

Presentation given on July 1st, 2026 by Godela von Kirchbach:

## **The Climate Crisis: Psychological, Structural and Communicative Dimensions**

I would like to begin with a personal story — the moment I first came into contact with the climate crisis. It was Earth Day, the 22nd of April, 1970 — fifty-six years ago.

At the time, I trusted that politics would deal with it. Other issues seemed more urgent then: dying forests, the ozone hole, polluted rivers and air. There were repeated crises, but somehow they were always resolved — even the Cold War ended peacefully. So I was confident the climate crisis, too, would eventually be tackled through sensible political action.

The betrayal of that confidence has been one of the great disillusionments of my life. Watching how irresponsibly so many politicians have acted has been bewildering. The endless stream of climate disaster reports brings fear; but it is the failure of those in power that has brought something sharper — frustration, and anger.

We are currently living through the second heat wave of this summer, and the season has barely begun. Scientists tell us this is not simply an unusual weather pattern — it is climate change, arriving faster than even they predicted. And while we feel this here, in our own skin, we should remember: extreme weather is now causing devastation almost everywhere on this planet.

In everything I have just described, you can already hear three different levels at which the climate crisis touches us — and at which we need to act: the psychological, the structural, and the communicative. Today I want to walk through all three with you, because real change requires working on them together.

### **Part One: The Emotional Level**

Let us turn first to the psychological level — because the inner world of each of us holds the key to whether change happens at all. And within that inner world, we usually find a whole cocktail of emotions that we need to untangle, understand, and turn into appropriate action.

#### **Denial and Coping Mechanisms**

The first reaction to bad news is almost always denial. How often do we hear ourselves say, “Oh no!” — and then quietly hope the problem will simply go away? Some people get stuck right there. None of us enjoys bad news. We want to feel at ease, to look to the future with some confidence. So when something unpleasant reaches us, our first instinct is to find a way to dismiss it. You have probably heard people say, in all kinds of contexts: “It can't be that bad!” This is the simplest possible defense against a threatening reality we feel unable to cope with.

There is also a more aggressive version of this — willful denial combined with hostility, which researchers have given the rather useful name “aggnorance”: a blend of ignorance and aggression, the active defense of not wanting to know. In the case of our current heat waves, this sounds like: “It's just summer weather” — or even, cheerfully: “Finally, some real warmth!”

If this kind of resistance persists, it tends to harden into what psychologists call cognitive dissonance — the mental discomfort we feel when two beliefs contradict each other, or when our actions clash with our own values. This discomfort pushes the mind to restore balance. Unfortunately, the mind often does this not by solving the actual problem, but by finding an easier route around the discomfort itself.

The American social psychologist Leon Festinger — who lived from 1919 to 1989 — observed that the brain does not resolve dissonance by changing behaviour. It resolves it by whatever path costs least. Denial is the first such path. But there are others: rationalisation, selective attention, and reinterpretation.

Rationalisation, applied to the climate crisis, often takes the form of cheerfully highlighting the supposed upsides of a warming Europe. “Soon you'll have Mediterranean beaches in England!” Palm trees, exotic fruit — and surely, someone will invent a technology to simply pull the carbon dioxide back out of the atmosphere.

Selective attention means simply not registering the worst of it — not letting it in. Some people our age find comfort in the thought that they, personally, won't live to see the very worst consequences.

Reinterpretation goes further still: insisting this is all perfectly natural, that the climate has always gone through cycles, that the warming has nothing to do with human activity — or simply minimizing it: “A few degrees can't really make that much difference, surely.”

Then there is moral licensing — using one small green action to justify a larger harmful one. “I don't drive a car, so I can afford to fly more often.”

And there is indefinite postponement — being fully aware that change is needed, but always finding a reason to put it off: “I'm too busy right now, too stressed, too old to overhaul my lifestyle.” We all recognize these mechanisms. And — this is important — simply knowing about them does not make them go away.

Confirmation bias leads us to seek out information that confirms what we already believe or do.

Motivated reasoning goes one step further still: the conclusion is fixed in advance, and the reasoning is built backwards to support it. Contradictory facts are quietly filtered out. And today, the internet is happy to supply us with exactly the information — or disinformation — we are looking for.

None of these reactions actually solves anything. They simply perpetuate the dissonance.

Interestingly, research also suggests that too much self-awareness about our own rationalizing — knowing that we are doing it — can itself produce paralysis rather than action. It is a bit like dieting: one small lapse, and suddenly it feels as though eating even more makes no difference at all.

So far I have spoken about cognitive dissonance and the various inadequate ways we try to cope with it. But what about those of us who do not deny the climate crisis — who are actively trying to protect the climate? What do we feel, and how do we manage those feelings?

## **The Emotional Landscape of the Climate Crisis**

The climate crisis can trigger a remarkably wide range of emotions, and they differ from person to person. Let me walk through the most common ones.

Denial and downplaying — I have already discussed this. It is, at its core, a self-protective mechanism against psychological overload. If we view climate deniers through this lens, it can actually help ease our own irritation with them. But if we do let the difficult news reach us, we are likely to feel several things in turn.

Fear and concern. Many people feel real fear and concern — for the future of the planet, for the health and well-being of generations not yet born, and for their own living conditions. Psychology now has a name for this: “climate anxiety.” I want to be precise here — this is not an irrational phobia, like a fear of spiders or open spaces. It is a well-founded fear, rooted in a real and dangerous situation. But it can still get out of hand and come to dominate someone's life, and that, too, needs to be addressed. The key is this: do not let the fear paralyze you, and do not let it tip into fatalism or cynicism. Fear is only truly fatalistic when there is genuinely nothing we can do — as with death. That is not the case here. There is a great deal we can still do.

When I examine my own reactions honestly, I have certainly felt a great deal of fear. But increasingly, what I feel — because of the irresponsible behaviour of politicians and powerful interests — is frustration, and anger.

Frustration and anger. The slow, inadequate measures taken by governments and large corporations have become impossible to ignore, and they expose a deep injustice — toward the majority of people alive today, and toward every generation still to come.

This particular reaction has a name too: “climate anger.” And unlike fear, anger does not paralyze — it activates. It is the motivating force behind many climate activists, visibly so in groups like the so-called “Last Generation.” I want to add a word of caution here: a small number of acts of disruption or even violence committed in anger have been used — quite deliberately — to discredit climate activism as a whole. As with any anger, this energy must never be allowed to turn destructive. It needs to be channelled into action that is both meaningful and effective.

Guilt and shame. Many people — particularly those of our generation — feel real guilt or shame about their own contribution to this crisis, through the way they have lived and consumed. But guilt and shame are backward-looking emotions. On their own, they help no one. At best, they can stop us repeating the same mistakes.

I would gently push back on too much guilt, though. People of my generation were often aware that something called “climate change” existed — but had no real way of knowing which everyday behaviours were most harmful. And many of the changes in our lifestyles were, frankly, forced upon us by the world around us. Think of the extraordinarily cheap flights that suddenly appeared, long before anyone explained what flying does to the

climate. Think of the flood of non-biodegradable plastic packaging, disposable plates and cutlery — none of which existed in our youth. Think of cars that kept getting larger,

marketed to us as “safer.” Think of fast fashion, with clothes priced absurdly low. None of us chose this system; in many ways, it was built around us. So: we should not punish ourselves for choices we made in ignorance. Instead, let us look squarely at what we can do, starting now.

Powerlessness and helplessness. The sheer scale and complexity of the climate crisis can easily produce a feeling of powerlessness — it seems impossible for any one person to make a real difference. But remember: the ocean itself is made of nothing but individual drops, and together they are immense and create enormous power. If every one of us decides we are powerless and does nothing, then nothing will happen. But if we join forces, we become a wave with real force behind it.

There is good science behind this, too. Studies have found that people tend to behave more selfishly when they believe everyone else is doing the same — and far more in the common good when they see others acting that way first. This means we genuinely can lead by example. Our actions are never truly isolated; they ripple outward through the people around us. (I’d point you to the website [global-tipping-points.org](http://global-tipping-points.org), which) Research has documented exactly these kinds of social tipping points — moments when a shift by a relatively small group changes what an entire society considers “normal.”

Overwhelm and stress. Constant exposure to disaster news, paired with the urgency of the situation, can easily produce emotional overwhelm. So good mental hygiene matters here. Don't limit yourself to the grim stories that social media algorithms tend to push toward you. Deliberately seek out stories of progress and success, too, and let them affect you emotionally — not only the catastrophes.

With the climate crisis specifically, the sense of being overwhelmed is especially strong, because for decades the danger felt abstract and far off in the future. It is also a problem we have caused collectively, demanding systemic changes that lie well beyond any one person's control. But we now see it happening in real time — and we have good reason to believe that collective action is both possible and effective.

## **Climate Grief**

Finally, there is a phenomenon known as “climate grief.” This affects older people in particular — those of us who remember a different world, whose internal baseline for “normal” is simply different from that of younger generations. We feel a genuine sense of grief for what has already been lost, and for what we continue to lose.

The American eco-psychologist Shawna Weaver coined this term. She draws a direct comparison to the grieving process first described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her landmark 1969 book, “On Death and Dying” — many of you will know it. We experience grief whenever a loss forces us to change some, or even all, aspects of our lifestyle, our sense of identity, or our expectations for the future.

But grief also has a constructive side. Weaver describes it as a process that guides us from the reality we once lived in toward a new one, shaped by loss and change. And the most effective way through a loss — any loss — is to transform the experience into

something fruitful and forward-looking. In our case, that means turning toward meaningful activism.

## Part Two: The Structural Level

Let us move now to the structural level — the societal and political dimension of this crisis.

Here we run straight into massive resistance, driven by vested interests. I hardly need to elaborate — we see every day just how powerfully lobbies and investors shape the decisions of parties and politicians.

There is also a psychological pattern at work here, documented by the psychologist John Jost, called “system justification.” It is found particularly — though not exclusively — in conservative circles, and it causes people to defend existing economic and social arrangements even when those very arrangements are harming them. Climate action can feel, to such people, like an attack on the system itself — which may help explain why conservative-leaning voters tend, on average, to be less engaged on climate than progressives.

This structural level is also the one on which our organizations operate. And let me be clear: we are not doing this simply to soothe our own conscience. We act here in order to drive real, significant change. Many of you are working to influence British politics through OKC; we, through the EGC, are working to influence policy across Europe. We do this writing to politicians, political bodies and the press, by exchanging information, sharing our experience, and — crucially — supporting one another.

### Progress Worth Noting

And there is genuine progress to report — even if its pace and scale rarely satisfy us. But if we ignore this progress entirely, we lose an important source of encouragement, and encouragement is something we cannot afford to discard.

The European Court of Human Rights has formally recognised climate protection as a human right, following a landmark lawsuit brought by the Swiss Climate Seniors — one of our own member organizations. This ruling is binding across every member state of the Council of Europe. Separately, the International Court of Justice has issued an advisory opinion confirming that states are legally obliged to protect the climate and the environment for their citizens.

Solar energy has spread with remarkable speed across India, and other countries of the Global South are very likely to follow — especially as fossil fuel prices continue to climb.

You may also have heard of the Great Green Wall of the Sahara and the Sahel — an initiative of the African Union to plant and cultivate a green belt, 7,775 kilometres long and 15 kilometres wide, stretching across the entire Sahel region, in order to fight desertification and its consequences. Naturally, there are enormous obstacles, and progress is slower than originally planned. But it is growing. It is working.

Yes — progress should happen faster. It should. But where we, as individuals, are concerned, we should resist the temptation to be perfectionists, whether toward others or toward ourselves. Instead, let us take real comfort in what has already been achieved.

### What the EGC Is Doing

Still, we want to be effective — not merely hopeful. So let me tell you briefly what we are actually doing within the EGC.

Our central focus is the campaign “Stop coal, oil, and gas,” which followed a presentation given to us by Jørgen Randers in Oslo last year. He made a compelling case that this is the single most important lever for climate protection — while also noting that China, somewhat surprisingly, is leading the way here. He predicted that fossil fuel consumption would keep rising for some time yet before eventually falling sharply. Given the erratic and destructive energy policy of the Trump administration, that turning point may now arrive considerably sooner than expected.

More recently, our focus has expanded to Big Finance — and to how the rules governing the international flow of capital actively obstruct effective climate protection. Our Psychology working group has produced a summary of a highly relevant report titled “Too Big to Cool the Planet.” I am happy to share this with anyone interested — and as always, your comments, your ideas, and especially your expertise are genuinely welcome.

I remain personally convinced that the change we so urgently need can only be delivered through politics. Individual behaviour, however, still matters enormously — it can steer politics in the right direction, above all through elections, but also by helping to create what is known as a social tipping point. I will return to that idea shortly.

### The Limits — and What Helps

Of course, even with the very best of intentions, the structural level is never simple. Consider a retiree whose pension happens to be invested in fossil fuel funds, or a commuter with no realistic public transport alternative. No amount of clever communication can fully dissolve the dissonance such people face — the structure itself is working against them.

That is precisely why we should be actively promoting structural measures that reduce dissonance without resorting to moral pressure or blame:

- Opt-out defaults for renewable energy tariffs — using simple inertia in favour of climate protection, rather than against it.
- Pricing that genuinely reflects the true cost of fossil energy — changing the underlying incentives, without condemning anyone's lifestyle.
- Investment in public infrastructure — railways, heat pumps, cycling networks — that makes the climate-friendly choice the easy choice.
- Regulation of high-emission industries, shifting responsibility to the level where it can actually be exercised
- effectively — namely, the corporations and systems themselves, not just individual consumers.

These are the kinds of structural shifts we should be championing — in our advocacy, in our conversations with politicians, and in how we talk about this crisis with the people around us.

### **Part Three: The Communicative Level**

This brings us to the third and final level: communication. This level is extraordinarily important for what actually happens — or fails to happen — in climate politics. And here, too, we encounter several recognizable patterns.

First: the very structural conditions I have just described — a pension tied to fossil funds, a town with no rail link — blur the picture and institutionalize dissonance before any conversation about climate even begins. We owe it to people caught in this kind of bind to recognize their situation honestly, rather than judging them for it.

#### **Exploited Coping Mechanisms**

Every one of the coping mechanisms I described earlier is actively exploited and reinforced by parties with a vested interest in the status quo. Think of the rhetoric around the “American way of life,” and how the right to drive an enormous car, without limit, has somehow become bound up with that identity. It is important to recognize this reaction for exactly what it is, namely propaganda, and to address the fear that genuinely lies underneath it — rather than simply dismissing the person who voices it.

Greenwashing is another communication trick used by high-emission industries to maintain their legitimacy without making any real structural change. Sometimes we see a tiny percentage of plant-based fuel in a blend being marketed as though it were a green revolution. But the most instructive example by far is the concept of the “personal carbon footprint” itself.

It was developed, in a strategic partnership, by BP and the advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather — an agency renowned for precisely this kind of impactful, strategic marketing. The campaign's declared aim was environmental awareness: encouraging individuals to calculate, and then reduce, their own personal carbon footprint. But beneath that surface lay something else entirely. BP was reshaping its public image — and, quite deliberately, diverting scrutiny away from industrial emissions and onto the individual consumer. It was a calculated strategy to shift responsibility from producers to consumers. Genuine corporate accountability would look very different: verifiable, near-term targets, and incentive structures that tie executive pay directly to real emissions reductions. This whole episode is a striking illustration of how corporate image management and public messaging interact — and why we must learn to critically examine environmental narratives, rather than simply accept them at face value.

#### **The Role of the Media**

The media, of course, plays a major role in shaping how threatening the climate crisis feels to the public. False balance — presenting fringe denial and overwhelming scientific consensus as though they were two equally valid “sides” — or disaster spectacle, and, finally, the constant reduction of climate change to individual lifestyle choices: all of this allows audiences to feel informed without ever feeling compelled to act.

There are better alternatives, and they are gaining ground. Solutions journalism presents science-based, genuinely viable paths forward. Attribution science names the true causes of specific events, rather than treating them as mysterious acts of nature. And system-level storytelling — rather than the more popular individual or sensationalist narrative — pairs danger with credible pathways through it, and makes our shared responsibility visible rather than hidden.

## How We Talk About It

Communication, naturally, also concerns how we ourselves speak about climate change, and how we try to raise awareness of it. Within the EGC, we run two distinct working groups on this front.

The first works to create positive narratives — narratives designed to ease fear, and to highlight what we stand to gain by consuming less and reconnecting more closely with the natural world.

The second is focused specifically on overcoming cognitive dissonance through better communication. Here, a word of caution is genuinely warranted: climate messaging that targets people's identities too directly tends to trigger backlash, not openness. When people experience a message as an attack on their values or their political allegiance, they dig in rather than open up. Effective communication builds bridges. It does not deepen the divides that already exist.

Research consistently points to three conditions under which cognitive dissonance is most effectively resolved through communication: first, when an action is normalized — presented as something “people like us” already do; second, when change is framed as collective rather than individual; and third, when climate action is positioned as consistent with identity — connected to jobs, fairness, care, resilience, and dignity, rather than to sacrifice and guilt.

These three principles apply with particular force to people exactly like us — older people and grandparents. We combine moral authority, exceptionally high civic participation, and a deeply personal stake in what kind of world our descendants will inherit. Our dissonance is distinctive — it is rarely about whether climate change is real. It is about how to reconcile a lifetime of caring for our families with a world that has been partly shaped by our own generation's economic choices.

Effective engagement with people like us avoids generational blame entirely. Instead, it frames climate action as the natural completion of a lifetime of values — not a correction of past mistakes — with an emphasis on legacy, stewardship, and dignity. Low-barrier, high-impact actions — voting, public testimony, writing letters, simply showing up and being visible — resolve dissonance precisely because they match real moral conviction with realistic capacity. And peer visibility, through organizations exactly like yours and ours, shifts the social norm itself: inaction, not engagement, becomes the unusual choice.

## Closing

So let me draw these three threads back together.



The psychological level asks us to understand our own feelings — and those of others — honestly, without judgment, and to channel them toward action rather than paralysis. The structural level asks us to support the systemic changes that make the right choice the easy choice, for everyone, not only the privileged few. And the communicative level asks us to speak — and to listen — in ways that build bridges rather than walls.

We are living proof that age does not mean withdrawal. It means experience, credibility, and — crucially — time and standing that younger activists often do not yet have. We have lived long enough to see how systems shift, and we have nothing left to lose by speaking the truth plainly. The ocean is made of drops. Let us keep being one of them — and let us help others find the courage to join us.