptions about what they are going to say. Polls show that people around the world are getting more concerned about climate change<sup>45</sup> and the vast majority of people say they are at least somewhat worried.<sup>46</sup> So guard against assuming that someone won’t care. In the #TalkingClimate survey, many people said they were surprised by the opinions they encountered.

Approaching the conversation with a curious mind, and treating it as a chance to learn from the person you are talking to, is more likely to lead to you **connecting** with each other – and potentially gaining more **insight into how other people think about climate change**. This will enable you to build your skills in talking to different sorts of people about it (see further advice on ‘Talking to different audiences about climate change’ below).

At the moment, only a few people in the world are consciously engaging in having good conversations about climate change. If you treat every conversation as a **small, informal experiment**, learning along the way, you will take the pressure off yourself, enrich your own personal relationships and experience, and add to the sum total of human knowledge on how to do this well.

*I learned a lot from the conversations.*

David, USA

*The Caribbean elders appreciated the opportunity to talk about it especially climate justice.*

Penny, UK

*I was kind of surprised by one conversation with an old colleague who I didn't know was into any of this stuff but was super interested in how I live now - and in the following days he was sending me links to comparisons of plant-based milks and things like that. Just felt super positive.*

Leo, UK

*Conversations with strangers were positive in general which I hadn't expected. Most people already very concerned about climate change.*

Harriet, UK

*My very elderly grandfather was incredibly supportive which I didn't expect necessarily, my best friend was surprisingly sceptical.*

Ruth, UK

*I was surprised how few people were aware of the gravity & urgency but also surprised just how many people were doing things already.*

Pauline, UK



Every climate change conversation you have is valuable.  
Photo by [Alexis Brown](#) (public domain)



## Keep going and keep connected

Every climate change conversation you have is valuable. Keep having climate change conversations, and seek community with others to support you!

*“The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness.” -Martin Luther King<sup>47</sup>*

Some of the participants in our survey told us that the most useful part of it wasn't the advice we provided. It was the sense of being part of a wider effort encouraging them to keep having climate change conversations when they might not otherwise have done so.

As people, we are profoundly influenced by the values and behaviour of the people around us, and we seek community with others. Tackling climate change successfully has to be a collective endeavour, shared with other people. Making the effort to keep having conversations about climate change - even if it feels difficult or awkward - will give you the opportunity to make connections and may open up new opportunities for actions you can take with different people. Perhaps most importantly, it will challenge the perception that no-one cares about climate change and there is no-one to build community with.

And don't hesitate to talk to like minded people about your efforts to talk about climate change. Sharing your experiences and learning about this process is as valuable - psychologically, emotionally and practically - as talking about direct climate solutions. So keep #TalkingClimate, and reach out and link up in community with those around you.

*This helped me with a project a few of us were beginning in our local community anyway so the timing was brilliant - this will continue.*

Penny, UK

*I think what I am learning is that the highest value of this project for me has been just to encourage me to initiate these conversations, it's like I have a little anchor in my mind going “oh, yeah, here is a good opportunity for a climate conversation!”*

Deborah, Italy

# Overcoming challenges to #TalkingClimate

The table below outlines common challenges cited by people attempting to engage in climate conversations and indicates which of the **REAL TALK** principles are relevant in overcoming these.

Challenge	Suggested solution
As information about the projected impacts of climate change mounts up – rising temperatures, wildfires, storms, falling fish stocks and damaged crops – it’s <b>easy to feel overwhelmed</b> . <sup>48</sup> Who wants to talk about such a negative and frankly scary topic over dinner?	Pair conversations about the impacts of climate change with discussion about potential solutions – and particularly, what you feel able to do. Acknowledge the negative emotions you may be experiencing, and discuss them if needed – but try not to drown in them (see <a href="#">‘Action makes it easier, but doesn’t fix it’</a> ).
Many <b>people don’t talk about climate change because they’re not sure what to do about it</b> – either through lack of knowledge, feeling unsure how to affect systemic change, or express their views in a way that feels impactful.	People feel more able to talk about climate change when they are doing something – anything – in response. If the person you are talking to is interested, you can provide information, but not too much – don’t overwhelm them or tell them what to do. Let them find their own path (see <a href="#">‘Action makes it easier, but doesn’t fix it’</a> ).
Feelings of <b>blame and shame</b> – about eating or travel habits, for example – often make climate change conversations feel difficult. If someone you are talking to feels like their identity is under attack, they may concentrate on defending themselves, or refuse to engage at all.	Focus on respecting the person you are talking to, rather than judging them for their views or personal choices. Making someone else feel respected, valued and safe will build trust, and strengthen the connection between you (see <a href="#">‘Respect your conversational partner and find common ground’</a> ).
Deliberately talking about climate change <b>can feel awkward, controversial or ‘difficult’</b> . It is, to some extent, breaking a social taboo. People with different political perspectives are also likely to have very differing views on it.	Don’t focus on winning an argument, but instead on identifying common ground between you and connecting with each other on some level. Use language that’s appropriate to the person you’re talking to (see <a href="#">‘Respect’</a> , <a href="#">‘Ask questions’</a> , <a href="#">‘Listen’</a> , <a href="#">‘Tell your story’</a> , <a href="#">‘Learn from the conversation’</a> ).
Climate change <b>can feel like a distant problem</b> when you compare it to everyday issues involving work and family.	Asking someone else questions about their concerns, feelings and responses to climate change can help them connect with the issue. Telling your own story is a powerful way of bringing it closer to home (see <a href="#">‘Ask questions’</a> , <a href="#">‘Listen’</a> and <a href="#">‘Tell your story’</a> ).

# Advice for dealing with particular audiences

*“The way messages about climate change are framed matters – not because there are ‘magic words’ that somehow transform someone’s views, but because starting a conversation with people in terms they are comfortable with is the first step to building (and sustaining) their engagement.” –Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke, ‘Talking Climate’<sup>49</sup>*

You may find yourself talking to lots of different sorts of people about climate change. The advice below gives some basic advice about how to talk constructively with different audiences, and some pointers on where to read more.

## Young people

More than 90% of young people in Europe aged 15–24 see climate change as a fairly or very serious problem.<sup>50</sup> There is a growing movement for change amongst young people, but different people react differently – don’t assume just because you are talking to someone who is young they care the way you do.

Recent Climate Outreach with young campaigners, combined with the growing social science evidence base on engaging young people produced some of the following recommendations:

- Highlight the moral and justice dimensions of climate change. Many young campaigners Climate Outreach has worked with are motivated by concern about the injustice of climate change;<sup>51</sup>
- If you’re talking about taking action, focus on short term, specific, achievable and tangible actions for the person you are talking with. The process of building efficacy – the belief that it is possible to do something, and that doing something can make a difference – is particularly important for younger people.<sup>52</sup> Longer term political campaigns may also be a turn off, because of the amount of time younger people may need to invest, or because they have less belief in the success of campaigns with distant aims.<sup>53</sup>

Anecdotal evidence suggests psychologists are concerned about the rise of ‘eco anxiety’ among younger generations,<sup>54</sup> particularly in parts of the world where serious impacts are already being felt.<sup>55</sup> This makes the recommendations to **respect and listen to the person you are talking to** more important. You may also wish to keep information about climate change manageable for the audience you are talking to,<sup>56</sup> and look for groups that can help provide peers, community and support in taking action.



*Young people are motivated by the belief that it is possible to do something that makes a difference.  
Photo: EIT Climate-KIC*

## People who are strongly opposed to action on climate change

There is no unique guidance for speaking to this audience and the principles of **REAL TALK** will still apply - if you can, ask the person you are talking to reflect on their values and life experience, and focus on finding points of agreement and connection between you. Be aware that actively trying to counter disinformation about climate change can have the opposite effect of strengthening it in someone else's mind.<sup>60</sup>

The principle of respecting your conversational partner also applies particularly strongly.

People working in certain industries may for example feel under attack from and judged by environmentalists, and a sense of loyalty to their industry and community.<sup>61</sup> In some cases, it may not be possible to have a constructive conversation if the person you are talking to cannot trust you as a messenger. In that case, it is better to withdraw. But even a short, respectful conversation may result in a small shift, or a sense of increased trust and positivity between you.

### NOTES

For further information, see Climate Outreach's previous research including:

- Broadening engagement with just transition: Opportunities and challenges, 2019<sup>62</sup>
- How to talk to a climate change denier - 2012 presentation from George Marshall<sup>63</sup>



*Show respect to your conversational partner by finding points of agreement.  
Photo by Pedro Ribeiro Simões (CC BY 2.0)*

## Tips and ideas

### Some exercises to try

#### Try a deep listening exercise

Set up a conversation with a friend, ask them what they think about climate change and listen to them for four minutes without interrupting them once.

#### Reflect on a conversation that moved you deeply

What happened in it? Why were you affected? How did you react at the time?

#### Practice telling your own 'climate story'

How did you get interested in climate change? Were there any particular events in your life that affected you? Write it down as a rough script, and research it if needed by for example talking to family members or looking up the climate facts that matter to you.

#### Have a practice conversation with a friend

Get another friend to listen in and give feedback on what they thought of it. Jot down phrases you find yourself using.

## Useful resources and reading

*Talking Climate* by Adam Corner and Jamie Clarke<sup>64</sup>

*Don't Even Think About It* by George Marshall<sup>65</sup>

*Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone<sup>66</sup>

*Nonviolent communication* by Marshall Rosenberg<sup>67</sup>

How to have a climate change conversation, Webinar 1 #TalkingClimate<sup>68</sup>

How to have a climate change conversation, Webinar 2 #TalkingClimate<sup>69</sup>

# Methodology of the #TalkingClimate citizen science experiment

In July 2019, Climate Outreach and EIT Climate-KIC advertised via email newsletter and social media for participants in a citizen science project exploring how to have conversations about climate change.<sup>70</sup> The project was particularly targeted at members of the Climate-KIC Alumni Association but open to all.<sup>71</sup>

549 people from 56 countries signed up to the project and filled in an initial survey, which included demographic information and self-reported reflections on attitudes and competence at baseline. In August 2019, Climate Outreach ran an hour-long webinar for participants in the survey outlining key principles for having good climate change conversations. The webinar was then made available online.<sup>72</sup>

Participants were encouraged to have climate change conversations as a part of the project for the next two months. They were supported by email newsletters providing resources and support, and membership of an online 'Slack' community hosted by EIT Climate-KIC. Participants provided detailed reports on 175 different conversations via an online form.

52 participants provided detailed quantitative and qualitative data in response to a final survey asking about their entire experience in October 2019. This reflected a total of 604 conversations, some or all of which may be a repeat of those above. In total participants in the project provided about 30,000 words of feedback in addition to quantitative data. Climate Outreach then ran a second webinar, reflecting on initial analysis of this data.<sup>73</sup>



*Member of the Climate-KIC Alumni Association.  
Photo: EIT Climate-KIC*

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