

# Do the actions of an individual matter, on Climate Change?

**By Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, climate scientist, author, activist, TX A&M, in May 2025**

Having solar panels, eating a plant-based meal, taking public transportation, or switching your light bulbs all eliminate a little bit of those heat-trapping gasses. But I crunched the numbers, and I realized that even if everyone who's worried about climate change and who has the resources to make changes did so, it still would only address about 20 percent of the problem.

Looking at history, abolitionists boycotted sugar and cotton because those were typically produced by slave labor, but boycotting sugar and cotton was not what led to slavery's abolition. Women got the vote, civil rights were enacted, apartheid ended, gay marriage was legalized **because people used their voices.**

Now, you'll see pinned to the top of my social media accounts a list of the actions that individuals can take that make the biggest difference, based on the social science.

**Number one** is to have a conversation about why climate action matters and what we can do: not about polar bears and ice sheets, but what's happening in my life and to the people and places and things I love, and then what can my school, my organization, my club, my business, my church, what we can do together, to make a difference.

**Number two** is join a climate action group to amplify your voice even more, like Citizens Climate Lobby at [www.citizensclimatelobby.org](http://www.citizensclimatelobby.org)

**Number three** is to start conversations where you work or where you study. You see a common theme here. If we talk about climate, then we think about it and are more likely to act.

**Number four** is to look at where you keep your money, because often we don't realize that saving \$1,000 in a bank that invests that money in fossil fuels, produces the same amount of carbon as flying from New York to Seattle once a year. Change to a better bank if needed.

**Number five**, use our voice with elected officials. In the U.S., 99% percent of elected officials are not federal, and research by the Yale [Program on Climate Change Communication](#) has shown that elected officials systematically underestimate how much their constituents care about climate change because they never hear from these constituents.

**Number six**, the last thing on the list is make changes in your personal life. This is where improving your home's weatherization, getting a heat pump, buying an electric car, etc., come in. But make those changes contagious by talking about them. Individuals have changed the world before, and I'm convinced we can do it again. It all begins with **using our voice.**

**More**

**Why don't we do more?**

For some reason, we are just obsessed with the idea that guilt, shame, and fear are enough to not only spark but to maintain long-term behavioral change. Fear certainly wakes us up. We have to understand there is a problem — that's one side of the coin, but we also need the other side of the coin. We need to understand what we can do about it. In the U.S., 67% of people are worried. But you know what percent are taking action? 8 percent.

If they're worried but not activated, more worry is not going to activate them. More worry is just going to paralyze them. What they're missing is what social scientists call efficacy. Efficacy is often what we might refer to as hope — the idea that **if I do something it will make a difference.**

It isn't wishful thinking. It's not burying my head in the sand. Hope requires action, and action breeds hope. The social science is clear that doom and gloom messaging wakes us up, and it gets the most clicks and shares on social media. But instead, it simply paralyzes us, and that is the last thing we need right now. **We need to be empowered to act. Every 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a degree additional global heating matters, and we can all do our part to help.**

**Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do something. We must simple begin!**

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