PART 2 RECAP

In this section, we examined four psychological processes that govern reactions to and engagement with climate change information. Social identity interacts with cognitive processes like motivated reasoning and identity protective cognition, leading people to draw conclusions that support their identity and to avoid those that threaten that identity. Psychological distance is an active topic of investigation in climate change communication and psychology research. However, because researchers have found mixed results, we suggest being on the lookout for new research, considering factors such as place attachment that may interact with messages emphasizing local and global distance, and paying close attention to what resonates with your particular audience. Terror management theory suggests that we deal with our awareness of our own demise by denying it or by seeking to bolster our self-esteem through adherence to cultural values and symbols, which may not help address climate change. Cognitive dissonance theory offers a perspective on the psychological gymnastics people do to deal with inconsistencies in their knowledge about climate change and their behavior.

Tips for Educators

1. Before developing a new climate change program, do the legwork to understand your potential audiences’ attitudes toward climate change and the relevant social identities that may come into play when you discuss climate change. The National Audubon Society’s Tools of
Engagement: A Toolkit for Engaging People in Conservation\(^1\) and the North American Association for Environmental Education’s Guidelines for Excellence: Nonformal EE Programs\(^2\) are open-access resources that provide information on how to conduct audience assessments.

2. Whether messages about local impacts or about distant impacts will be more effective in achieving your climate change education outcomes varies. Choose message types that seem to resonate with your particular audience.

3. Use human stories to build compassion by asking audiences to put themselves in the shoes of people experiencing climate change impacts.

4. To avoid terror management responses, keep your messages hopeful and solutions-based.

5. Giving examples of easily adopted actions that audiences can participate in may help reduce cognitive dissonance.