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IDEAS

How to cut carbon — and get happier

By Elizabeth Dunn and Jiaying Zhao , Updated December 26, 2019, 12:32 p.m.



Commuting by bicycle is a way to reduce your carbon footprint while also creating greater happiness in your life. ULF SVANE/THE WASHINGTON POST

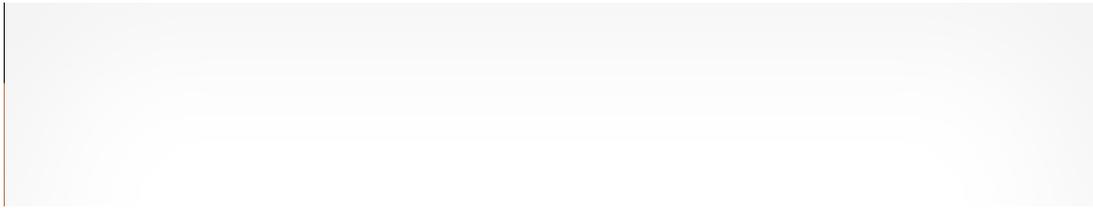
When we hear words like “ecocide” and “climate emergency,” it’s easy to feel paralyzed into inaction. The conversation around climate change too often emphasizes the need for [self-sacrifice](#), with undertones of [shame](#). Shame is what psychologists call an avoidance emotion; it makes us want to retreat rather than step up. We think there is a better approach.

The two of us work on the same university campus, but do research on very different topics: Liz studies how to get the most happiness out of daily life, while Jiaying investigates environmental behavior. We recently realized that by combining our expertise, we could identify sweet spots: changes in behavior that reduce carbon and increase individuals' happiness at the same time.

In contrast to emotions like shame and fear, happiness is an approach emotion, a positive feeling that spurs us to engage with challenges in [novel, creative ways](#). And the scope of the challenge posed by climate change demands that both individuals and governments break out of old habits and consider a wide range of new approaches. It's not enough for a small sliver of the population to purchase electric vehicles or go vegan — we need lots of people to make lots of changes, in addition to the big structural adaptations that need to be made.

And let's be honest: some strategies for combating climate change do pose a real cost to human happiness. For example, Liz's husband likes to point out that turning down the thermostat on cold winter days would help reduce her carbon footprint. But in a [study](#) of 31 cities in China, researchers found that people were happier when the ambient room temperature was more comfortable. So, rather than suggesting that people bundle up inside their homes, this challenge would be better addressed at the policy level. Most of Boston's power comes from natural gas, which emits a lot of carbon, but investing in cleaner energy sources (like solar and nuclear power) would have a far bigger impact than individuals turning down the thermostat.

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While creating cleaner energy sources requires long-term structural change, individuals can still identify strategies for lowering their own carbon footprints — and boosting their happiness — right away. Changing consumption habits is particularly essential for people who have a fair bit of wealth and privilege. [Wealthier people](#) tend to have particularly large carbon footprints, which can be easily reduced with little effect on their happiness. But all of us can benefit from re-considering our own habits.

To get started, it's helpful to take a look at your current carbon footprint using a free [online calculator](#), which will identify the biggest contributors to your own footprint, from food and shopping to commuting and air travel. Then, consider applying some of the strategies below to minimize your carbon use while maximizing your happiness.

Food & Shopping

Most people recognize that giving up meat is good for the planet. But for many of us, going vegan feels like a huge sacrifice. Happiness research, however, points to an alternative approach: When people cut back on something they enjoy, they are more inclined to savor it. So, if you're not ready to give up meat entirely, think about turning it into a treat. Focus on eating relatively low-impact foods during the week, so you can look forward to a burger or steak on Friday night.

We also recommend turning shopping for clothes back into a special occasion rather than a regular habit that embraces fast fashion. The fashion industry emits [more greenhouse gases](#) than international air travel and shipping combined, and every year people throw away [\\$460 billion of clothes](#) that can still be worn. To save carbon (along with money and time), Jiaying shops for clothes just once a year, hitting the outlets to get an injection of happiness at a discount.

Commuting

Despite doing research on sustainability, Jiaying drives eight miles from her home in downtown Vancouver to work on the University of British Columbia campus. To feel less guilty about this, she has turned her daily commute into a kind of free ridesharing service, offering rides to friends and colleagues anywhere between campus and her home.

On average, people experience their [lowest daily levels](#) of happiness while commuting. In contrast, spending time socializing ranks among the most enjoyable activities of the day. So, turning time alone behind the wheel into time spent catching up with friends is a way to trade unhappy minutes for happy ones. And compared to driving solo, [driving two friends](#) (who also otherwise would be driving alone) reduces your personal carbon footprint by about the same amount as taking the commuter rail.

Because Liz lives close to campus, she often bikes to work. She has noticed that she is more cheerful after biking than after battling traffic. In fact, when more than a [million Americans](#) were asked how many days in the past month they had experienced poor mental health (such as stress and depression), those who biked regularly reported substantially fewer bad days. And in a [nationwide study](#) of common travel modes, people felt happier while biking than while driving, taking transit, or walking. This doesn't mean you would benefit from biking to work through slushy streets on a freezing January day. But when the first blossoms appear and the sun comes out, consider joining a bike-share program and cycling to work, or even just to the closest transit hub.

While many people can't afford to live near work, shaving even a few minutes off the daily slog — by, for example, moving close to a commuter rail station — can potentially make a measurable difference for happiness. Long daily commutes undermine happiness in part by sucking up our free time, reducing what researchers call “time affluence,” the feeling that you have enough time to do what's important to you. [Studies](#) suggest that time affluence may matter almost as much as material affluence for happiness. Perhaps, then, it should be no surprise that cutting commuting time by 20 minutes is linked to about the same benefit for happiness as a [35 percent increase](#) in income.

And if moving isn't an option, it's worth exploring tele-commuting, even once in a while. [Researchers](#) recently tracked the happiness levels of more than 100 federal government workers who tele-commuted at least one day per month. These workers experienced more job-related happiness on days they worked from home.

Air Travel

Although cutting back on driving is important, cutting back on flying can make an even bigger difference. In fact, according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), eliminating just one round-trip flight from Boston to Los Angeles would be equivalent to giving up driving for three months. And as anyone who has ever raced to the airport only to wait hours for a delayed flight can attest, frequent air travel can undermine feelings of time affluence.

Recently, Jiaying was invited to give a talk on her research at a conference in Sweden. This cross-Atlantic trip would emit 2.4 tons of carbon (equivalent to driving for 6 months), just to give a one-hour talk on, ironically, climate change. So, Jiaying asked to deliver the talk via video instead. Hopping on Skype instead of a flight will save Jiaying a lot of time (as well as carbon). But she recognizes that there's a potential cost: She may miss out on new social connections or spontaneous conversations with far-flung colleagues. Indeed, social relationships and social interactions are [essential](#) for human happiness. And Liz's [research](#) has shown that even brief in-person conversations can lift people's moods and feelings of belonging. Her [research](#) also suggests that when technology supplants these casual conversations, people miss out on feelings of social connection.

So, cutting back on air travel sets the stage for a happiness tug-of-war: reducing work-related travel may increase your sense of time affluence (promoting happiness) but may also reduce your sense of social connection (undermining happiness). This inherent tension offers a framework for deciding which optional trips to keep and which to cut. If a trip will cost you a lot of time and offer relatively few opportunities for informal social interactions, we suggest politely declining.

New Year, New Habits

When you turn down a work trip or approach your boss about tele-commuting, consider highlighting your desire to save carbon. After pointing to her carbon footprint when declining a cross-country speaking invitation, Liz received an exceptionally warm response from the organizer, who shared her concern about the climate.

By approaching climate change through a happiness lens, we can re-think habits that have been making us miserable. We can cut back on consumption that we've taken for granted, potentially increasing our ability to savor. And we can figure out where to draw the line and insist that policymakers tackle the challenges they might otherwise place on individuals' shoulders.

[Elizabeth Dunn](#) is a professor at the University of British Columbia and co-author of *"Happy Money: The Science of Happier Spending."* [Jiaying Zhao](#) is a professor at UBC and Canada Research Chair in Behavioral Sustainability.

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