CLIMATE CHANGE APATHY

There are reasons to think the world is getting to grips with climate change. Carbon emissions are still rising but more slowly than before, and in many countries they're falling. The UK has slashed its emissions to 19th-century levels, and plenty of other countries are making progress as well. Crucially, that's happened without many people noticing, suggesting the world might be able to deal with the problem without having to persuade the public to change their polluting lifestyles.

But this is wishful thinking. The UK's recent emissions cuts have mostly come from shutting coal power stations. Cutting emissions further to stop dangerous warming will depend on people changing how they live: flying less and eating less meat and dairy, for example. There's no way this can be done as quietly as what's been achieved so far.

Persuading people to cut down on things they enjoy for the sake of the climate might seem impossible. In most European countries, about three-quarters of the public say they're worried about climate change, yet less than a third would accept higher taxes on fossil fuels to cut emissions.

But this climate apathy can be overcome if it's tackled in the right way. The first step is to understand the psychology behind apathy. Climate change is exactly the kind of threat our minds aren't equipped to worry about. It seems distant, happening mostly in the future and to other people. The widespread tendency to think "I'll be OK", known as optimism bias, makes it easier for people to assume such distant problems won't affect them.

Partisanship is a problem, too. Arguments about climate change are often polarised between left and right, and the public widely see it as a left issue.

The distance between emissions and their effects also makes it harder to feel guilty or outraged about them. It's easy enough to be angry when a crime has an identifiable victim, and to feel ashamed when we are at fault. Even if burning fossil fuels isn't a victimless crime, it's not instinctively obvious who the culprits and the victims are.

And there are more psychological barriers. Cutting emissions requires people to trust authorities to be competent, honest and fair – a tall order at a time when only a third of people say they trust government. Those authorities have to persuade the public to change how they live. But most people don't like change, favour the status quo and are averse to losing what they have.

Yet, daunting though these barriers are, they can be beaten with political leadership and honesty. Cutting emissions could bring benefits including clean air, new forests and well-insulated homes. Research suggests these can be the most persuasive arguments for climate action.

Adapted from *The Guardian*
October 2018
(454 words)