

Social Environmental Psychology



By Beau Gray

Ever wanted to make a positive impact on the way your friends think about sustainable behaviors? Read these tips to learn how you can increase your friends' sustainable behaviors – *without* lecturing them on the importance of sustainability.

Conformity

(if you do it, your friends will copy you)

A basic principle of social psychology is that we copy others whether we know it or not, and whether or not we intend to. This behavior is a product of human evolution; if an individual was different enough to be rejected from a group, it would die, leaving those who are more prone to conformity alive to reproduce. In addition to this, we naturally tend to become more comfortable with new ideas as more people adopt them, and as these ideas become the norm. If you want to make environmental change in the long run, you must start by

acting as though your sustainable actions are the norm. People might think you are different at first, but as you continue your actions, your friends and neighbors will eventually become comfortable with them. In this way, whole communities can mobilize toward a more sustainable lifestyle.



Social Proof

(what you provide through your behavior)

Most people need *social proof* (evidence that a certain behavior is the norm) in order to feel good about being sustainable. This means that, with each new sustainable action that you adopt into your lifestyle, you are creating social proof for others that sustainable behavior is normal. **Using social proof, people imitate the behavior of others constantly; we tend to laugh when others laugh, put money in a tip jar when we see that others before us have done so, and we buy products that are labeled as “most popular.”**

In the same way, when you incorporate sustainable actions into your everyday life

such as **carpooling or biking to work, reusing products rather than buying new ones, and recycling your recyclables**, your friends see that these actions are normal. They will then be more likely to incorporate these actions into their own lives, and they'll be increasing the amount of social proof that sustainable behavior is normal for the rest of society.

This goes to show that an individual's actions *can* make a difference. If we make the effort to add sustainable behaviors into our lives, *others will follow.*



Source: Manning, C. Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, (2009). *The psychology of sustainable behavior: tips for empowering people to take environmentally positive action* (p-ee1-01). St. Paul, MN: