



# Reframing how we think about climate change

Could changing the way we think about climate change be key to adapting and building emotional resilience in the face of uncertainty?

**Published:** 06 March 2024

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**Read time:** 4 Mins

**In this article, Professor Sergei Shubin takes lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic to explore strategies for planning for uncertainty, mental health and collective action and applies them to the climate emergency.**

## Future thinking

We need to rethink how we make plans for uncertain events by making sense of the future and developing future scenarios. Climate change 'is a social, environmental, and scientific phenomenon that is characterized by its relationship to futures'.<sup>1</sup>

Perceptions of climate change are often governed by long-term goals or points on a timeline (i.e. carbon concentration levels 100 years from now), which often appear far removed and difficult to relate to.<sup>2</sup> However, the future is not about a set of endpoints or targets in some field called 'the future', but is a continuous process of adjustment and ongoing ways of being.<sup>3</sup> The future is not limited to tasks (e.g. carbon reduction goals) that can be completed and ticked off, but it relates to commitments that shape our lives (living in a sustainable and fair manner) that are constantly applicable and cannot simply 'end'.

## Living with uncertainty

We can take lessons on this from the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we learnt that governments' planning and initial responses were based on the strategies of imitation and similarity, modelled on past experiences (such as adoption of preparedness plans for the

spread of flu). However, these responses had to be adjusted to the new challenges caused by the constantly mutating virus. It became apparent that responding to COVID-19 could not just use the logic of calculation and risk, often expressed in economic terms.

Pandemic responses also had to include new practices of dealing with uncertain futures, for example different ways of living together (tackling isolation) and supporting people living with loss and the immediacy of death. What became particularly noticeable was the effect of the pandemic on mental health, especially since mainly physical effects were initially prioritised.<sup>4</sup>

Learning from this experience, it is important that we go beyond the logic of economic systems of environmental governance and risk calculation in relating to the future and anticipating climate change.<sup>1</sup> We need to address the effects of climate change on mental health (climate distress) and consider a whole variety of surprising, unpredictable ways in which people are shaped by climate, using creative methods such as storybooks.<sup>5</sup>

## The importance of emotions

As well as dealing with uncertainty, we saw that COVID-19 pandemic responses had to deal with more-than-human and more-than-rational processes. We need to reconsider climate change similarly. For a long time, climate scientists tried to understand how people drive climate change, but in analysing 'human factors' they often overlooked emotions and non-rational desires that reshape environments. Now, scientists go beyond measurable and instrumental analysis of human-environmental dynamics to analyse the embodied, experiential and emotional forces that shape responses to socio-natural change. Such forces, described as affects (love, hate, anxiety), emerge through encounters between bodies, things and technologies, and shape reactions, for example public support for the victims of extreme weather events.<sup>6</sup>

Outcomes from the recent cross-European COVINFORM project (Coronavirus Vulnerabilities and Information Dynamic Research and Modelling), where I was leading a Swansea-based team, illustrated how affects produced gaps in rational reasoning in healthcare policies and conflicting emotionally-driven responses. The COVID-19 virus not only spread disease, but also produced anxiety and fear, which 'became a new organising principle of society'.<sup>7</sup> The uncanny presence of the virus haunted everyday realities and created new exclusions, such as shielding and forced isolation (with negative effects on mental health). Fear for others also created a sense of urgency and moved people to help those in need.

Similarly, living with climate change produces anxiety and fear, but can also prompt collective action. It is important to consider the transformative potential of affects and new possibilities they offer to address climate change, beyond technological solutions. For example, we need to make people comfortable with being uncomfortable about the changes posed by climate change, making potential interventions attractive (not just about sacrifice) while ensuring inclusivity and fair transitions.

# Conclusion

To summarise, it is important to develop different thinking about climate change, particularly in relation to its effects on health. We must go beyond technological solutions by supporting emotional resilience. We need to pay attention to different personal experiences of adaptation to climate change in different places and times, and ultimately address social inequalities that support unsustainable lifestyles.

I would like to thank colleagues from the COVINFORM team – Diana Beljaars and Louise Condon – who helped to develop ideas for this project and collect data.

[References available on our website.](#)

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