

A chance conversation on climate change

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Recently I had a conversation with a fellow camper in a town in NE Victoria who said he 'didn't know about climate change' and went on to tell me that climate change had always happened and that we are just caught in a natural cycle.

I told him of my respect for the knowledge of the 97% of climate scientists who accept we humans are causing climate change and that historical records show that the current warming is unprecedented in human history. We talked further about my engagement with a group of psychologists helping understand the emotional struggle we have with accepting what the science is telling us. This focus piqued his interest. We talked and listened, and found common ground in acknowledging the enormity of the problem and the global changes required to address it. This man was a keen bushwalker who loved nature and was clearly troubled about the issue and the implications for change. He later told me our conversation had got him thinking. The next day as we farewelled he went out of his way to sincerely wish me luck in my work.

What was going on that this man at first presented himself as a climate sceptic, but with further conversation revealed deep concern and even despair about the problem. I suspect he is representative of lots of us in the community who feel anxious about the implications of climate change, and are troubled by feelings that are in tension with each other: on one hand, we feel deep alarm and concern and want action, and on the other we wonder how the changes needed could possibly occur, particularly with the state of adversarial politics in this country.

It is emotionally challenging to bear conflicting feelings, and our tendency is to release ourselves from this uncomfortable gridlock by dismissing the information along with the emotions that cause the distress. On the surface, it's so much simpler to say and believe that climate change is occurring naturally.

Of course, it's not really that simple, as once we become worried, we have to continually work at pushing our anxiety away from consciousness. Think for example of the person who has received bad medical news. It's hard work to ignore what we know we must face. The denial can only go on so long until the truth breaks through, and the tough emotional work needs to begin.

For my fellow camper it seemed that my labelling climate change an emotional issue shifted his focus from questioning climate science to recognising his feelings, and how complex and fraught they were. Whether he later explored them further is not known, but he sure hoped other people would not shy away from *their* feelings. Sometimes people encourage others to do the feeling, while hoping to keep himself themselves distant from what troubles them.

This simple exchange between us can give us an insight into how we only need to connect with others and empathetically scratch the surface to find they care as much as we do.

Opinion polling is telling us Australians are becoming more concerned about climate change and accept it is caused by human behaviour. It is likely there are many more who don't show up in the polling because they are frightened to acknowledge their fear and uncertainty about the future, especially for those they love. Engaging in conversations where feelings are recognised, with space to discover others may feel as they do, can help people accept the urgent reality of the climate crisis, and hopefully ultimately foster pressure for change.