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Denial: Our Biggest Environmental Health Threat?

Editor's Note: The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, we feature this column from ecoAmerica whose mission is to build public support and political resolve for climate solutions. NEHA is an official partner of ecoAmerica and works closely with their Climate for Health Program, a coalition of health leaders committed to caring for our climate to care for our health. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA.

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We all recognize air and water pollution, certain ingredients in food or consumer products, vector-borne diseases, and many other issues as environmental health threats. People in the U.S. are also waking up to the fact that climate change and all its implications could be our biggest environmental health challenge. There's one important thing missing, though, from this list: the psychological condition of denial.

Denial, an extreme form of disagreement, is in fact an environmental health concern. Many of the subjects dominating our headlines over the last year—climate change, COVID-19, vaccines, election integrity—are great examples. People are given conflicting information or disinformation on various topics. They make their decisions on the basis of social identification and whatever they believe, and there probably exists a news source or discussion board that validates people's perspective. Science and facts

typically ground one side of the dichotomies. The other might be grounded in disinformation, fear and emotion, or conflicting priorities and self-interest. If we are going to help our organizations and communities effectively manage environmental health threats, we need to be able to help them manage denial.

Understanding Denial

Humans are social beings. We live as part of and in cooperation with our communities. People are not born with biases—our views are shaped through life experiences and reinforced by our social groupings and communities. Then, once a perspective is absorbed and internalized, it is very difficult to change our mind especially if it goes against the grain of our social milieu (Kolbert, 2017). Nonconformity with community views could limit your career or acceptance in the community, as well as even result in ostracization.

We all got our news from the same few television stations and the same local newspapers just a few decades ago. Congress passed the Fairness Doctrine annually from 1949–1987 that required broadcasters to identify and express opinion separately from factual news. The advent of cable TV and the internet exploded news options. Instead of appealing to people in the U.S. more broadly, commercial media success often became grounded in targeting niches and reinforcing extremes. Indeed, the internet and social media have grown so quickly that they have outpaced the way our minds use reason to understand and digest facts and scenarios (Kolbert, 2017). Selecting one's own versions of the truth that might not be based in science and facts puts all of us at risk.

In this atmosphere it is easier to sow doubt than to prove something definitively. Science and facts evolve as we learn new information. Wearing masks to stop the spread of COVID-19 is a good example. Initially, we were not aware of the high number of asymptomatic carriers. Now we know that 40–45% of infected people can spread the virus without showing symptoms (Oran & Topol, 2020). We know wearing a mask slows the spread. Environmental health professionals need to stay current with science and ground themselves in facts to be effective in their work.

Some say we are in a postfact, posttruth era, but we are still surrounded by objective truth and reality. Wildfires, storms, and votes are real and impact our lives in profound ways. If the scientific explanation of these events conflicts with your interests or worldview, it is easier for most to find and seek solace in other validators than it is to change our mind. As with COVID-19,

inconsistent messaging and amplification of falsehoods from people in power fed distrust and denial rather than united the country to defeat the virus.

Dealing With Denial

How can environmental health professionals deal with denial and support healthy practices when some, maybe many, of their stakeholders chose to believe concepts counter to public health? There is not necessarily a silver bullet to address these issues but rather an arsenal of communications resources and guidance to help.

- **Ground yourself in science and facts.**
 1. Research the topic and internalize the facts.
 2. Practice talking about it.
 3. Craft solutions and next steps.
- **Understand and adjust to the context.**
 1. Are you amidst other professionals seeking the best path forward for your organization or community? Openly share and seek best knowledge and practices. Make it real with simple, irrefutable facts (Krygsman & Speiser, 2016a, 2016b).
 2. Are you in a gathering where denial might be present? Focus on impacts, solutions, and benefits more than causes. Be respectful, acknowledge ambivalence, and show empathy (Krygsman & Speiser, 2016a). Cite examples everyone can agree on and sources that everyone can trust.
 3. Is it an email, opinion piece, or letter to the editor that merits a response? Use the same strategy as group gatherings but keep it brief and do not get into a debate. No need to refute or challenge, just make your points.

You can inspire and empower people to take action by focusing on things that everyone can see around them and the actual environmental health impacts, as well as providing solutions that are accessible now and showing the benefits of those solutions to your organization and community.

Combating Climate Denial to Improve Environmental Health

Climate science that emerged in the 1950s projected a warming future and ice sheets in the Arctic melting. It was all tomorrow's problem, but the decades of inaction since then have made climate change a very real present-day emergency. Vehement climate science denial is fading as people look out their windows to see extreme weather, fires, and associated health outcomes. Climate solutions, however, still face opposition in communities and with decision makers because of powerful forces that still sow seeds of doubt, division, and misinformation. A clear majority people in the U.S. (74%) report being concerned about climate change, including almost one half (45%) who are very concerned (Kobayashi, 2020). Some still deny, however, the threats climate change poses to their health and livelihoods.

Environmental health professionals can be major change agents in moving doubters from denial to climate solvers. People in the U.S. trust health professionals for information on climate change, but only 1 in 5 report hearing about climate change from health professionals (Kobayashi, 2019). We must help people understand they are not alone in their concern about climate change. We must also unite in our demand for climate solutions that can be implemented now (Hill, 2020).

The National Environmental Health Association (2020) is leading the charge with a new position statement on climate change and as a charter signatory of the MomentUs campaign (ecoAmerica, 2021). The cost of inaction has proven to be too high and with the economy still reeling from COVID-19 impacts, we have the opportunity to rebuild with a greener and more equitable framework that unites us. 🌱

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Did You Know?

The NEHA Board of Directors has approved a new policy statement on point-of-service food inspection disclosure. The policy recommends that government agencies mandate the posting of food inspection results at the point-of-service. Read the statement at www.neha.org/policy-position-statements.