

How Can We Comprehend the Climate Crisis?



The earth's warming is not immediate, but gradual, and without a direct or immediate impact on our everyday actions. wildpixel / Getty Images

The science is clear. If we continue to emit greenhouse gases at the same rate we have been doing for the past decades, 80 years from now, our planet will be at least four degrees warmer than pre-industrial levels.

"And the warming won't stop there," climate researcher and oceanographer Stefan Rahmstorf told DW. "It will continue to rise to seven or eight degrees over the next 100 years. Human civilization won't survive that."

Normally, we respond to danger quickly; we put out fires, run away when we feel at risk, and protect our children in every way we can. So why are people so slow to react to the existential threat of global warming?

"In evolutionary terms, we are not built for this kind of danger," explains Andreas Ernst, Professor of Environmental Systems Analysis and Environmental Psychology at the University of Kassel. "We react to a rustling in the bushes with lightning speed. But the threat posed by climate change is abstract."

The earth's warming is not immediate, but gradual, and without a direct or immediate impact on our everyday actions, Ernst says the complex correlations are hard for us to grasp.

Figures Remain Incomprehensible

Although the findings of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports are unambiguous, many laypeople, as well as politicians, find their details hard to understand. This can impact the implementation of recommendations. Such, at least, is the conclusion reached by an international team of researchers who analyzed the IPCC reports.

Many struggle to picture a ton of the greenhouse gas CO₂.

Such figures "don't really reach the human psyche," Ernst said.

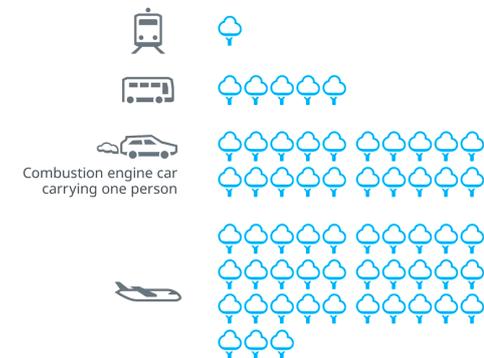
Yet dealing with CO₂ is essential in the climate crisis, because the more greenhouse gases there are in the air, the faster the earth warms up. CO₂ is mainly produced by the burning of oil, coal and natural gas. In order to limit global warming to a maximum of two degrees, CO₂ emissions need to be reduced as quickly as possible, and neutralized no later than 2050. In order to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees, however, the world would have to become climate-neutral even sooner.

Christoph Nikendei, psychotraumatology expert at University Hospital in the southern German city of Heidelberg says it's important to use easy-to-understand figures, and to address the emotional brain so that climate change can become a real and tangible part of life.

How Many Trees Need to Grow to Compensate for My Flight?

1,000 kilometers of travel per person

How many beech trees need to grow for one year to offset CO2 emission



Source: UBA Österreich, co2online

To stay with that example: One ton of CO₂ is produced, for example, by burning 422 liters (111 gallons) of gasoline, which would allow a car to travel an average of 5,400 kilometers (3,355 miles).

Conversely, plants absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere. This enables them to grow. A beech tree, for example, takes in around 12.5 kg of CO₂ per year. That means a single ton of CO₂ corresponds to the annual growth of 80 beech trees.

If we compare the CO₂ emitted and absorbed, we can calculate how many trees are needed to compensate for a certain distance traveled by car, and which means of transport "consumes" the least amount of tree growth.

For example, 20 beech trees would have to grow for one year to offset a 1,000-kilometer (621-mile) journey with a combustion engine. For 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) of air travel, it would take 33 beech trees per person. The same distance traveled by train would equate to the growth of just one beech tree.

Collective Behavior: Silence and Repression

Another obstacle to tackling the climate crisis is **repression**, which is a very common psychological protection mechanism.

"People don't want to hear how bad things are, so they push it away. Smokers also do this when confronted with the consequences of their behavior," Ernst said, adding that many who don't want to deal with the climate issue, look away and leave it for others to solve.

Nikendei sees this behavior as a collective pattern of action: **a collective social norm of silence**, and likens the reluctance to acknowledge the climate crisis to the social taboos of aging, illness and death.

Rejection and Paralysis Can Be Overcome

Nikendei regards it as the role of psychologists to acknowledge this collective rejection and the emotions associated with it while simultaneously assisting the necessary change in values. This includes mourning the end of the fossil fuel era, recognizing one's own involvement in climate change and **a shift in values towards cooperation over competition**.

Excessive behavior in society needs to be replaced by more sharing, repairing and preserving, the psycho-trauma expert says.

Reconnecting with nature is also important. In pursuing this approach, he believes psychologists can help people to cope with the climate crisis and overcome feelings of fear, paralysis and helplessness.

More than a thousand psychologists and psychotherapists in Europe are trying to do just that with the *Psychologists for Future* network, says co-initiator Lea Dohm.

"Our campaign has struck a nerve. Lots of people from all walks of life want our help in tackling the climate crisis."

Reposted with permission from *Deutsche Welle*.

Further reading

- [4 Climate Crisis Solutions No One Is Talking About](#) - EcoWatch ›
- [12 Books Surrounding Election Add Perspective to Climate Crisis ...](#) ›
- [Should You Have Kids Despite Climate Change?](#) ›
- [Climate crisis: 11,000 scientists warn of 'untold suffering' ...](#) ›
- [Climate crisis could displace 1.2 billion people by 2050, report warns](#) ›