

OPINION

Climate Action

Harborough Climate Action

The psychology of facing up to crisis

Though reiterations of warnings about climate change and the crisis in biodiversity are commonplace there remains the difficult question of what to do about both.

Telling ourselves that we face an uncertain future on a spectrum of outcomes ranging from acceptable economic, social, and cultural reforms all the way through to various armageddon scenarios, can be confusing, to say the least. Vested interests tend to argue for themselves, ranging from an unwillingness to cut down on air miles up to greenwashing by industrial and technological movers and shakers.

Academic studies in psychology tend to agree that if people accept that climate

change is caused by human activity they are more likely to support action to mitigate its effects. That said, there is also a disturbing correlation between believing in the anthropogenic causes of climate change and failing to act in a responsible and progressive manner. In other words, we seem to be living in a time of what might be termed a 'second-order' denial, where the acceptance of climate change does not necessarily lead to appropriate and sufficient action. There appears to be a threshold that people find it hard to cross, especially when it interferes with their lifestyles and personal belief systems. This arises when embedded ideas about rights and responsibilities come under pressure, and when climate



change mitigation measures – such as London's expansion of the ULEZ traffic scheme – conflict with what some folk find ideologically acceptable, or practically achievable.

The question of environmental reform has some fundamental psychological components. The Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory argues that the degree of awareness of environmental crises can be

The ULEZ expansion has seen conflict arise between people who want to tackle the climate crisis, and those who question its practicality or disagree with it ideologically

correlated with ecologically altruistic values, as a corrective to egotism and hedonism. The central issue here is an awkward series of relationships between environmental responsibility and consumption. How do we curb consumption when it is a contributor to climate change, and when what used to be called 'first world' countries (now the 'Global North') have been living environmentally excessive lives compared to those of the 'third world' ('Global South')? Do we have the psychological resources to adapt to environmental imperatives, if these are based on wholesale changes to our lifestyles?

The future depends on answers to complex and interrelated questions about how we

can thrive in a sustainable way. We are nowhere near providing these answers, for all the progress that's been made so far. It's worth remembering that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, a critique of the use of agricultural pesticides, was published in 1962. It seems to take us a long time to learn some basic lessons, when time is fast running out. As our previous article suggests, there has to be a reciprocal relationship between government regulations and 'grass roots' initiatives.

If you are concerned about the climate and ecological crisis, would like to find out more and maybe get involved, go to www.sustainableharboroughcommunity.co.uk/hca. You can email hca@sustainableharboroughcommunity.co.uk.