



Having More Productive Discussions about Climate Change

This guide is a valuable resource for productive conversations about climate change, but can be applied to discussions about other divisive issues. This guide was created for the screening kit for the film *Purple Mountains* and is available for free use by filmmakers and impact producers with acknowledgement to [Sound Off Films](#). [Drop us a line](#) if you find this guide helpful.

Climate change is one of the most divisive issues in the United States. Here are five tips for having productive conversations with those who are uncommitted or skeptical:

1. Manage your Expectations

Enter with the expectation of having a dialogue, not a debate. Psychologist Peter Coleman explains the difference: “A debate is a closed process of persuading the other that you’re right, a dialogue is a process of discovery, a process of learning.” No one likes being told what to do or how to feel. We often have false assumptions about the beliefs of those who disagree with us.¹

2. Practice Active Listening

Listen with the intent of understanding their point of view, not to refute. Casually introduce the topic by asking questions about weather patterns, such as recent fires and hurricanes. They may not be interested in talking about the topic, but if they are, ask them further clarifying questions, without mentally preparing a rebuttal or interrupting. Show that you’re listening and reflect back.²

3. Find Common Ground

We all want the same basic things out of life: security, belonging, and respect. People connect to divisive issues like climate change at a deep emotional level, so it’s best to meet people where they are. You may encounter people who are unsure, doubtful, and even skeptical and still find common ground. Statistically speaking, a majority of Americans believe climate change is real and human-caused. Only about 7% say they are “very sure” climate change is not happening.³

4. Set Boundaries

When deep-seated beliefs are challenged, many people become defensive and may hold on to the belief despite being presented with contradicting evidence. This backfire effect occurs when there isn’t mutual respect and understanding. Try to remain calm, focused, and kind. If the conversation devolves into an argument, especially with tension, raised voices, or name-calling from either side, it’s best to disengage.⁴

5. Move Forward

No matter how you feel the conversation went, end on a positive note. Tell the other person you love, respect, and/or appreciate them. You can have more conversations with them if they are willing, and if not, it was still good practice for talking with others who are more open about it.⁵

¹ www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/well/family/talking-with-relatives-across-the-political-divide.html

² www.elephantjournal.com/2019/02/how-to-have-a-useful-conversation-about-climate-change-a-10-step-roadmap-to-get-us-talking-about-it/

³ www.fastcompany.com/90424549/how-to-talk-about-climate-change-in-an-emotionally-intelligent-way

⁴ www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-convince-someone-when-facts-fail/

⁵ www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/tackle-climate-change/climate-change-stories/how-to-have-a-connected-conversation-about-climate-change/