

We need to talk about aviation: a guide to having climate conversations

This is a summary of a guide written by Swedish climate activist Maja Rosén. The [full guide](#) contains extensive insight into Maja's personal experiences and campaigning, and it's well worth a read. The main points are summarised in bite-sized form here.

Why should we talk about the climate?

If we are to solve the climate crisis, more of us need to fully understand the extent of what we're up against. The IPCC report from 2018 states clearly that we need to halve our emissions in the coming decade if we are to avoid climate breakdown. We're currently on course for a 3 degree rise in global temperatures, which would have devastating consequences for all who rely on our planet for survival, human and otherwise. We need to drastically reduce our emissions, quickly.

But while we can do everything in our own lives to reduce our own emissions, our impact is far greater if we can also influence others to reduce theirs. Talking about the climate crisis is vital if we are to succeed in our fight against climate breakdown. Everyone has the potential to be a climate hero. Don't assume people don't care, assume that everyone would be prepared to fight for the climate if they realised what's at stake.

How should we talk about the climate?

Be nice

Getting angry or arguing with people takes a lot of energy and it's better to use that energy to really influence people. Think of the person you're talking to as your customer, and your job as selling them the idea of saving the climate. No one buys from a salesperson who tries to force them. It's important that those who are active in the climate struggle are friendly and inclusive in order to motivate others to get involved.

Ask questions, and listen to the answers

A good opener is to ask people if they're worried about the climate, then you can judge your response depending on what they say. If people say they're not worried, ask why not? It doesn't necessarily mean that they don't care, but perhaps that they don't know much about it. If they say there's no rush to save the climate, don't tell them they're wrong, but ask why they think that, and ask them if they know about the IPCC report from 2018.

People like to be listened to, so use your body language to show that you're interested in what they have to say. Try to see things from their point of view. It's good to ask questions like "what do you think about this," or "have you heard of..." Try to find personal connections, e.g. for those who think social justice is important, focus on the fact that those who will suffer the most from the climate crisis are the ones who have done the least to cause it. If they love to travel, show that you can still travel without flying, and that if we want to be able to travel and discover the world in the future we need to solve the climate issue now.

Be understanding

Show the person you're talking to that you believe they mean well, and be understanding of the fact that a lot of people don't know much about the climate. Talk in general terms, e.g. "most people don't know how much flying affects the climate, but the fact is that...", or "I was surprised to hear that..."

If you say, "I understand why you think that/I used to think that too/it's very common to think that," people will realise you're not out to get them. But don't be afraid to give the stark facts. Understanding why people fly is not the same as approving of flying.

Be clear

Say what you mean; explain why this is important. If you help people to really understand why this is so important, they won't just want to change their own behaviour, they'll want to get more people on board too.

Talk to lots of people

It's often easier to speak to people you don't know than to speak to friends.

How can we find the courage to talk about the climate?

It can be difficult to talk about the climate in social situations, and a lot of people avoid it for fear of making people feel awkward. It helps to give yourself a resolution: "I've promised myself I am going to talk to people about the climate." You can even say this to people, as an opener to the conversation. Talking about the climate can be hard at first, but once you start the conversation it can also be a huge relief. The more you talk, the easier it becomes.

It's important to remember that not everyone has the climate as their highest priority. Once upon a time, all of us were unaware of the damage flying does. Sometimes it's better to plant the seed than try to change people's attitude from zero to a hundred all at once.

What should we talk about?

The urgency of the situation

You don't necessarily want to frighten people, but neither should we sugarcoat the truth. Emissions have to decrease *now* in order for us to have a chance of succeeding. If we wait for ten more years it will be too late. The most pressing concern is for our children: not necessarily that they might die from the climate crisis (though that risk exists), but that they'll live knowing all is lost.

The impacts of the climate crisis on us

A lot of people haven't realised that they themselves will be affected by the climate crisis – they think it will affect others. For people to realise how serious this is, they need to have a connection to themselves. It's not always enough to talk about polar bears, coral reefs and people across the global south who are already bearing the brunt of climate change. The fact is, the climate crisis will affect people in the west, too. Unpredictable weather means crops will be harder to grow, which is a very real problem for people all over the world. All the people forced from their homes because of rising

temperatures will have to find refuge somewhere, and the risk of war and terrorism will increase as natural resources are depleted.

Change is possible

It's important to give hope. If we believe that we *can* solve the climate crisis, we will act in a way that will. It is still not too late to turn things around, though the window of opportunity is closing.

The positive aspects of stopping flying

When people choose to stop flying they usually describe it as a positive change, even if it felt like a sacrifice to start with. Instead of focussing on what you're missing, it's more about feeling good about the action you've taken. It feels worthwhile and it's a relief to do something practical that can make a difference. Many people have enjoyed their holidays much more since they stopped flying, and wouldn't start again even if there were a climate-friendly way to fly.

Travelling without flying is not only great for the climate, it's good for us as travellers as well. You can connect much more with the world when you travel overland. It's also not just about travel: it's far less stressful to appreciate where we are rather than feel the pressure to be jetting off all over the place all the time.

Responding to the most common counter-arguments

1. Flight emissions only contribute 2% to global warming

This figure is frequently quoted as a reason not to worry about flight emissions. Many industries take up a far higher proportion of global emissions. However, this isn't because emissions from flying are low, it's because very few people around the world fly. An estimated 80% of the global population has never been on a plane.

The 2% figure only takes carbon dioxide into account. Including high altitude effects and other greenhouse gases the figure rises to 5%. In the UK the figure is higher, around 7%.

On average, Brits emit 6 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent each year, yet if you fly a few times a year, you could emit that through flights alone. For example, a return flight within Europe will generate up to 1 tonne of CO₂, flying to New York generates nearly 2 tonnes, going to Bangkok is around 3 tonnes, and all the way to Australia/NZ will generate between 4 and 6 tonnes CO₂, per passenger.

Compare that the other things we do in our lives: for example, eating meat for a year generates around 2.65 tonnes CO₂e, heating your home is around 2.5 tonnes, and driving for a year generates around 2.6 tonnes.

The IPCC says we must halve our emissions by 2030, and has given a budget of 2.3 tonnes each, annually, by 2035. That's for everything we do in our lives, including eating, clothing, housing and travelling. So you can see there's very little room for flights in a sustainable future.

2. I hardly ever fly

How much is hardly ever? Some people will say it means flying once every five years, while others think it means a couple of times a year. The trouble is, most of us know someone who flies a lot more than we do. If your neighbour is on a plane every other week, you would see your own annual flight as a drop in the ocean. But even one flight a year is too much in relation to our carbon budget.

To count as a 'frequent flyer' (i.e. one of the 15% of Brits who take 70% of the flights), you need only take three flights a year.

3. Animal agriculture/clothing industry/having children is worse

This relates to point one: the picture is very different if we look at the individual impact rather than the global/industry impact. For example, while animal agriculture is responsible for 15% of global CO₂ emissions, and the clothing industry 8%, this is because everybody eats and clothes themselves, but not everybody flies.

Ryanair recently made it into the Top Ten list of highest emitters in the EU. If aviation were a country it would be seventh in the list of global emitters.

A Lund University study showed that having fewer children is the biggest impact you can have to reduce climate change emissions – around 58 tonnes per year. But choosing your family size is not the same as deciding not to fly on holiday.

By comparing the impact of going vegan to not flying, we are not saying don't be vegan. Ultimately, there are a huge number of things that we can and should be doing to reduce our emissions. We need to be doing them all, which includes flying less. In addition, there are campaigns that address all the above issues: clothing, animal agriculture, population. This campaign focuses on aviation as the quickest and easiest way to reduce your carbon footprint, without saying it's the only thing that matters.

4. China/USA is worse

We have to reduce all emissions across the board, not just the very worst. Even if we start with China and the US, their total emissions add up to less than half, so we wouldn't even get close to halving emissions.

It is certainly the case that China's emissions are high, and growing. But this is partly because they produce a huge amount of goods which are consumed by people in western countries. In addition, their population is much larger, so naturally their emissions seem high, even though per person they are lower than in Europe.

In addition, people in China are aspiring to our high-carbon western lifestyles, and eating more meat and flying more. So if we think people in China are flying too much, the best thing we can do is reduce the amount of flights here in the west, which is far more within our realm of influence. The more we fly, the more others will too.

5. It should be up to the politicians, not individuals

Saying it doesn't matter what individuals do is like saying there's no point in voting. One single vote doesn't make a difference, but together the votes are what decide the outcome.

Of course decisive political action is necessary if we are to save the climate. But those policies won't appear by themselves. All large-scale change processes throughout history like abolishing slavery and acknowledging women's rights have started from the bottom. We have known how serious the climate crisis is for a long time, yet politicians continue to make decisions which completely contradict the science. There are two things at play here: politicians will enact policies that they think people will want to vote

for. If we show this is what we want, politicians will implement it. Secondly, we have been waiting for political action for a long time, and we are still waiting. If we are serious about the climate crisis, we need to take action ourselves.

Individual action goes far beyond reducing your own emissions. It can lead to social change. Research from the UK shows that if you know someone who has stopped flying, you are more likely to reduce your own flights, or at least have a basic awareness of the climate impact of flights. The influence increases if a public figure takes action in this way. We all have our ripple effect; the advantage of the tendency of humans to copy each other is that once we start to adjust our behaviour, change can happen fast. The opposite is also true: if we keep flying, the people around us are more likely to do so too, which ultimately shows government and industry that things are fine the way they are.

The intense public debate in Sweden about flying has shown that individual action can make a difference. In 2019, there was a 9% drop in domestic flights and a 3% drop in international flights, and the International Air Transport Association described the 'flight shame movement' as the biggest threat to the airline industry in Europe (before Covid!).

Of course, not all of the responsibility should be placed on us as individuals. We need government to put policies in place to make low-carbon transport the obvious choice. But research shows that a 25% minority can change the majority. We have more power as consumers than we think.

6. Giving up flying is not enough

No, it's not. It will never be enough to eliminate one source of emissions if we're to succeed in saving the climate. Stopping flying is not the only thing we should do to avoid climate breakdown. But we definitely won't avoid climate breakdown if we keep flying.

7. Giving up flying is too much of a sacrifice

It can feel very hard to stop flying, but once you've stopped it doesn't feel difficult at all. If you stop thinking of flying as an option it doesn't feel like a big sacrifice to give it up.

Giving up flying is only a sacrifice because we have become so accustomed to being able to fly wherever we want whenever we want. The vast majority of people on the planet have never been on a plane and around half of Brits don't fly in any given year. It

is possible to change the way we think about travel, and rather than jetting off to a new place every few weeks we can explore closer to home, and make our annual summer holiday by train.

Ultimately, we must reduce our emissions, fast. If you understand the urgency of the climate crisis and how much difference you'll make by not flying, it no longer feels like a sacrifice. No one would hesitate to give up flying if their children's lives were at stake – the problem is that most people haven't realised that their own children will be affected by the climate crisis too unless there is radical change.

8. I do lots of other things for the climate

It's common to think that we can fly with a clear conscience because we are vegetarian, only buy organic, or cycle to work. While all these things are really important, all the carbon savings combined could be wiped out by a single flight.

Many of the things we do only have a marginal effect on the climate. For example, careful recycling can reduce your emissions by 0.2 tonnes carbon per year. This means that one return trip to Thailand (3 tonnes CO₂e, according to flightemissionmap.org) cancels out 15 years worth of recycling.

A good tip is to calculate your emissions. Most people haven't done this and it's a real eye-opener.

Another argument is that those of us who are already climate aware should do everything in our power to reduce our emissions – because if we don't, how can we expect everyone else to? Leading by example is really important here.

9. When I fly, I stay for longer

This argument comes from the idea that by flying longer distances and staying away for longer, you get more 'value' for your emissions. But a flight between Europe and New York emits the same amount of CO₂ no matter if you stay for two nights or two months.

On the other hand, if you stay for longer you are less likely to take other trips: one long trip to NY is certainly better than one short trip to NY and lots of other short trips around

Europe. But overall, it is better not to take the trip at all, or go somewhere that you can reach by train.

10. I offset my flights

One of the biggest problems with carbon offsetting is that it makes us believe our emissions can be neutralised, so we continue our polluting behaviour. We are already emitting far more carbon dioxide than the planet can cope with, without adding flights to the equation. Offsetting should be used to undo the damage that's already been done, rather than give us licence to continue flying.

Carbon dioxide can stay in the atmosphere for hundreds of thousands of years. On the other hand, trees take a long time to grow – it might be a hundred years before a tree has reached maturity in order to compensate for your flight – and how many flights have you taken since then? What if the tree doesn't survive? We're trusting that offsets will let our emissions off the hook, but no amount of tree planting will stop carbon dioxide coming out of the back of an aircraft, straight into the upper atmosphere where it does the most damage.

According to the EU commission, as many as 85% of carbon offset projects didn't live up to their promises. Flying emits greenhouse gases here and now, while tree plantations will only absorb carbon dioxide in the decades to come. And emissions have to decrease now.

Climate scientist Kevin Anderson believes that carbon offsetting does more harm than good, precisely because it signals that emissions can be undone. He also points out that by continuing to fly, you contribute to aviation expansion, rather than investment in climate-friendly travel.

Airlines would have us believe that we can 'fly carbon neutral' if we just pay for an offset, which is a very attractive prospect for consumers. The bottom line is that, while offsetting might help with those unavoidable flights, it doesn't lead to behaviour change, and that's what we really need if we are to reduce our emissions.

11. But I love to travel!

Not flying doesn't mean not travelling, it just means doing it in a different way. Many people who have stopped flying appreciate their trips more than they did when they flew. It's about focussing on what you can do, rather than on what you can't do. We are so lucky with Europe. There is a lifetime's worth of travel and exploration right here, with as much variety as we would want: mountains, snow, coastlines, cities, beaches, sunshine and culture. Depending on where you go, it's all accessible overland in a day or two – and that just adds to the adventure.

Travelling is about mindset more than about where you go. Staycations can be just as rewarding as far-flung travels, and are much lower carbon as well as avoiding the horrible airport lounge.

And ultimately, continuing to fly on holiday when people are dying from the climate crisis just isn't appropriate.

12. I have family abroad

Of course people should be free to visit their family, although consider that your family will also be affected by the climate crisis if we don't do everything we can to reduce emissions right away. From a climate point of view, it doesn't make any difference what the reasons are for your emissions.

While we are not saying we should go back to the days when you got on a boat to Australia and never saw your family again, we do have to acknowledge that if we live across oceans from our family it will be difficult to see them on a regular basis. If your family live within Europe could you travel overland, and if they live across an ocean could you visit less often?

13. Flying increases our understanding of the world around us

Flying has given us a lot of good things, including a greater understanding of the world around us. Now we need to use that understanding to realise that our lifestyle is destroying the survival of everyone around the world. If we want to live in a peaceful world it is of the utmost importance that we slow climate change down now. If emissions aren't reduced now, and we miss the 1.5 degree target, the risk of more conflicts in the world will increase dramatically.

Although a lot of air travel has been and is important in helping people to meet, not all travel leads to increased understanding. In many cases, the opposite is probably true.

Going on a package holiday to a tourist destination to spend time with friends and family doesn't really contribute to increased understanding of other cultures. In fact, it may give a false idea of what the country looks like beyond the luxury of the resort.

Overland travel can be a much better way of increasing our understanding of the world around us, as we see more, meet more people, and learn how everything connects.

14. We need to keep flying because so many people depend on tourism for their livelihood

It is true that the era of cheap flights means that many communities now depend on our tourism rather than on their traditional livelihoods. If we choose to stop flying, those traditional industries are likely to return. How much do people continue to depend on tourism simply because we continue to go there?

Even if some people are dependent on tourism in the short term, a lot of tourist destinations are threatened by climate change and may not even be inhabitable in the future. Flying to support the tourism industry is ultimately going to lead to the end of the tourism industry.

15. Technology is going to solve this

A lot of people hope that we'll be able to reduce the emissions from air travel using biofuels or technological solutions. But even if we do manage to find a climate-friendly way to fly in the future, that won't solve the problem of the current emissions. In the short term, there are no technological solutions that can reduce emissions from air travel enough. Recent emissions savings from green measures and efficiency have been cancelled out by the increase in air travel.

'Green' fixes are not without their environmental impact. Biofuels are a leading driver of deforestation, synthetic fuels use fossil fuels in their production, and electric planes increase the demand for energy (which is not necessarily green energy) as well as using rare earth metals in the production of batteries. Electric planes will never be a solution for long-haul travel because of battery range and weight.

In general, if we are to solve the problem of emissions within the next ten years, the technological fixes need to be in production now, which they aren't.

Some people claim that we need to fly more to speed up the development of new green technology, but if anything the opposite is true. If there is no demand for fossil-fuelled air

travel, airlines will have to invest more resources in developing more sustainable alternatives.

16. The flight will leave anyway

Supply depends on demand. The reason that the number of departures has increased is that there has been demand for more flights. Now that demand is decreasing, fewer planes will be departing, although in the short term this may mean half-full planes taking off.

17. I don't have time to take the train

A lot of people say that they have to fly for work because they don't have time to take the train. Although the actual trip often takes longer by train, that doesn't necessarily mean that you lose time. Air travel also includes quite a lot of time to travel to and from the airport as well as checking in, checking out, etc. On the train you can use that time to work or rest instead.

A lot of people don't feel they have time to travel by train on holiday either, because the actual journey takes longer. But when you go by train, the journey becomes part of the experience. It can certainly be stressful to travel overseas if you only have one week off. But what would you have done if there weren't any aeroplanes? Perhaps you would have gone on holiday closer to home. Or travelled less frequently, but taken a longer break when you did go on holiday.

18. Flying is so cheap

Yes, flying is cheap. However, we're going to pay dearly for the consequences of that. The reason flying is so cheap is that in places like the EU there are no taxes on aviation fuels. Airlines in the EU don't have to pay VAT for international flights either. This means it's not a level playing field and other modes of transport can't compete. What we need is for aviation to be taxed fairly in line with everything else, which would give rail travel a competitive advantage.

In addition, flying only seems cheap when we compare like-for-like. An air ticket to Dublin might be advertised as £10, but when you add airport transfers and baggage costs it brings the price up. A rail and sail ticket to Dublin costs £50, but there are no

hidden extras, and instead of paying for time spent in an airport and aeroplane, you are paying for the view out of the train window, a few hours of working/relaxing time, plenty of leg room, and an exciting ferry trip across the Irish Sea where you might see dolphins or orcas. Overland travel gives you so much more of an experience, which is worth the extra cost.

19. It's unfair that people who haven't flown before shouldn't be allowed to

This is a common question: Do people who are adults now really have the right to tell young people that they shouldn't see the world? And can we tell people in growing economies that they shouldn't travel the world, now that they can finally afford to?

The point is, when aviation first entered the world, we didn't realise the damage it did. Now we know the damage it would be irresponsible of us to continue. The unfair part is not about people being unable to access air travel, it's that those who currently do not fly are the ones already being affected by the climate crisis – in part made worse by the flights we take.