

# PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE UK

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## What is Psychological Distance?

Psychological distance is the invisible mental lens through which we perceive experiences. This creates an emotional and cognitive gap that determines how immediate or remote a concept feels. In the environmental context, this phenomenon explains why complex issues like climate change often seem abstract and disconnected from our personal lived experience, making global challenges seemingly distant, intangible realities that struggle to trigger immediate personal engagement or action[1].

Construal Level Theory explains how psychological distance transforms our mental representation of experiences. Revealing that as something feels more distant in time, space, social context, or hypothetical nature, we perceive it more abstractly (beyond what we can observe physically), with fewer specific details[2]. This theory demonstrates that our cognitive processing fundamentally shifts based on how close or far we subjectively feel an event, concept, or phenomenon is from our immediate personal reality.

## Types of psychological distance

**Spatial Distance:** The geographic proximity or remoteness (close or far) of climate impacts. Many people associate severe climate impacts with places not in close proximity, diminishing local relevance and lack of action in immediate context.[1]

**Social Distance:** The extent to which people relate to those affected by climate change. If climate change is seen as primarily affecting others — whether marginalized communities or future generations — individuals may dissociate from responsibility.[10]

**Temporal Distance:** The perception of climate impacts occurring in the distant future. Framing climate change as imminent rather than long term can increase environmental action.[10]

**Hypothetical Distance:** Degree of certainty or skepticism around climate change events and impacts. When individuals perceive climate change as unlikely to happen they are less motivated to take action.

## Cognitive Biases and Confounding Factors in Reducing Psychological Distance

Extending beyond Construal Level Theory, cognitive biases that influence decision-making — complicate reducing psychological distance. Egocentrism leads individuals to prioritize personal experience, often underestimating distant risks[3]. Optimism bias makes people believe they are less likely to face climate impacts; for example, those outside flood-prone areas may underestimate future vulnerability[4]. The availability heuristic focuses attention on easily recalled events and prioritises accessible information. Such as UK heatwaves temporarily heightening concern, while milder seasons or inconsistent coverage reduce urgency.

Confounding factors like cultural attitudes, personal values, and media representations further complicate this relationship in the UK. Urban areas often prioritize air pollution, while rural regions may emphasize land conservation, creating regional differences in perceived proximity to climate issues[5]. Socio-political contexts, including renewable energy debates and how UK media frames climate risks, also shape how distant threats are understood[6]. Tailored strategies are essential to reduce psychological distance effectively, accounting for these diverse regional and cultural factors across the UK.

## METHODS

### TO REDUCE PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE

#### Spatial dimension: Connecting climate change to local areas

**What to do :** Focusing on local impacts and solutions has the ability to create stronger connections – focus on specific regions and highlight localised solutions.

**Example:** In Cornwall, rising sea levels threaten coastlines and local ecosystems. The local councils have chosen to adapt through community-led initiatives like shoreline management plans to protect vulnerable areas.[8]

**Why it works:** When an individual is able to see effects within their own community, they are more likely to feel a personal connection to the issue and support local action.

#### Temporal Dimension: Making Climate Change Relevant Now

**What to Do:** Highlight recent climate events to show how climate change is affecting people right now. Avoid focusing solely on distant predictions.

**Example:** The UK experienced record-breaking temperatures this summer (2024), with the highest temperature recorded on August 12. This heatwave disrupted lives, strained healthcare systems, and caused infrastructure issues, underscoring the urgent need for climate adaptation.[7]

**Why it Works:** By linking climate change to recent events, people are more likely to see it as a pressing issue that demands their attention.

#### Hypothetical Dimension: Providing Certainty Through Evidence

**What to Do:** Highlight well-researched policies and their tangible benefits to remove ambiguity and demonstrate progress.

**Example:** The UK's commitment to reducing emissions by 78% by 2035—guided by the Climate Change Committee's Sixth Carbon Budget—provides a clear roadmap for tackling climate change. This includes feasible steps including transitioning to renewable energy and reducing carbon dioxide emission.[11]

#### Social Dimension: Sharing Personal Stories to Foster Empathy

**What to Do:** Share stories of people who have experienced the impacts of climate change. Emphasise their challenges and actions to build empathy and solidarity.

**Example:** Climate-induced heatwaves have particularly impacted disabled individuals like Doug Pauley. His personal health challenges during heatwaves highlight how extreme weather events pose existential risks for vulnerable populations. Pauley's advocacy turns abstract climate data into tangible human experiences, fostering deeper emotional connections.[9]

**Why it Works:** Personal stories make the consequences of climate change feel real and motivate people to act out of empathy and solidarity.[4]

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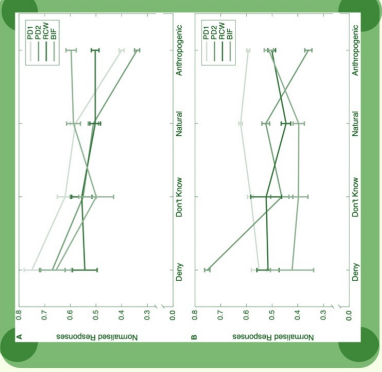


Figure 8:

The figure shows that as belief in human-caused climate change increases, psychological distance decreases. When individuals see climate change as their responsibility, they feel its impacts more personally and urgently. This highlights the importance of communication strategies that make climate change feel immediate and local to inspire action.[10]