

2016 Presidential Initiative

# THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGY

TO THE BIG ISSUES OF THE 21ST CENTURY





The science of psychology can help us to understand the “big issues” facing the world today and find solutions that contribute to individual and community wellbeing. As social complexity escalates, we need to find creative ways to work with diverse communities in confronting the increasing challenges to our collective wellbeing.

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# THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PSYCHOLOGY TO THE BIG ISSUES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

To many Australians, we appear to be living in a time of multiple risks, threats, and dangers. Challenges like climate change, violent extremism, pandemics and soaring rates of depression and self-harm, are some of the threats that dominate the media, and raise people's anxieties and concerns. Are we right to be concerned about these issues? How do they affect us psychologically and socially? And what can we do about them?

These are some of the questions that the 2016 APS Presidential Initiative is addressing via the development of a series of online booklets and other evidence-based resources relating to three such 'Big Issues'.

## Community Wellbeing

An understanding of the interrelationship between individual and community wellbeing can inform government policy and ultimately lead to healthier and happier people and communities. This resource outlines evidence-based indicators of wellbeing at multiple levels.

## Social Cohesion

With an increasing appreciation of the importance of social cohesion to community wellbeing and national security amid fears of violent extremism, there is a clear need for psychologists to take greater community leadership in this area. This resource outlines psychology's contribution to understanding, communicating and promoting social cohesion in a multicultural society.

## Climate Change

Climate change is the biggest health threat in the 21st Century. This resource looks at the contributions psychology can make in better understanding and tackling this threat. How can psychology help us to stay engaged with the problem of climate change so we can participate in effective solutions?

These three issues are intricately interconnected. With increasing intensity of threats to climate change and social cohesion, the implications for individual and community wellbeing will need to be addressed on a local and global scale.

Each booklet considers the salience, seriousness and personal relevance of one of these challenges, provides a sampling of what we currently know about the topic, and offers basic insights for how to respond to each challenge in ways that build a fairer, safer world, and help us all to flourish.

For more information about the 2016 Presidential Initiative visit  
[psychology.org.au/2016-presidential-initiative/](http://psychology.org.au/2016-presidential-initiative/)



# INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING MATTER

EVIDENCE-BASED INSIGHTS FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND EVERYDAY LIVING

An understanding of individual and community wellbeing can inform public policy and ultimately lead to healthier, happier and more productive people and communities. Helping people to live meaningful and fulfilled lives can enhance social and economic growth.

Wellbeing is a multi-faceted concept that includes physical and mental health, but also security – of food, income, and identity (personal and collective) – and environmental sustainability. Particularly important are factors that build people's resilience and make communities more liveable. All these depend on a strong, supportive and just society that affords all its members opportunities for growth and development.

## Individual wellbeing matters

A focus on wellbeing in psychology represents an early intervention or prevention approach to mental health.

Mental health and wellbeing are more than the absence of negative psychological states or mental illness; and more than 'feeling good' but living a good quality of life. From a positive psychology perspective, there are five core elements of psychological wellbeing:

- **Positive emotions** – experiencing happiness and satisfaction with life
- **Engagement** – feeling connected to people, work and the world around us
- **Relationships** – having satisfying social networks, such as family, friends or workmates
- **Meaning** – finding a sense of purpose in one's life
- **Accomplishment** – developing opportunities to fulfil one's potential for a contributing life.

As life is full of uncertainty, it is essential to develop coping skills and flexibility to manage challenges as they arise. The concept of resilience has emerged as an important component of wellbeing that can be applied to individuals, families, schools, organisations and communities. Resilience is defined as the capacity to anticipate, avoid, adapt to, and recover from the impacts of injury, violence and adversity. It also involves the capacity to develop and stay open to positive connections and opportunities.

## Community wellbeing matters

Community wellbeing is more than the sum of individual members' wellbeing, because our psychological needs are intertwined with the needs and influence of our families, organisations and communities. It refers to the quality of life experienced by people living together in communities – their social bonds, capacity and resilience.

A resilient community is more able to respond to adverse events, and be more effective and inclusive in delivering basic functions in both good times and bad. Such resilience is associated not only with better individual outcomes, but also social innovation and productivity.

## Community wellbeing indicators

A focus on wellbeing is relevant for psychology as a discipline and practice, and for public policy, which affects all domains of quality of life. Particularly important indicators of, and strategies to promote, community wellbeing have been identified as:

### 1. Healthy and safe communities

- Support local initiatives that promote health, wellbeing and mental health
- Promote personal and community safety by taking action on crime prevention, family violence, road safety and workplace safety



## 2. Community connectedness and belonging

- Provide opportunities for people to connect with neighbours and to participate in their community (e.g., sporting groups)
- Promote inclusive communities that involve disadvantaged groups

## 3. Diverse and vibrant communities

- Promote recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as First Nation's people and celebrate their cultures past and present
- Actively support diverse cultures, religions, genders, abilities, ages and sexualities
- Provide opportunities in arts, cultural, recreation and sporting activities

## 4. Well resourced and connected local neighbourhoods

- Provide integrated services locally and ensure they are accessible
- Support the liveability of communities and the resilience of people in regional and rural Australia

## 5. Democratic and engaged communities

- Provide adequate opportunities for people to have a say on important issues
- Ensure engagement processes are transparent and citizens feel their voice is heard so they can have confidence in decision-making processes

## 6. Sustainable built and natural environments

- Ensure built environments promote wellbeing and access on a social, emotional, physical and geographical level, including adequate open spaces
- Provide adequate, affordable and quality housing and public transport
- Promote care for natural environments and encourage sustainable energy use

The APS is committed to promoting individual and community wellbeing. Wellbeing should be a primary planning focus and its rigorous measurement a policy imperative, including those factors that affect wellbeing.

All psychologists have a responsibility to improve both individual and community wellbeing, and community and government leaders can enable the flourishing of individuals and communities by reframing policy goals to place wellbeing at the centre.

For more information about the 2016 Presidential Initiative visit [psychology.org.au/public\\_interest/social-determinants](http://psychology.org.au/public_interest/social-determinants)



# BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

## 5 INSIGHTS FROM PSYCHOLOGY

Matters relating to national security, violent extremism, radicalisation and social disunity have become entangled with instances of visible racism in the community.

These five basic but important insights from psychology can help people understand why social cohesion matters, and how their own behaviour can threaten social cohesion and also play a part in solutions.

### 1. Understand what factors promote social cohesion and why it breaks down

Social psychology tells us that, while social cohesion is a strength of Australia's multicultural society, attention needs to be directed towards what builds or threatens it. Psychologists can assist in designing effective policy and interventions from our knowledge of the factors that:

- enhance social cohesion (e.g., positive contact between cultures, maintenance of one's cultural identity, strong sense of acceptance and belonging to the broader community); or
- disrupt it (e.g., racism and discrimination, ignorance, misplaced fears, alienation from the broader community).

### 2. Strengthen people's identities

Research on identity shows that both strength within groups and strong links between groups are important in building social cohesion.

- Promote ways to strengthen people's positive cultural identities
- Support the development of a broad and inclusive national identity
- Support people to feel they matter and belong in Australia
- When problems arise, define the perpetrators narrowly (e.g. 'a few young angry men') not broadly (e.g. 'all people from \_\_\_ background'), and engage with them through positive evidence-based programs of inclusion
- Avoid creating an 'us' and 'them' scenario
- Challenge common stereotypes with evidence
- Create positive social norms (e.g., 'Racism: It stops with me' campaign)

### 3. Focus on community strengths (not punitive measures)

Current approaches to countering violent extremism and radicalisation based on surveillance and policing often overlook Australia's existing strong social cohesion, and risk undermining our multicultural ethos and national identity. There is little evidence to support the effectiveness of such approaches, often presented as 'quick fix' solutions to perceived community problems that are seen as urgent. A key theme of research in this area is that strengths-focused approaches should be prioritised ahead of punitive or coercive measures.

- Promote community engagement and community-led interventions
- Promote partnerships and collaboration with at-risk groups
- Encourage listening and trust



#### 4. Provide safe ways to express conflict

Different cultures and people see the world differently. Diversity and radicalism are natural, healthy aspects of any society, and allow for complexity and creativity in problem-solving. Diversity has allowed the human species to survive and is vital to our future on the planet. Problems arise when violence is used, so there is a need to target promoters of hate and violence, who are often a product of disengagement themselves.

- Create opportunities for respectful discussion and exchange of views
- Create social spaces for intercultural interaction
- Learn about and apply conflict resolution skills

#### 5. Promote cultural competence

Understanding the diversity of the world's cultures is fundamental to social cohesion. Not only is it important to be knowledgeable about other people's cultural backgrounds, beliefs and values, it is also crucial to understand one's own cultural influences, to develop skills to communicate with a wide range of groups, and to be exposed to the enriching cultural experiences of other groups.

- Learn how different kinds of bias influence cultural stereotyping
- Challenge the assumption that it is the responsibility of minorities to integrate into the 'mainstream'
- Experience other cultures through a range of cultural activities
- Share your own culture with others

Any strategy to effectively promote social cohesion requires long-term vision, planning and leadership from government, media and all sectors of the community.

For more information, visit  
[www.psychology.org.au/public\\_interest/social-cohesion](http://www.psychology.org.au/public_interest/social-cohesion)



# COMING TO TERMS WITH CLIMATE CHANGE

## 8 INSIGHTS FROM PSYCHOLOGY

Climate change is the biggest health threat in the 21st century, and 97% of climate scientists agree that humans are causing it. Already we are seeing climate disruption in many places on the globe, with far worse forecast.

These eight simple but important insights from psychological science help people come to terms and cope with the profound implications of climate change and participate in speedy societal change to restore a safe climate.

### 1. Speak up

A collective silence around climate change is dangerous. The more we hear others talk about it, the more it will be viewed within our communities and social networks as a risk that requires action, and thus build our own sense of threat and our motivation to act.

- Talk about climate change and weave it into your discussions (without overdoing it)

### 2. Make climate change personal and salient

To counter the sense that climate change is only a distant threat, we need to show people how climate change is relevant to them and threatens their health, families, communities, jobs and whatever else they care deeply about.

- Show that climate change is here, now and for sure
- Focus on the impacts of climate change that your audience cares about
- Talk about how people they can relate to will be impacted by climate change

### 3. Use social norms

Social norms are group beliefs about how people should behave in a given situation. People are very sensitive to cues about what is normal behaviour, and like to follow suit. Suggesting that pro-environmental behaviour is 'normal' is a more powerful way to encourage helpful behaviours than directly asking people to protect the planet.

- Model pro-environmental behaviours and leave behavioural traces (physical signs of your actions, like cloth shopping bags and bike helmets)
- Show that it's normal to be green; 'everybody's doing it'

### 4. Promote pro-environment values

The values we hold affect our behaviours, choices and feelings and are the bedrock on which attitudes are built. Values are learned, and can be shaped and cultivated. Most people hold two major types of values, extrinsic (like wealth, power, status) and intrinsic (like justice, equity, cooperation). Activating intrinsic values can increase pro-environmental behaviours.

- Promote intrinsic values over extrinsic values
- Attend to but move beyond 'what's in it for me?' to 'what's best for humanity?'

### 5. Create positive visions

To transform our society into a low-energy, sustainable, zero carbon world, we need a plausible vision of what that world would look like. When we know what we are working towards, we can identify steps to get there.

- Use personal and vivid 'can do' stories that elicit positive emotions so the message sticks and people are more likely to respond
- Talk about how 'green' communities will be great places to live





## 6. Deal with feelings

Climate change is frightening, and people often have strong feelings about it. How people respond to these feelings is crucial. Unhelpful ways include minimising the threat, distracting ourselves, blaming others, or becoming helpless and resigned to disaster. Or we can manage our feelings so we can accept and not avoid the reality of climate change.

- Acknowledge feelings about climate change to yourself and others
- Use different ways of thinking to change how you feel so you can stay engaged with the problem and the solutions (psychologists call this cognitive reappraisal)

## 7. Get active

Action is the best antidote to despair and helplessness. Doing something to reduce our carbon footprint can be empowering in itself. The activity both contributes to climate change solutions *and* helps us feel engaged and less distressed about the problem.

- Prioritise actions with high carbon reduction potential (e.g., install solar panels, minimise air travel, take public transport, divest from fossil fuel industries and their funders)
- As well as reducing your own carbon footprint, engage in broader societal efforts to address climate change (e.g., write to your local MP, join a climate change group, encourage your workplace or super fund to divest from fossil fuel industries and their funders)

## 8. Connect with nature

Humans have spent almost all of our history in close connection with the natural world. Today, however, more than half of us live in urban environments and spend most of our time indoors, with little experience of our place in nature. Greater connection with nature can restore our spirits while helping us to acknowledge the profound implications of climate change and take the necessary action.

For more information, visit  
[www.psychology.org.au/public\\_interest/environment](http://www.psychology.org.au/public_interest/environment)

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that behavioural science insights — research findings from fields such as behavioural economics and psychology about how people make decisions and act on them — can be used to design government policies to better serve the ... people.

US President Barack Obama, *Executive Order*, September, 2015

The Presidential Initiative on community wellbeing, social cohesion and climate change will provide leadership in those domains and broaden our scope of influence.

APS President Mike Kyrios FAPS, *InPsych*, August 2016





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