

# **WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT AVIATION: A GUIDE TO HAVING CLIMATE CONVERSATIONS**



**MAJA ROSÉN**

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## Preface

Why do most people in countries like Sweden continue to fly on holiday even though we're in the middle of an urgent climate crisis? I've thought about that question for a long time, but hardly ever found the courage to ask it. Since I decided to stop flying ten years ago, I haven't quite known how to respond to people who tell me about their air travel. Usually I haven't said anything at all, because I haven't wanted to be a spoilsport, but afterwards I've regretted it. I've often lain awake wondering how it's possible to be more afraid of social awkwardness than of climate collapse.

Last year I felt that enough was enough and decided that my New Year's resolution that year was going to be to stop worrying about bringing people down and to start asking questions about the climate when people told me about their air travel. That turned out to be the best New Year's resolution I ever made (and probably the only one I've actually kept). I soon realised that you can actually talk about the climate. Because of that realisation, and because public debate about flying was finally taking off, my neighbour Lotta Hammar and I decided to start a campaign to get 100 000 Swedes to have a flight-free year. To start with, the idea was to work on the campaign in our spare time, but for the past year I've been running the campaign and the organisation We Stay on the Ground full time. The campaign has received a lot of attention both in Sweden and internationally. This has meant that Flight Free 2020 campaigns have started in about 10 countries worldwide so far. You can find more information about our work at [www.westayontheground.org](http://www.westayontheground.org).

Working on this campaign has taught me several important things. I've realised that most people haven't realised how urgent the climate crisis is, or how much flying affects the climate. But the most important thing I've learned is that you can affect people, and that a lot of people are prepared to change their lifestyle and be active in the climate struggle once they realise how serious the climate crisis is and how important their actions are. This means there are billions of potential climate heroes out there just waiting to get started. But it's urgent! We don't have time to wait for people to realise these things in their own time. I hope this guide will inspire more people to find the courage to talk about the climate crisis.

I'd like to say a big thank you to everyone who has joined the campaign Flight Free 2020 and an even bigger thank you to those of you who are raising awareness about the campaign, both in Sweden and other countries.

I would also like to thank Martin Hultman, associate professor in science-, technology- and environmental studies at Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden. Thank you for making it possible to translate this guide into English, for all your encouragement and for leading the way as a scientist by not flying.

Maja Rosén

[maja@westayontheground.org](mailto:maja@westayontheground.org)

*Translated from Swedish by Abigail Sykes*

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## **Introduction**

This guide is based on my own experiences of talking about flying and the climate. I've learned that the most important thing isn't *what* you say, but *how* you say it. Of course having the right arguments is important, but if you use them in the wrong way, people won't take what you have to say on board. The guide starts by answering the question I've asked myself so many times, that is, why do most people in countries like Sweden continue to fly on holiday even though we're in the middle of an urgent climate crisis. In the following sections I discuss why, when and how you can talk about the climate and what you can talk about. I end with a section in which I answer the most common counter-arguments. Several examples are from Sweden, but I hope the guide will be useful even for all those of you who don't live in Sweden.

The main focus of this guide is face-to-face conversations, but of course the advice can also be used on social media. Social media are an effective way to spread information, but I think it's very important to talk about the climate "in real life" as well. Partly because you reach people you otherwise wouldn't, and partly because I think a personal conversation has more of an effect.

This guide is intended to be a living document. Please get in touch if you have any comments and suggestions to improve it, or if you have any really good arguments you think should be included.

## **Why do most people in countries like Sweden continue to fly on holiday even though we're in the middle of an urgent climate crisis?**

It used to make me very uncomfortable when people told me about their air travel. To me it sounded as though they were saying "now we're going to reduce the chances of survival for your children". Now I've realised they were just excited about their holiday. In the past year I've talked to lots of people about flying and the climate and one of the most important things I've learned is that a lot of people don't know how serious the

climate crisis is. Even if most people are aware that it exists, few have realised how urgent the situation is and what it'll take to solve it. Most people don't know how much flying affects the climate, or how important their own actions are.

The psychologist Per Espen Stoknes has identified five barriers that stop us taking in the full extent of the climate threat. He calls them the five D's, standing for *Distance*, *Doom*, *Dissonance*, *Denial* and *iDentity*. You might want to watch his [Ted talk](#)<sup>1</sup> before you keep reading.

When we hand out flyers and talk to people about the [Flight Free 2020](#) campaign we usually start by asking if they are worried about the climate. Most of them do say yes, but if we ask them what they're worried about it becomes clear that a lot of people still think the climate crisis is something that'll affect someone else, somewhere else, far off in a distant future. Stoknes describes this as feeling *Distant* from the climate crisis, not just in space and time but also socially. You also feel distant from responsibility, that you can't make a difference and that what you do doesn't matter. This makes the climate crisis so abstract that it's hard to absorb. If it were possible to say that your personal emissions would lead to the death of a specific person, no one would choose to fly. However, our joint emissions will lead to the deaths of a large number of people, it's just that we can't say exactly whose emissions will affect which person.

In the media, the climate crisis is often described from the point of view of *Doom*. When we repeatedly read catastrophic reports about how urgent the situation is, while politicians and people around us don't act as though we're in a crisis, we become desensitised and don't listen to facts. We humans are very strongly influenced by the people around us. As long as "everyone else" keeps flying we think it can't be a problem. We aren't very good at dealing with mixed messages, so when articles about the climate crisis are interspersed with articles about far-off destinations and advertisements for flying, it's no wonder that we focus on the message we "want" to believe.

We humans are also creatures of habit, and for many of us flying has become something we take for granted. When our actions conflict with facts, we experience so-called "cognitive *Dissonance*", which leads to internal discomfort. To rid ourselves of this discomfort we defend our air travel, for example by focussing on someone or something

else being worse. A lot of people know someone who flies much more than they do, and then it's understandable that their own annual flight abroad feels like a drop in the ocean. It's also common to blame China or to believe that new technology will solve the problem. These kinds of defences allow us to continue with our actions, and so our actions govern our attitudes. This becomes very clear when I meet someone who doesn't fly. Even if they didn't know before how much flying affects the climate, they immediately accept the information without questioning it or pointing out something else as being worse. The more you enjoy flying and the more often you fly, the harder it is to accept facts about the effects of air travel on the climate.

Relatively few people are in *Denial* of climate science, even if those few draw a lot of attention to themselves. However, the vast majority of people deny how serious the climate crisis is and what we need to do to solve it. According to Stoknes, denial is when you are aware of something that makes you uncomfortable, but live and act as though you didn't have this awareness. He states that this is enforced by others and becomes a social convention not to act. When people talk about their air travel the usual response is a positive comment like "oh, how nice, you really deserve to get away!" I've often heard expressions like "we deserve some sun" and "we do the best we can" (even from people who are climate conscious). In social situations, these comments are often met with agreement, which enforces the feeling that it's okay to fly occasionally. So we help each other, consciously or unconsciously, to defend our air travel.

In many circles, people have assigned high status to flying – and still do. Being well-travelled is a sign of being successful. If you travel a lot and think of it as an important part of your *iDentity*, it's hard to accept that you have to stop. This means that information about the effect of air travel on the climate can feel like a personal attack, rather than a scientific fact. According to Stoknes, when there is a conflict between facts and values, our values win.

Further reading: The review [Motivating Climate Action: A Review of Per Espen Stoknes "What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming."](#) at Common dreams.<sup>2</sup>

## Why should you talk about the climate?

If we are to stand a chance to solve the climate crisis, more of us need to be active in the climate struggle. And to want to be a part of it, you have to understand how important it is. Because most people haven't yet realised how important it is, there are a lot of potential climate heroes out there. For many years I've tried to be as climate friendly as possible by limiting my own emissions. And yet, deep inside, I've felt that I could've done more, by influencing others. Now I wish I had found the courage to start earlier. Getting others to reduce their emissions has a much bigger effect on the climate than just changing your own lifestyle, especially if the people you talk to go on to influence others.

Last autumn the UN's climate panel IPCC released a new report, evaluating the consequences of 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius of global warming, respectively. Basically, the conclusion was that the risks increase substantially if the temperature rises by more than 1.5 degrees and that emissions therefore need to start to decrease immediately, and to be halved during the coming decade.<sup>3</sup> Johan Rockström, professor at Stockholm Resilience Centre and joint director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, wrote a [column](#)<sup>4</sup> (in Swedish) about the report when it was published, in which he called it "a final warning from science to humanity" and described it as possibly the most important scientific report ever. Staffan Laestadius, professor emeritus at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden, has written a summary<sup>5</sup> of the report in Swedish. He emphasises that if anything, the IPCC reports understate the situation and "should be read from the point of view that the situation is at least this serious, possibly even worse".

So, we should do everything we can to limit global warming as much as possible. It's also important to note that if we continue as we are doing now, we don't even have a hope of limiting the rise in temperature to 2 degrees, but are on our way towards 3 degrees or more of global warming which would have devastating consequences.<sup>3</sup> As I mentioned before, most people haven't realised that the situation is this urgent. And knowing about the climate crisis in theory isn't the same as in-depth insight. I've met a

lot of people who say that they've known about the climate crisis for a long time, but that it hasn't really sunk in until recently. When it has, there's no going back. Luckily more and more people are coming to this realisation. This year a lot of people have contacted me to say that they haven't just decided to stop flying, but that they now think of the climate in everything they do and also want to influence others (and have succeeded). So my philosophy is that there is a dormant climate hero inside most people, and that they just need help to get started. Don't assume that people don't care, assume that everyone would be prepared to be active in the climate struggle if they realised what's at stake.

## **How do you find the courage and energy to talk about the climate?**

It can feel very uncomfortable to talk about the climate in social situations. A lot of people avoid it for fear of making people feel awkward. I often used to keep quiet when people talked about their air travel, because I didn't want to be a killjoy. At the same time, every time I chose not to say anything, it "killed" my own joy. Last year I had had enough and I made a New Year's resolution to find the courage to be socially awkward. It was a very good way to start. If I hadn't promised myself I would talk about the climate I probably would've chickened out several times at the beginning. When I'm talking to people it also helps to be able to fall back on that resolution. Sometimes I start by saying "I've promised myself to talk about the climate, even if it feels very uncomfortable, and I don't want to upset anyone".

Although it was hard to talk about the climate at first, it has also been a huge relief. It feels so good to finally say what I think, and it usually leads to positive conversations. I try to think that it's not the end of the world if the conversation isn't a success, but that we are actually heading towards the end of humanity unless more of us wake up and realise how serious the climate crisis is. The more you talk, the easier it becomes. Today it's hard for me to imagine that it used to feel so difficult. I really hope this guide can help more people to start.

It's important to remember that it's in everyone's interest to know about this. If a hurricane was on its way, no one would hesitate to run around knocking on neighbours' doors to warn them, despite the risk of "spoiling the mood".

None of the people I've spoken to have said afterwards that they wish I hadn't said anything. In fact, they wish they'd had this realisation sooner. Those of us who've understood what's happening have a moral responsibility to pass that knowledge on. Climate change is so urgent that we don't have time for people to come to the realisation of how urgent the situation is in their own time. Those of us who have realised need to use our actions to show what's necessary, and we have to find the courage to talk about it. If we stay quiet, we are contributing to the collective denial of the climate crisis.

A lot of people feel very frustrated that not everyone is doing everything they can to save the climate. It's important to remember that you yourself haven't always known about the problem (or at least most of us haven't). I usually remind myself that at the beginning of the 2000s I thought it was great that it was so cheap to fly with Ryanair. At the time I was living in Oxford in England, and the cheap flights meant that I could go home and visit my family and friends every now and then, and that they could come and visit me. Although I worried a bit about the climate even then, and probably suspected that flying wasn't very good, like a lot of people I thought that it was okey to fly occasionally because I did other good things, like not owning a car and not eating meat. Flying didn't mean that I didn't care. If someone had explained to me then how important it is not to fly I probably would've decided to stop sooner. Even then a lot of other people had realised how serious the situation is. I've spoken to several people who stopped flying for climate reasons in the 1980s. For the same reason, others have never even started. I've also spoken to people who've only understood the effects of flying on the climate in the past year, who've stopped flying and are also trying to influence politicians and people around them. They're not selfish just because they haven't realised this earlier. For people who are aware of the climate crisis it can be hard to imagine how other people can avoid realising how urgent the situation is. But if no one you meet talks about the climate, and if you haven't realised how important it is, it's easy not to register the few news reports that actually describe how serious the situation is. Remember that your feeds on social media are very much determined by your

interests and those of your friends. Some people never see any climate-related posts in their feeds, but are fed instead with pictures from their friends' air travel.

The vast majority of people mean well. In other emergencies people usually cooperate, help and support each other. So the problem isn't that people are selfish and don't care. Our brains just aren't built to deal with threats that aren't perceived as being urgent. I'm convinced that most people would be prepared to change their lifestyle if they realised how urgent the situation actually is. Of course some people are very hard to influence. For example there's no point in trying to convert active climate deniers. On social media you can easily get the impression that there are a lot of them, but a study of 21 000 people in 26 countries has shown that only four percent are climate deniers<sup>6</sup>, and probably even fewer in countries like Sweden. The reason there seem to be more is that they are vocal and overrepresented in comments fields. My best advice if you run into one is just not to waste time and energy discussing with them. Use your time and energy on everyone you can influence instead. On social media it can be worth responding to their arguments if you think that they risk convincing other readers, but bear in mind that this will give their comments higher priority which will mean that they reach more people. In these cases my advice is to respond objectively to their opening arguments to show that they aren't true, but to avoid getting into long discussions.

Try not to lose heart if you don't get people on board straight away. You've planted a seed, and that'll make them more receptive next time someone talks to them about the climate. I suggest you talk to lots of different people. Without a doubt that'll lead to a positive experience that'll give you the energy and courage to continue. If you can get a single person to think in a different way it's a huge achievement, because this person will definitely influence someone, who in turn will influence someone else.

My very best trick to remain motivated to talk about the climate is to find like-minded friends. I used to feel utterly alone in thinking about the climate, as I didn't know many people who did. But we're not alone. There are lots of people all around the world who want to save the climate. Spend time with other people who think the way you do. That makes things so much easier and gives you lots of energy. Knowing that other people think like you really helps you to stand up for yourself. If you can't find friends like that,

there are plenty of different climate organisations, like We stay on the ground. There are also lots of different climate-related groups on Facebook you can join.

”There are things you have to do, even if you don’t have the courage, because if you don’t you are not a human being, you’re nothing but a little louse.” – Jonathan in ”The Brothers Lionheart” by Astrid Lindgren

## **When do you talk about the climate?**

I think the best way to get people on board is to start talking about the climate in neutral situations, rather than immediately after someone has said something about flying, for example. A good way to start the conversation is to ask if the person you’re talking to is worried about the climate. Then you can adjust the conversation depending on what the person in question says. On the other hand, it’s also important to speak up when air travel is being discussed. In those situations, I think it works well to start by saying that you don’t want to put a dampener on the conversation or to blame anyone. I usually start by saying something like ”now I feel really uncomfortable because I don’t want to spoil the mood, but I am really worried about the climate and I’ve promised myself to talk to people about it”. I think it’s good to say that you talk about the climate with everyone because then people don’t think of it as a personal attack.

Talking about the campaign Flight Free 2020 is a good way to mention the climate without being a party-pooper. This places the focus on how much good you can do by not flying, rather than on how much damage you do by continuing. Tell people that you’re participating and that you’re trying to get more people involved to reach the target of 100 000 participants. Because it’s clear that the campaign is aimed at everyone, it isn’t thought of as a personal attack either. You can find more information about Flight Free 2020 at [westayontheground.org](http://westayontheground.org).

Another tip is to invite friends to dinner and explain beforehand that you’re going to talk about the climate. Then you don’t have to feel like a party-pooper and anyone that doesn’t want to talk about the climate can choose to say no to the invitation. For example, my neighbours have invented the concept ”climate soup” which means that

they invite neighbours and friends over for soup and I get to come and talk about Flight Free 2020.

## **How do you talk about the climate?**

“You cannot teach a man anything. You can only help him discover it within himself.” – Galileo Galilei

*How* you talk about the climate is more important than *what* you actually say. It’s not enough to recite lots of facts or to tell people what they should do and think. The aim is to help the people you’re talking to gain true insight and to awaken their involvement, because then they’ll want to pass on what you’re saying. Of course how you achieve this varies widely. Here are my best tips on how to have a good conversation without making people feel uncomfortable.

### **Be nice**

The most important thing first – be nice. I’ve talked to a lot of people who find it hard to talk about the climate without getting upset. Of course it’s frustrating for people who have realised what the climate crisis is about when others don’t immediately take on board what they’re saying. When I had just stopped flying I was angry with my friends for not doing the same – but that didn’t stop them from flying. Getting upset tends to have the opposite effect. Since I realised that, talking about the climate has been much more fun. Getting angry or arguing with people takes a lot of energy and it’s better to use that energy to really influence people. If you’re nice the person you’re talking to will respect you and be much more open to what you have to say. Think of the person you’re talking to as your customer, and your job as selling your idea (saving the climate) the best way you can. No one buys anything from a salesperson who tries to force them. If we want to motivate more people to get involved in climate issues it’s very important that people like us who are active in the climate struggle are seen to be friendly and inclusive. We want to get people to join us!

## **Ask questions – and listen to the answers!**

I usually start by asking people if they're worried about the climate. Then I ask different follow-up questions depending on what they answer. Try to listen carefully to what the person is saying and to get a sense of this particular person's thoughts about the climate. People have very different ideas of what the climate crisis involves on a practical level. Sometimes people say that they aren't worried and then I ask why not. Several times people have answered "I don't know very much about the climate" and then we've had a good conversation. So don't assume that people don't care if they say no to that question.

Use your body language to show that you're interested in what the person you're talking to has to say and let them finish. People like to be listened to. Asking questions is important so that you can understand that particular person's way of thinking, and adjust the conversation accordingly. Even if you think the person you're talking to says something that is completely wrong, try to see it from their point of view. Remember that not everyone has the same background information as you. For instance, if someone says that there's no hurry to save the climate, don't immediately say that they're wrong. Instead, ask why the person thinks that, and ask if they know that the UN's climate panel published a new report last October. If not, you can tell them what it says, which is that we have to reduce global emissions by half within the next ten years.<sup>3</sup> It's good to ask questions like "what do you think about this...?" and "have you heard of...?".

Try to find personal connections. For example, if someone thinks that there are more important issues to focus on, you can try to find a link to that issue. If someone thinks that justice is important, you can talk about the fact that the people who are already victims of the climate crisis are poor people who haven't contributed to it. For people who love to travel, you can talk about how we have to do everything we can to save the climate now if we want to be able to travel and discover the world in the future.

## **Be understanding**

I start by assuming that everyone would care if they realised how serious the situation is. 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 very much about the climate. No one likes to feel stupid or to be accused of being selfish. So it's good to talk in general terms. Talk about what people think in general and what you used to think. For example, you can say "most people don't know how much flying affects the climate, but the fact is that...", or "I was surprised to hear that...".

A good way to respond to counter-arguments is to start by saying that "I understand your way of thinking/I used to think that too/it's very common to think that" and then explain the facts. It's disarming and makes people realise that you're not "out to get them" and also helps them relate to you.

Of course, being understanding of the fact that people don't know everything and that they want to keep flying isn't the same as "approving of" continuing to fly. A lot of people say that they're not prepared to give up flying and then you can answer "I understand you feel that way, but...". You can also say that it's common to feel that you're not prepared to give up air travel if you haven't thought very much about it before and if everyone around you is still flying. I often say that I know a lot of people who have felt like that before but that have changed their minds, and that I think the person I'm talking to will too. That way you show that you think the person you're talking to means well, and you increase the chances that they will keep thinking about it. In this [radio interview](#) I used those strategies when the host said he would never give up his air travel.<sup>7</sup>

## **Be clear**

I don't think it's a good idea to use jibes and insinuations. Say what you mean instead. Explain why this is so important. A lot of people don't know very much about the climate crisis, which increases the risk of misunderstandings. It's a bit like teaching maths to a child. Unless you make sure they understand the basics they'll never progress. It's also hard to motivate someone who doesn't see the point of what they're

doing. Once you've "cracked the code" it's much more fun to keep going. 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.

## **Be patient**

Speaking of maths, try to be patient even if people don't immediately buy into what you're saying. If someone doesn't understand a maths problem, getting annoyed with them won't help. It's better to try a new strategy and explain in a different way. It can also be a good idea to take a break to give the information a chance to sink in and be processed for a while.

It can be difficult to be patient when the situation is so urgent, but it's hard to change people's attitude from zero to a hundred all at once. If you don't think you're going to get the person you're talking to on board completely, it's better to think that you're sowing a seed and then return to the subject another time. It's more important to try to make sure that the person you're talking to remembers the conversation as being positive. For example, you could end the conversation by saying "I understand that it feels difficult if you haven't thought this way before, feel free to get in touch if you have any questions." Several times, people who have started by flatly refusing to join the campaign have told me after a while that they've changed their minds. One of them is the Swedish journalist Fredrik Strage who wrote a [column](#) about it (in Swedish).<sup>8</sup>

## **Talk to a lot of people**

Like anything else, you get better at talking about the climate the more you practice. If you talk to the same people around you over and over again and they still don't understand it's easy to lose hope and give up. By talking to a lot of people you'll definitely have a successful conversation sooner or later, and that'll give you the hope and energy to keep going. So try to talk to colleagues, acquaintances and other people beyond your closest circle as well. Personally, I find it easier to talk to strangers than to people I'm close to. If you carry leaflets about Flight Free 2020 it isn't strange to go up

to people and talk to them, because they can see that you represent an organisation. I've had lots of interesting conversations this year with people I don't know.

## **Do your homework**

You certainly don't have to be a climate expert to talk about the climate, but you'll be more convincing if you can answer people's questions and counter-arguments with credibility. But you don't have to know everything. The contents of this guide will be perfectly adequate for discussing flying and the climate with most people.

## **What do you talk about?**

To motivate people to change their lifestyle they need to understand why it's so important. So it's important to convey how serious the climate crisis is and how important everyone's actions are. It's also important to convey that change is happening, and that it's both necessary and possible. It's usually effective to see what the person you're talking to says and start from there. The next section contains answers to the most common counter-arguments. Below are some suggestions of what you can discuss.

### **The urgency of the climate crisis**

Some say you shouldn't frighten people because you risk paralysing them, but I think it's more risky to sugarcoat the truth. Then people get the idea that you can save the climate a little bit at a time, at your own pace. And the people that aren't scared enough act as though they were paralysed anyway.

One way to start a conversation can be to ask people if they're worried about the climate. Don't settle for a yes or a no, but keep asking. If they say no, ask them why they're not worried. If they say yes, ask them what worries them. A lot of people haven't realised that they themselves will be affected. They think they should care about the climate crisis because it will affect others. For people to wake up, most people need to make a connection to themselves. It's not enough to talk about how the coral reefs are going to

die, that the polar bears are starving and that people are already dying because of the climate crisis.

A big problem is that the climate crisis is still perceived as being very abstract. A lot of people haven't thought about the practical consequences of a warmer climate. For example, several of the people I've spoken to hadn't realised that all the people who are forced from their homes will have to seek refuge somewhere, and that the risk of war and terrorism will increase as natural resources are depleted.

"If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." – Thomas and Dorothy Williams

I often talk about how the IPCC report that was published in the autumn of 2018 shows how important it is that the temperature doesn't increase by more than 1.5 degrees, and that emissions have to decrease *now* for us to have a chance of succeeding. If we want to change things, it's now or never. If nothing has changed in ten years' time it'll probably be too late. To illustrate what that means I often talk about how worried I am about my own children. What worries me the most isn't that they might die because of the climate crisis (although that risk does exist). I think the worst thing is the risk that they'll have to live knowing that all is lost. For now there's hope, but unless there's radical change in the next ten years we may pass the point of no return. How will they find meaning and joy in their lives if there's no hope?

## **Change is possible – and it's happening**

So it's important to convey how serious the situation is, but also that change is possible and that it's actually already happening. According to sustainability expert Solitaire Townsend, if we believe we can solve the climate crisis, we act in a way that does. In a [lecture](#)<sup>6</sup> she says that people in crises often come to a crossroads. That happens when a problem has become so big that it's no longer possible to ignore. At this crossroads we choose between three different paths. The first is to continue as we have before, which leads to disaster. The second is to make some changes, but not the right ones (so-called "maladaptation"), which also leads to disaster. The third path is to deal with the problems that have caused the crisis, which means that we emerge stronger than before. The most

important factor in deciding which path we choose is which one we believe will happen. If we expect disaster, our actions and choices will lead us there. If we believe in a positive outcome, we act in a way that leads to one. Per Espen Stoknes emphasises the importance of spreading positive social norms and talks about how infectious sustainable behaviour is. He says that we need new stories about where we're headed.<sup>1</sup>

“The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.” – Albert Einstein

So it's not a good idea to be defeatist and say that "people are selfish and they don't care about the climate". That just makes people feel that there's no point in doing anything themselves. Instead, talk about others who have changed their lifestyle. Knowing that others believe that change is possible creates involvement and is infectious. And trying to do something yourself gives you a more positive view of the future. Everyone I've met who has chosen not to fly describes it as something positive, even those who felt it was a big sacrifice to begin with. Once you've made your mind up, you seem to change perspective. Instead of focussing on what you're missing, you start to focus on how much good you're doing. It feels worthwhile and it's a relief to do something practical that makes a real difference. Several people I've spoken to have said that they've enjoyed their holidays more since they stopped flying, and wouldn't start again even if a climate friendly alternative were to turn up here and now. At [vihallerospajorden.se](http://vihallerospajorden.se) we share stories and interviews with people who have joined the Flight Free campaign (in Swedish). At [flightfree.co.uk](http://flightfree.co.uk) you can find stories in English from people who have joined the Flight Free UK campaign and talk about their experiences of flight-free travel.

People are strongly affected by people we know or can relate to, so it's good to talk about someone you both know or a celebrity who has chosen not to fly. Of course it's good to talk about your reasons too, but make sure you don't make it sound as though you're "better" than the person you're talking to. It can be a good idea to say that you used to fly, just like the person you're talking to, and what made you change your mind.

## **The importance of your own actions**

It's also very important to emphasise how much difference individuals' actions make. Grassroots involvement is going to be crucial to get the political solutions we need in time. And nothing is more motivating than seeing other people actually doing something. Of course, individuals' emissions are important in themselves as well (read more about the importance of individuals under [point 4](#) in the section "[How do you respond to the most common counter-arguments?](#)").

I usually ask people if they're trying to do something about the climate crisis, and if so, what. Based on what they answer you can talk about the effect of what they're doing and whether it's enough. Ask the person you're talking to whether they know how big their own emissions are. The vast majority of people don't. Many think that they're pretty climate friendly. Several people I've spoken to have been a bit shocked when they've calculated their emissions on sites like [footprint.wwf.org.uk](http://footprint.wwf.org.uk) or [coolclimate.org/calculator](http://coolclimate.org/calculator). (Note that neither of these tools include the high altitude effects of flying. See [High altitude effects](#), and calculate high altitude effects at [flightemissionmap.org](http://flightemissionmap.org)).

You can talk about what you'd do if your own emissions were decisive. What would you do if you knew that if you personally didn't halve your emissions within ten years it would be too late? And if you knew that if you did, that would solve the crisis? It's a big problem that a lot of people think that "everyone else" is just going to carry on as usual. But that's just not true. If you start, others will follow. Now we all have the chance to decide whether we want to be part of the problem or part of the solution. Of course we can't know for certain whether it's going to be enough, but we do know that unless there's radical change soon, all will be lost. Shouldn't we give it our best shot?

You can also discuss which story you'd rather tell your children in the future. Do you want to say "I wasn't sure if my actions would save the climate, so I didn't bother trying"? Or do you want to say "whether or not we were going to succeed, I did everything I could to save your future"?

”Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

## **Help people see things from a different point of view**

For people who haven't thought very much about the climate crisis before it can be useful to try to see the issue from a different point of view. Talk about why most people continue to fly despite the climate crisis (see the section [”Why do most people in countries like Sweden continue to fly on holiday even though we're in the middle of an urgent climate crisis?”](#)). Again, it's good to talk about the question in general terms instead of why the person you're talking to keeps flying. The following section suggests different topics to discuss.

### **People do what everyone else does**

A good question to ask is ”How would you react if everyone you know suddenly said that they had decided to stop flying until the climate crisis is solved?”. I've used that question a lot to great effect. For example, once I had a long conversation with two men in their sixties who often flew on golfing trips. When I asked one of them what he would do if his friend had told him the same things about flying and the climate as I had just done, and said that he had decided to stop flying, he replied ”well, then I'd probably stop too”. This question makes a lot of people realise how much we're influenced by the people around us.

### **We have to do everything we can here and now**

A lot of people want to save the climate, but they think it's enough to do it ”a bit”. Perhaps you make some small lifestyle changes, but not enough to bring your emissions down to a sustainable level. One way to illustrate this is to discuss what you'd do if your own house was on fire. Would you phone the fire brigade and say that maybe their smallest fire engine would be enough? Would you stand with your arms crossed and let the fire run wild until the fire brigade arrived, because putting it out wasn't your responsibility?

When there's a fire it's important to start trying to put it out as soon as possible to stop it from escalating and the same is true of the climate crisis. It's important that we do everything we can here and now. Maybe the smaller fire engine will be enough to finish the job – if we roll out the big guns straight away?

### **Focus on what we have – but risk losing**

There are lots of things that people in countries like Sweden take for granted that most people in the world would do anything to have. For example, most people here are able to give our children enough to eat and a safe bed to sleep in at night. If we don't do everything we can to reduce emissions now, things like this will be far from guaranteed in the future. Then we'll wonder why we didn't do everything in our power to keep them.

### **What you would be prepared to sacrifice in a more tangible crisis**

Ask the person you're talking to what they would do if World War III broke out. Would they be prepared to stop flying then? In more tangible crises people are prepared to make very big sacrifices. During a war no-one would worry about missing a holiday, we would do everything we could to keep safe and bring about peace. The climate crisis is just as serious as a world war. The problem is that it's still seen as being so abstract that most people haven't realised what an emergency it is.

### **The climate won't be saved without some effort**

People are prepared to work hard for the things we want. For example, we spend a lot of time and energy to get an education and succeed in our careers. How much effort you are prepared to put into reaching a goal depends on how attractive that goal seems. Saving the climate is humanity's most important goal ever. Once you've realised that, you realise how unrealistic it is to think we'll be able to achieve this goal without any effort. It's like thinking you can win an Olympic gold medal without any training. I usually say that I understand that it can seem difficult to change your lifestyle, but that if we're going to save the climate we can't do what we want to do, but what we have to do. We just can't keep living as we have been doing. On the other hand, most people

don't find saving the climate painful once they've made up their minds. But even if it were a huge effort, we would still have to do it.

### **Focus on gains instead of losses**

Instead of talking about the risks we face if we don't do anything, you can turn it around and talk instead about how we can still prevent climate collapse. We have the chance to go down in history as the generation who saved the existence of humanity! That's an amazing opportunity that we can't pass up. If we think that it's possible to solve the climate crisis, our chances of actually succeeding increase enormously.<sup>6</sup> Speaking of Olympic gold medals – who stands the best chance of winning one? The person who visualises winning and trains hard, or the person who thinks it's impossible and stays at home on the couch?

“Believe you can and you're halfway there.” – Theodore Roosevelt

## **How do you respond to the most common counter-arguments?**

In this section, I give my answers to the most common counter-arguments I come across when I'm out talking about flying. Several of the responses are useful when you encounter other counter-arguments too so I recommend reading all the questions and answers. Have you come across other counter-arguments? Or do you have an answer you think should be included? Please get in touch. Before we get into the counter-arguments themselves I'd like to explain some of the terms used in the answers:

### **High altitude effects**

As well as emissions of carbon dioxide, flying has several other effects on the climate. These are known as high altitude effects and are caused by emissions of oxides of nitrogen, condensation trails and cirrus clouds. There is a lot of uncertainty about how big these effects are, but they are estimated to be about as big as the carbon dioxide emissions themselves. This guide includes high altitude effects in all calculations of the climate effects of air travel. Read more about high altitude effects in the article

[Measuring greenhouse gas emissions from international air travel of a country's residents methodological development and application for Sweden.](#)<sup>28</sup>

## **Carbon dioxide equivalents**

Different greenhouse gases are recalculated into carbon dioxide equivalents (CO<sub>2</sub>e) to make it possible to compare them with each other. Read more about this at [Eurostat's webpage](#).<sup>10</sup>

## **Consumption-based emissions**

There are different ways to calculate the emissions of a country or population. If you look at territorial emissions, that is, the emissions generated within a specific geographic area, countries like Sweden do pretty well. But if you look at consumption-based emissions instead, Sweden's emissions are much higher, because they also include the emissions Sweden's consumption causes overseas.<sup>11</sup> If you want to calculate the emissions you are responsible for as an individual, consumption-based emissions are the relevant measurement.

## **The most common counter-arguments**

1. [The emissions from flying are so low](#)
2. [I hardly ever fly](#)
3. [Someone/something else is worse](#)
4. [It doesn't matter what individuals do / Reducing emissions is the responsibility of politicians](#)
5. [Giving up flying isn't enough](#)
6. [Giving up flying is too much of a sacrifice](#)
7. [I'm incurably selfish](#)
8. [Giving up flying is too radical](#)
9. [I've heard experts say that it's possible to keep flying](#)
10. [I do so many other things for the climate](#)
11. [At least I don't fly domestically / When I fly, I stay away for a long time](#)
12. [I offset my flights](#)

13. [But I love to travel!](#)
14. [My mother-in-law is turning 70 / My children will be disappointed / All my friends are flying together](#)
15. [Some trips are necessary](#)
16. [Flying increases our understanding of the world around us](#)
17. [We need to keep flying because so many people depend on tourism for their livelihood](#)
18. [Technology is going to solve this / We need to fly more to speed up the development of new technology](#)
19. [The flights leave anyway](#)
20. [I don't have time to take the train](#)
21. [Flying is so cheap](#)
22. [Flying on holiday shouldn't be a matter of class](#)
23. [It's unfair that people who haven't flown before shouldn't be allowed to](#)
24. [Encouraging people to give up flying is shaming](#)
25. [Giving up flying is just a trend](#)
26. [It's too late anyway](#)

### **1. The emissions from flying are so low**

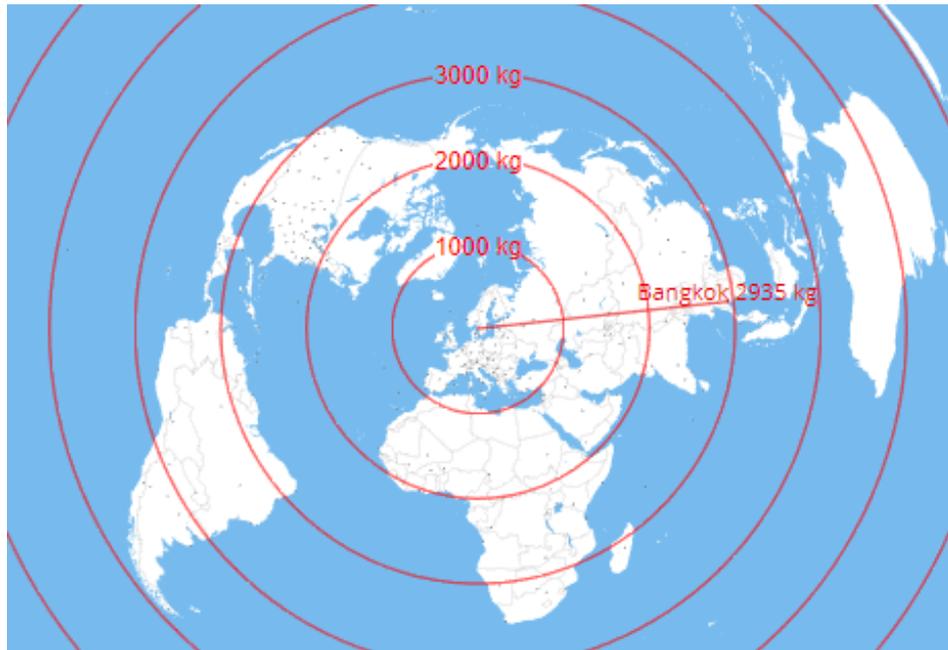
A lot of people believe that the emissions from flying are low. Perhaps they've heard that in countries like Sweden, flying only accounts for a few thousandths of global emissions of carbon dioxide or that flying accounts for 2 percent of global emissions. It's true that flying is only responsible for a small percentage of the total global emissions. However, that's not because the emissions from air travel are low, but because so few people in the world fly. An estimated 80 percent of the world's population have never set foot in an aeroplane.<sup>12</sup>

A lot of people have heard that flying only accounts for 2–3 percent of global emissions. However, that only takes carbon dioxide into account. If you also include [high altitude effects](#) up to 5 percent of the total global emissions of greenhouse gases come from aeroplanes.<sup>13</sup> For Swedes, for example, that figure is higher, about 10 percent. On average, Swedes emit 10 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents per person per year.<sup>13</sup> Of

this, flying accounts for an average of 1.1 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents. About one tonne of this comes from international travel (domestic flights account for 0.07 tonnes per person per year). That's the equivalent of one round trip between Stockholm and southern Spain.<sup>9</sup>

Even if 10 percent is a lot, the figures are somewhat misleading. Of course at the moment we are emitting far more carbon dioxide than the climate can handle. If we are to stand a chance of limiting the rise in temperature to 1.5 degrees we need to reduce our emissions to no more than one tonne per person per year.<sup>13</sup> From that point of view, the current air travel of an average Swede accounts for 100 percent of the emissions we shouldn't exceed. It doesn't leave any room for the things we have to do, like eating and having somewhere to live. And a lot of people fly much more than that. A study of 1 000 people in the Swedish county of Västra Götaland showed that the 20 percent who flew the most accounted for a massive 50 percent of the emissions from flying. The fifth who flew the least hadn't flown at all in the previous two years. The study only looked at private travel. If it had also included business travel the distribution would have been even more skewed, because the people that flew the most in their spare time also belonged to the socio-economic groups that fly the most on business.<sup>14</sup>

You can easily calculate the emissions from your own flights using the tool [flightemissionmap.org](http://flightemissionmap.org). For example, a return flight between Gothenburg and Bangkok emits about 3 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents.



According to the IPCC we should cut our emissions by at least half by 2030 to have a reasonable chance of meeting the 1.5 degree target.<sup>3</sup> If everyone in the world were to treat themselves to an annual flight to Thailand the total emissions (not just from flying) would increase instead, by almost 40 percent<sup>1\*</sup>.

Admittedly, this will never happen because so few people in the world can afford a trip like that, but it demonstrates how much effect per person flying has on the climate (as well as how extremely unfair the world is).

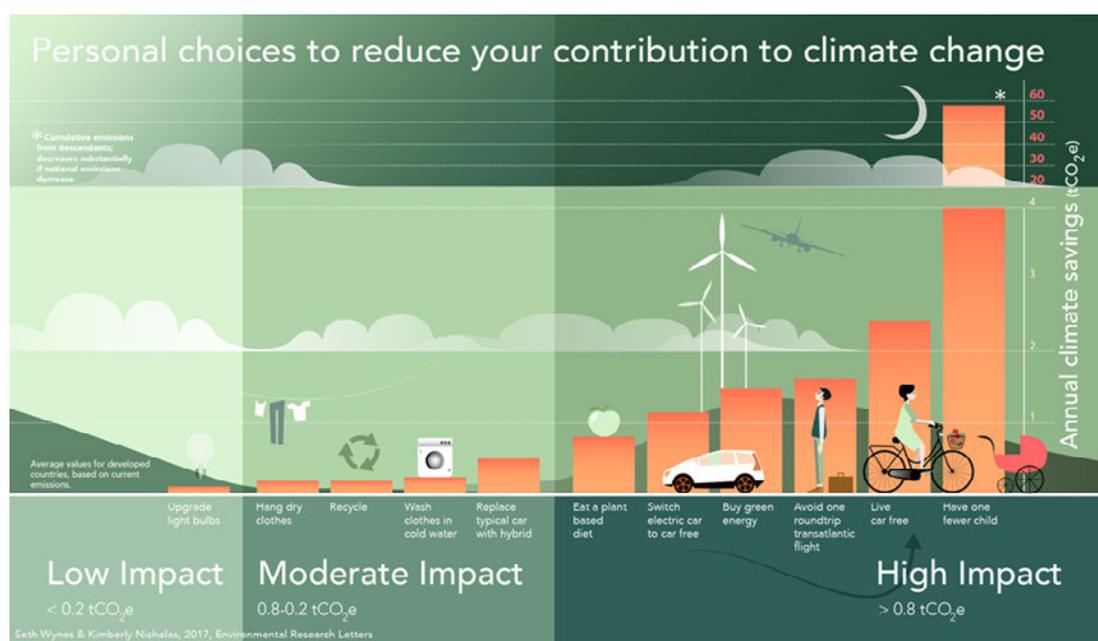
So choosing not to fly is one of the most important things you can do on an individual level for the climate. A study<sup>15</sup> from Lund University in Sweden which has received a lot of attention shows that the four most effective lifestyle choices to reduce your individual emissions are eating plant-based food, not flying, not having a car and having fewer children. The study shows that eating plant-based food can reduce your emissions by 0.8 tonnes per year. Not having a car saves on average 2.4 tonnes per year and giving up one transatlantic flight (London – New York) saves 1.6 tonnes of carbon dioxide

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<sup>1\*</sup> For the average citizen of the world, flying accounts for 0.2 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions per person per year.<sup>9</sup> A trip from Sweden to Thailand emits 3 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e (according to flightemissionmap.org). If everyone in the world were to fly the equivalent of the distance to Thailand once a year on average it would mean an increase of about 2.8 tonnes x 7.5 billion people = 21 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e. Considering that the total annual emissions currently stand at 53.5 billion tonnes<sup>27</sup>, that would mean an increase in emissions of 39.3%. Note that this calculation is approximate.

equivalents (1.9 tonnes according to [flightemissionmap.org](http://flightemissionmap.org)). The study also shows that every child you choose not to have saves the equivalent of 58.6 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents per year. This calculation is based on the emissions of your future descendants and current patterns of consumption. So if emission levels drop this figure can be substantially reduced. The researchers behind the study, Kimberly Nicholas and Seth Wynes, have also written a contribution to the scholarly symposium "Green New Deal: Pathways to a Low Carbon Economy" called [Flying Less Is Critical to a Safe Climate Future](#).

Of course, the biggest source of individual emissions varies from person to person. If you want an idea of the distribution of your own emissions, there are several tools, such as <https://footprint.wwf.org.uk> and <https://coolclimate.org/calculator>. (Note that neither of these tools include the high altitude effects of flying. See [High altitude effects](#), and calculate high altitude effects at [flightemissionmap.org](http://flightemissionmap.org)).



Data from Wynes, Seth, and Kimberly A Nicholas. 2017. "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions." *Environmental Research Letters* 12(7). DOI: 10.1088/1748-9326/aa7541. Image credit: Catrin Jakobsson.

## 2. I hardly ever fly

A lot of people think their air travel isn't a problem because they hardly ever fly. Then I usually ask how often "hardly ever" is. It's interesting how differently people interpret

that phrase. Some think that hardly ever flying means once every five years, while others think hardly ever flying is twice a year. A lot of people are surprised to hear that the average Swede only flies abroad once a year. And that that's five times more than the global average.<sup>9</sup> This is because we compare ourselves with people around us. Most people know someone who flies much more than they do. Maybe they have a neighbour who flies twenty times a year and then their own annual flight feels like a drop in the ocean. But the fact is that the average Swede's annual flight is only for the lucky few. According to estimations only 3 percent of the world's population fly abroad every year<sup>16</sup> and as many as 80 percent of the people in the world have never flown<sup>12</sup>. From that point of view everyone who has ever been on an aeroplane can think of themselves as being a frequent flier.

### **3. Someone/something else is worse**

One of the most common defenses of air travel is to say that someone or something else is worse. Some people think that we should deal with the steel industry/the clothing industry/coal power, while others say that it doesn't matter what we do in our country because China is so much worse. It is true that flying isn't the biggest source of emissions, but the fact is that Ryanair recently made it onto the top ten list of companies with the highest emissions in the EU, after nine coal-fired power plants<sup>17</sup>, and if air travel were a country it would have the seventh highest emissions<sup>18</sup>.

It's true that the emissions from the clothing industry are higher than those from air travel on a global scale (an estimated 8 percent of total emissions<sup>19</sup>). However, this is because the number of people who wear clothes is so much bigger than the number who fly. For an individual (who flies), flying is often the single biggest source of emissions (see [point 1](#)).

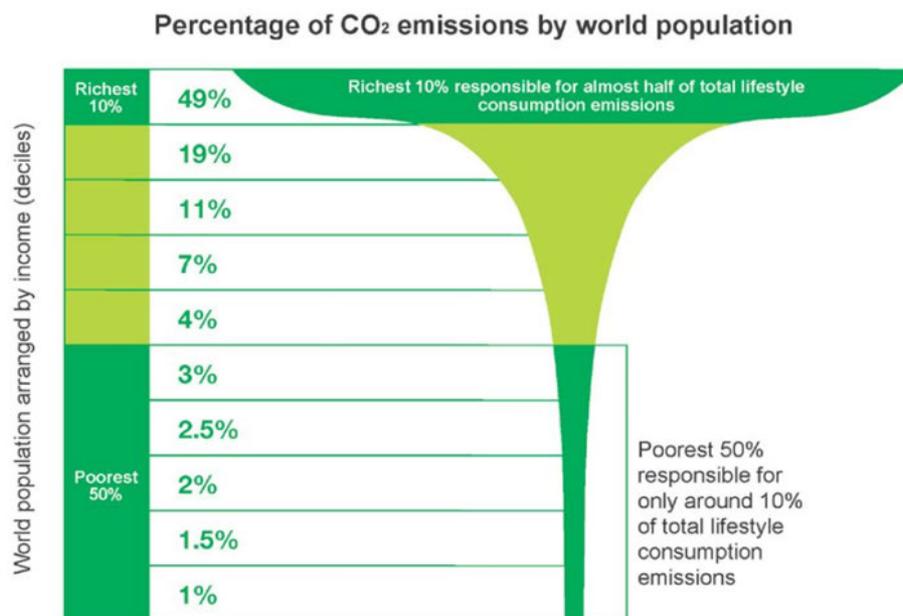
However, it isn't relevant which source of emissions is the worst. We have to reduce *all* emissions, we can't just focus on the very worst source. It wouldn't even be enough if we could eliminate the total emissions from the USA and China, because their combined emissions don't even amount to half the total emissions<sup>20</sup>, and global emissions need to be halved as soon as possible<sup>3</sup>.

Saying that China is the biggest problem is very, very common. It is certainly a big problem that China's emissions are huge and growing. However, the reason that China has the biggest emissions is partly that they produce an enormous amount of goods which are then consumed by people in other countries<sup>21</sup>, and partly because it has such a big population. If you look at individual emissions per person, the average citizen of China still emits less than the average Swede.<sup>20</sup> Why should Swedes be entitled to higher emissions just because there are so few of us?

The reason that people in countries like China, with a fast-growing economy, are now starting to fly more, eat more meat, etc, is also that people in the West have assigned high status to that lifestyle. Because people all over the world are influenced so much by each other it's even more important that we change unsustainable norms and assign high status to a climate-friendly lifestyle. If you think it's a problem that the Chinese are flying more and more, the best thing you can do if you live somewhere else is to work to reduce flying where you live – which is what we are most able to influence. The more we fly, the more the Chinese will too. And when more and more people are starting to fly and to increase emissions even more, it makes it even more important for those of us who have understood what is happening to reduce our emissions. It's hard to find statistics on how much people from different countries fly, so how much the average Chinese person flies is unclear. If you look at the number of passengers per capita who fly *from* different countries (so these numbers don't just include the people who live there) the figure is 0.3 in China and 1.2 in Sweden, which means that the number of international passengers from China is only a quarter of the number from Sweden.<sup>22</sup>

If you look at consumption-based emissions per person, China is far from being the worst country. The CO<sub>2</sub> map<sup>23</sup> at [globalcarbonatlas.org](http://globalcarbonatlas.org) shows the countries with the highest emissions (choose "consumption" under "type" and "tCO<sub>2</sub>/person" under "units"). There you can see that Luxembourg is the worst followed by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Brunei. Sweden is in 43<sup>rd</sup> place and China in 49<sup>th</sup>. But you can't really say that people from a particular country are the worst climate villains. The distribution of greenhouse gas emissions is extremely unequal, both within and between countries. The five countries with the highest emissions have something in common, which is that a lot of extremely wealthy people live there. The richest ten percent of the

world's population account for nearly half of global emissions, while the poorest half of the world's population only account for ten percent of the emissions.<sup>21</sup> The people who are already being affected the worst by climate change haven't contributed to it.



Source: Oxfam

So who are the richest ten percent of the world's population? Well, everyone with an average monthly income of 10 425 SEK or more<sup>24</sup> (around 1 000 USD or euros). That means that most of Sweden's population belongs to this group. If you earn 20 000 SEK or more per month (around 2 000 USD or 1 900 euros) after tax you are among the richest two percent in the world.<sup>24</sup>

On average, Swedes emit ten tonnes of greenhouse gases per year.<sup>13</sup> If seven and a half billion people emitted as much as that, the total annual emissions would be 75 billion tonnes, which would be an increase of almost 50 percent (the total emissions are 53.5 billion tonnes<sup>25</sup>). So if everyone in the world lived like the average Swede we wouldn't have a chance of saving the climate. The fact that there are people producing even higher emissions doesn't matter. What is relevant is what would happen if everyone lived like you. You can find that out by calculating your own emissions at for example <https://footprint.wwf.org.uk> or <https://coolclimate.org/calculator>. (Note that neither of

these tools include the high altitude effects of flying. See [High altitude effects](#), and calculate high altitude effects at [flightemissionmap.org](http://flightemissionmap.org)).

Another question that often comes up is children. A lot of people have heard of the study which shows that having children is the biggest effect an individual can have on the climate (see [point 1](#)).<sup>15</sup> However, the basis of the calculations in that study is that those children will continue to have an unsustainable lifestyle. Humans as a species don't naturally produce high emissions. In poor countries a family with ten children can emit far less in total than one person in Sweden does.

#### **4. It doesn't matter what individuals do / Reducing emissions is the responsibility of politicians**

Saying that it doesn't matter what individuals do is like saying that there's no point in voting. One single vote doesn't make much 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 right to vote have started from the bottom. People have known how serious the climate crisis is for a long time, and yet politicians continue to make decisions which completely contradict the science. If we are to have a hope of getting the necessary political changes in time, more individuals need to wake up and realise that we have to change our lifestyle. Research from the UK shows that seeing other people do this of their own free will is a very effective wake-up call. In one study, half the respondents who knew someone who had stopped flying for climate reasons said that it had made them fly less. 75 percent said that it had changed their attitude towards flying. These effects increased if the person who had stopped flying was influential, for example a public figure. So the more influence you have, the more difference you can make by this decision.<sup>26</sup> If we want radical climate policies to be accepted, it's important to practice what we preach. I doubt that the people who fought to abolish slavery kept their own slaves until the ban was in place. In the unlikely event that someone did – how would that have affected their credibility?

People have a strong impact on each other. Sustainable behaviour is contagious.<sup>1</sup> Not flying is one of the most important things an individual can do for the climate (see [point 1](#)). But the biggest effect comes from the influence this decision has on the people around you. If you stop flying, the chances increase that your friends will do the same (as long as you tell them about it). The opposite is also true – if you keep flying, your friends are more likely to do so too.

Sweden has had an intense public debate about flying for the past year and a half and we can already see a noticeable difference. In 2019 (January–July) the number of airline passengers decreased by 8 percent on domestic flights and 3 percent on international flights.<sup>27</sup> Considering that the international passengers include people that don't live in Sweden (44 percent of the international travellers from Sweden's biggest airport Arlanda live in other countries<sup>9</sup>) and that the number of passengers from other countries is probably continuing to increase, it's reasonable to assume that Swedes' international air travel has decreased even more. The fact that Sweden's air travel has decreased has spread the debate about flying to a lot of other countries. In a recent [comment](#) the chairperson of the International Air Transport Association described the "flight shame movement" as the biggest threat to the airline industry in Europe right now.<sup>29</sup> The fact that 15 000 people registered for Flight Free 2019 has attracted international interest and meant that the campaign Flight Free 2020 has spread to other countries.

Of course not all the responsibility should be placed on us as individuals, but it's a shame that the public debate sometimes gives the impression that there's no point in changing our behaviour. This can make people lose hope, and it's also not true. If you start with yourself and tell other people, change is underway. Not everyone will join you straight away, but research shows that a 25-percent minority can change the majority attitude.<sup>30</sup>

The climate crisis can be solved – if everyone tried we'd have a good chance of succeeding. We have to stop having such low opinions of each other and we have to stop waiting for someone else to start. If you start, people will follow! Hopefully, even politicians will follow eventually.

## **5. Giving up flying isn't enough**

No, it's not. But the fact that it isn't enough is no good reason to keep flying. We need to deal with all our emissions. Ideally we shouldn't emit another gramme of carbon dioxide. It'll never be enough to eliminate just one source of emissions if we're to succeed in saving the climate (see [point 3](#)).

Giving up flying is one of the most important things an individual can do to reduce their effect on the climate (see [point 1](#)). It's also one of the last things people are prepared to do to save the climate, so once you've accepted that flying isn't sustainable you seem to be more likely to make other lifestyle changes and be active in the climate struggle in other ways. During the past year we've seen lots of examples of people who have been hesitant to participate in the campaign to begin with, but once they have they say that they now think of the climate in everything they do and are also trying to influence others and to make political demands. So giving up flying becomes a clear statement which makes you and the people around you more involved (see [point 4](#)).

## **6. Giving up flying is too much of a sacrifice**

A lot of people feel that giving up flying is a big sacrifice, which is understandable. But whether you feel that the sacrifice is too big depends on whether you've realised how urgent the climate crisis is and how much difference you make by not flying. 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. Once you've realised this, giving up flying doesn't feel like a sacrifice, it's just self-evident.

The hard part is deciding to stop ignoring the climate crisis and to break habits. A lot of people I've talked to have said that to begin with it felt very hard to stop flying, but it doesn't at all any more. If you stop thinking of flying as an option it doesn't feel like a big sacrifice to give it up. For example, we don't go around fretting that we can't go to the moon, because it's not a realistic option.

If we are going to succeed in saving the climate, we have to stop focussing on what we want to do, and think about what's possible instead. No one questions the fact that people who can't afford to fly don't fly. We're more likely to be astonished by people who

choose to live beyond their financial means. Anyone who has seen the Scandinavian TV programme "The luxury trap" or similar programmes like "Life or debt" or "Til debt do us part" has probably been astounded at how people can spend much more money every month than they earn. But living beyond our means is what most of us do when it comes to the planet's limits. The average Swede lives as though we had four Earths.<sup>31</sup> If we want to continue to have a planet to live on we can't afford to fly.

From a global point of view most people can't afford to fly. It's the poorest people who will be affected first by the fact that we can afford to (financially). If we don't sacrifice our air travel, they will have to sacrifice their lives.

### **7. I'm incurably selfish**

This argument is actually more common than you might think. However, I don't believe that deep down, many people are incurably selfish. This type of argument is more like an easy way to avoid a discussion, because they mean that no other arguments matter – except for the fact that we're all going to be affected by the climate crisis. However, many people haven't realised that yet.

### **8. Giving up flying is too radical**

A lot of people think that giving up flying feels like a radical decision. It isn't. It's just trusting in science. We shouldn't emit another gramme of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere if we can avoid it. So it's really more extreme to continue flying given the circumstances. If you were diagnosed with a serious illness and prescribed medication, most people wouldn't choose not to take it, or only to take half the dosage, saying that otherwise "it would be too radical".

In fact, giving up flying is not nearly enough. We need to make much bigger changes than that if we are to succeed in limiting global warming to a manageable level.

### **9. I've heard experts say that it's possible to keep flying**

It's easy to be confused by all the mixed messages we are constantly being surrounded by. Of course it's important to look at who's saying what. When people who work in the aviation industry say that we can keep flying, we should obviously take that with a big pinch (handful) of salt. But sometimes climate experts, too, say things that make it

sound as though it's okay to keep flying "a bit". In these cases it's important to remember that it's not scientists' job to shape opinion, and that they look at their area of research in isolation. For example, people who do research about aviation calculate how much the emissions from air travel need to decrease globally, and they assume that all other sources of emissions will decrease to the same extent, relatively speaking. They also don't take ethics into account. The fact that it's deeply unfair that rich people keep flying on holiday, when poor people who have never flown are already dying because of the climate crisis, is one example. They also don't consider the secondary effects of giving up flying. Giving up flying isn't just about the emissions you personally save – the biggest effect is the way that this decision influences the people around you. It makes more people do the same and is also an effective way to make more people wake up and realise how serious the climate crisis is.<sup>26</sup> In addition, people who have realised how unsustainable flying is are also more likely to change their lifestyle in other areas, and to want to influence others to change their behaviour and to make political demands. It's a shame that not all climate experts have a degree in psychology.

You might ask yourself why every climate expert doesn't encourage *everyone* to do *everything* they can, considering how important it is for us to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees, and how unlikely it seems that we'll succeed (according to the latest IPCC report, the total emissions need to be halved in the coming decade, and even if we manage that there's only a 66 percent chance that that'll be enough to meet the target<sup>3</sup>). One person who does is the Swedish politician Pär Holmgren, who has written a book called "The least we can do is as much as possible and a bit more" [our translation]. He doesn't think it should be legal to fly the way we do today.<sup>32</sup>

There are also politicians who say that we can keep flying. A lot of people have great confidence in politicians, but it's important to remember that they are normal people, with the same kinds of defence mechanisms as everyone else. Most politicians aren't climate experts. Many of them don't know any more about the climate than the average citizen does (although of course they should take more responsibility and do their homework). There are also politicians who say that we have to make the climate our top priority, but at the same time they act as though the opposite were true. The new airport in Sälen in the Swedish mountains is a case in point. This is called response denial and

unfortunately it's very common.<sup>33</sup> Until more people back radical climate policies, a lot of politicians are probably also going to be wary of doing what's necessary, because they're worried about not being reelected.

### **10. I do so many other things for the climate**

Defending your air travel by saying that you do lots of other good things for the environment is very common. A lot of people think that they can fly with a clear conscience because they are vegetarian, mostly shop organic or second hand and cycle to work.

The problem is that even if you do all these things and more there's no room for air travel. Just by being part of, for example, Swedish society you emit a couple of tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. You also have to eat, and live somewhere, and just by doing these things you've used up your share of carbon dioxide.

In addition, the things most people actually do for the environment only have a marginal effect on the climate. For example, careful recycling can reduce your emissions by 0.2 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents per year.<sup>15</sup> This means that a single trip to Thailand (which emits 3 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents, according to [flightemissionmap.org](http://flightemissionmap.org)) cancels out the effects of 15 years of recycling.

The belief that you can "compensate" for air travel is common. According to a recent article by researchers at the University of Gävle in Sweden, we treat our effect on the environment the same way we treat social situations. We can make up for a misstep in a social situation by apologising or saying something nice. In the same way, we hope that the positive effects our actions have on the environment will cancel out the negative ones. We think that we can average out our actions, rather than adding them together. This is why we believe that flying overseas on holiday is okay if we cycle to work. You can read more in the article "[Why People Harm the Environment Although They Try to Treat It Well: An Evolutionary-Cognitive Perspective on Climate Compensation](#)" by Patrik Sörqvist and Linda Langeborg.<sup>34</sup>

A good tip is to calculate your own emissions. Most people haven't done this and it's often a real eye-opener. There are many different tools you can use, for example

<https://footprint.wwf.org.uk> and <https://coolclimate.org/calculator>. (Note that neither of these tools include the high altitude effects of flying. See [High altitude effects](#), and calculate high altitude effects at <flightemissionmap.org>).

### **11. At least I don't fly domestically / When I fly, I stay away for a long time**

I've talked to several people who agree that flying is a problem and who say that they never fly domestically and wouldn't dream of flying on a weekend break. This argument comes from the idea that by flying long distances and staying away for longer, you get more "value" for your emissions. But a flight between Sweden and New York emits the same amount of greenhouse gases no matter whether you stay for two nights or two months. The climate doesn't care how important your trip is. Although flying between Gothenburg and Stockholm is very unnecessary as there is an excellent train service, a flight between those cities emits much less than a flight between Gothenburg and Italy (129 kgs vs. 573 kgs according to <travelandclimate.org>).

### **12. I offset my flights**

We're in a situation where we shouldn't emit another gramme of greenhouse gases. It's good that we can support different types of projects that can capture some of the emissions, but it would be very unnecessary to ruin the effect by flying. We should be offsetting AND not flying. During our lifetime, most people in countries like Sweden have emitted levels of greenhouse gases that are far from sustainable. Carbon dioxide can stay in the atmosphere for hundreds of thousands of years.<sup>35</sup> As the emissions we've already caused can't be undone, it's an excellent idea to offset them retrospectively.

One of the biggest problems with carbon offsetting is that it signals that there is an easy way to undo our emissions, and that we can maintain our current lifestyle as long as we pay for it. If it were possible to buy our way out of the climate crisis we would have done so a long time ago. By continuing to fly you contribute to maintaining the norm of air travel, which means that people who don't offset will also continue to fly.

Patrik Sörqvist, professor of environmental psychology at the University of Gävle in Sweden, says that "there are psychological risks inherent in carbon offsetting which mean that the tool can be used to justify environmentally damaging behaviour and

thereby impede the transition to a sustainable society.”<sup>36</sup> If you think you’ve “done your bit” you might even fly more than you might otherwise have done.

Some climate experts believe that if you can’t avoid flying, it’s better to buy carbon offsets than not to do anything at all. Although in theory it’s good to compensate for air travel that can’t be avoided, in practice there’s a risk that carbon offsetting will widen the definition of which trips are unavoidable. A vast majority of air travel isn’t necessary at all. Private flights account for 80 percent of Swedes’ air travel<sup>9</sup> and most of these are holiday flights. Continuing to fly on holiday when people are already dying from climate change just isn’t appropriate. More and more people are realising this, which has meant that several travel companies now say that they’ve started to offset all their flights, in an attempt to persuade us to keep flying with them. If you read the fine print in their terms and conditions, you can see that there are some exceptions, like only offsetting their own planes’ emissions. They also don’t offset high altitude effects, which are estimated to be roughly equivalent to carbon dioxide emissions.<sup>9</sup> So only half the emissions are being “offset”. If this means that we also fly more because we think we can do so with a clear conscience, the carbon offsetting won’t have any effect whatsoever.

In addition, carbon offsetting is by no means infallible. According to an evaluation for the EU Commission, as many as 85 percent of carbon offset projects didn’t live up to their promises.<sup>37</sup> Flying also 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 airlines continuing to buy more aeroplanes and expand airports, as well as not putting pressure on politicians to invest in trains instead.<sup>38</sup>

”Offsetting is worse than doing nothing. It is without scientific legitimacy, is dangerously misleading and almost certainly contributes to a net increase in the absolute rate of global emissions growth!” – Kevin Anderson.<sup>39</sup>

Joseph Romm of [climateprogress.org](http://climateprogress.org) compares carbon offsetting to “trying to save the Arctic by collecting left-over ice cubes and shipping them up north.”<sup>40</sup>

### **13. But I love to travel!**

All the more reason to give up flying here and now. If we don't succeed in limiting global warming many areas will become completely uninhabitable. By not flying now, we increase the chances of being able to discover the world in the future.

Not flying doesn't mean that we can't travel or experience things. We just have to do it in a different way. It's pretty fascinating that most of the people I've talked to this year and who have decided to stop flying say that they now appreciate their trips more than they did when they flew. It's about changing perspectives, and focussing on everything you can do without putting too much pressure on the climate, rather than on what you're missing. Several people have said that they now have a more creative approach to travelling, and that it turns into more of an adventure when you can't just jump on a plane to get from A to B.

When you realise the enormous climate benefits of holidaying close to home, rather than flying, you value it much more highly. Most Swedes haven't explored all of Sweden. Why not try a holiday in your own country for a change? Or tap into the staycation trend? Discovering and enjoying places close to home is underrated and also very economical.

If you want to travel a bit further, you can get to lots of wonderful places by train. Everyone I've talked to has said that train travel has given them lots of new experiences. You get to see more of the country you're visiting and you meet more people. The journey itself becomes part of the adventure. Although trains are also responsible for quite high emissions in some countries (depending on how their electricity is generated) it's a much better option than flying. In the EU energy production is quickly becoming more climate friendly, which means that trains are improving much more quickly than aeroplanes. In the Nordic countries the trains already produce very low emissions.

At [travelandclimate.org](http://travelandclimate.org) you can compare the emissions from different modes of travel. If you'd like tips on how to travel by train, try [www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) or the Facebook group [Flight-Free Travellers Network](#).

#### **14. My mother-in-law is turning 70 / My children will be disappointed / All my friends are flying together**

It's quite common for people to say that they themselves would be prepared to give up flying, but that they feel that the people around them expect them to fly on holiday with them. However, it often turns out that they haven't discussed this with the people they're planning on travelling with. Encourage people to bring the subject up and to suggest trying an alternative holiday. They may be surprised to find that others, too, are prepared not to fly. I've heard of several examples of someone summoning the courage to say that they don't want to fly, and this leading to the rest of the group also choosing not to fly. And of course, the more people who join you, the more emissions decrease. In addition, most children can't make an informed choice. If they understood the risks of global warming, they would probably want to do everything they could to minimise their emissions. Surely no-one thinks that flying on holiday is more important than their future?

#### **15. Some trips are necessary**

Yes, some trips are necessary, but that doesn't legitimise all the ones that aren't. On the contrary, it's even more important for us to avoid unnecessary flights, because some are unavoidable. 80 percent of Swedes' air travel consists of leisure flights. Most of these could be avoided. It's likely that a large proportion of the remaining 20 percent could be avoided too, and replaced by digital meetings or train travel.

One of the most difficult questions I get about flying is what to do if you have family abroad. I'm extremely grateful that I'm not in that situation myself. Obviously part of me wants to answer that of course you should visit your family. On the other hand, the climate doesn't care about family. And your family will also be affected by the climate crisis if we don't do everything we can to reduce our emissions right away. One way of thinking about it is to ask yourself what you would do in a different crisis. Would you risk flying to visit your family if World War III had broken out? If it's your closest

family, maybe you would. Personally, I would rather that people who have close family abroad should fly to visit them occasionally (if no other modes of travel are available), than that those of us who don't have close family abroad should fly. If you do choose to fly to visit your family you should do everything possible to minimise the emissions. For example, of course it's better for one person to travel to meet several others, than the other way around.

## **16. 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 we have to do everything we can to help the people that are already suffering from climate change. We have to realise that our lifestyle is destroying their survival. 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.

In addition, the people who have travelled the world and gained a deeper understanding of others won't lose this understanding just from avoiding air travel until we have dealt with the emissions.

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

If the reason you fly really is to help others, you could always choose to donate money to those who are dependent on tourism so that they can start other businesses. 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. If we're to build a sustainable world, we're going to have to help each other. A lot of people are

going to have to change jobs, but that will be more economical than helping them to deal with all the costs that climate change will cause.

### **18. Technology is going to solve this / We need to fly more to speed up the development of new technology**

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. According to the IPCC, emissions have to drop by at least half by 2030 if we are to succeed in limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees.<sup>3</sup> In the short term, there are no technological solutions that can reduce emissions from air travel enough. Even if emissions per flight do drop, the effect is cancelled out by increased air travel. If we are to succeed in reducing emissions from air travel within the next decade, the only solution is to fly less.<sup>41, 42</sup>

Of course we also need to develop new, green technology. Some people claim that we need to fly more to speed up the development of new 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.

Discussions about technological solutions tend to get stuck in the question of which alternatives the future holds. However, this distracts attention from the matter at hand – that is, that we have to reduce our air travel here and now if emissions are going to decrease.

### **19. The flights 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.

### **20. 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.

Staffan Laestadius, professor emeritus at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden, puts it this way: "Everyone says that they don't have time. We've developed a sense of time which is based on an unsustainable technical solution – air travel. When people talk about expanding the railways an important argument is that going by train should be as fast as flying. Why should it be? People say that we can never compete with air travel. But air travel isn't actually competitive because it isn't sustainable. It's an illusion we've built that gives us unrealistic expectations."<sup>42</sup>

## **21. 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. Read more at the campaign site [endingaviationfueltaxexemption.eu](http://endingaviationfueltaxexemption.eu).<sup>43</sup>

The aviation tax that was introduced in Sweden last year is not nearly enough to reduce air travel to a sustainable level. It has made flights within Europe 61 SEK (about 6 USD or euros) more expensive. The tax on flights outside the EU which are shorter than 6 000 kilometres is 255 SEK (about 25 USD or euros) and on longer flights it's 408 SEK (about 40 USD or euros) per passenger.<sup>44</sup> In comparison with the taxes on car travel this tax is very low. But even if flying were taxed as much as driving it might not be enough. The tax on petrol isn't enough to keep car travel at a sustainable level.<sup>41</sup> The people who fly the most are people who have a lot of money, and they would be able to afford flying even if taxes were much higher. To get the necessary reductions in air travel we need

strong political measures. The more of us who use our behaviour to show what's needed, the quicker we'll get there. In addition, there isn't really room for even one more gramme of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, no matter how cheap it is to emit.

## **22. Flying on holiday shouldn't be a matter of class**

Reducing class distinctions in society is an important issue, but it won't be solved by continuing to fly in solidarity with those that can't afford to travel by train. In addition, flying is already very much a matter of class. The majority of the world's population can't afford to fly (an estimated 80 percent have never been on an aeroplane<sup>12</sup>), or go on holiday at all. Even in countries like Sweden many people can't afford to fly even though it's relatively cheap.

If we are to create a fair and equitable world it is of the utmost importance that we do everything we can to save the climate. The people that are already being hit the hardest haven't contributed to the climate crisis.

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

A question that a lot of journalists ask is: Isn't it unfair to say that we have to stop flying, when a lot of people haven't had the chance to fly? 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?

If there was room for more air travel, of course it would be more fair if the people who haven't flown before could do so, rather than all those of us who already have. But if we're going to save the climate we can't think about what's fair. It's in everyone's interest to survive, and young people today have no choice but to minimise their emissions if they want a future. In addition, the people who will never be able to afford to fly are the ones already being affected by the climate crisis, which is much more unfair.

Finally – the fact that more and more people are starting to fly makes it even more important for those of us who have already flown to stop.

## **24. Encouraging people to give up flying is shaming**

The aim of encouraging people to give up flying isn't to shame them, but rather to get more people to realise how serious the climate crisis is and how important their own actions are. We assume that people wouldn't choose to fly if they had realised the consequences. No one I've talked to has said, once they've given up flying, that their motivation is to avoid feeling ashamed, but rather that they don't want to fly anymore because they've realised that it isn't possible if we are to avoid climate collapse. However, feelings of guilt or shame can help people to come to this realisation.

Maria Wolrath Söderberg, associate professor of rhetoric at Södertörn University, and Nina Wormbs, professor of the history of science and technology at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, describe their thoughts on guilt and shame in the book "Grounded – beyond *Flygskam*", published by Fores in December 2019.<sup>45</sup>

Of course there are people who deliberately set out to shame others over their air travel. For example, a high-profile Swedish Instagram account "shamed" celebrities over their air travel. Although this strategy has certainly gained a lot of attention, I wouldn't use it on friends and family. I don't think shaming is an effective way to get people to fly less, and there is a risk that these celebrities instead feel targeted and "switch off". However, it may make other people want to give up flying in order not to feel ashamed. Still, I think there is a risk that this method makes "ordinary people" feel that they can keep flying occasionally as long as these celebrities are much worse than they are.

The term "flight shame" is now well-established in Sweden and has spread across the globe. Of course, it's very positive that there's a term for the phenomenon that Swedes are increasingly choosing not to fly and that it's spreading, but the phrase itself is rather misleading. In the media it's often used to mean that we're giving up flying – but people who don't fly don't feel flight shame. Instead, the feeling of shame occurs if you keep flying, despite knowing the consequences.

## **25. Giving up flying is just a trend**

Some people think giving up flying is a passing trend, something you do to feel better about yourself. I don't know of anyone who, after deciding to give up flying, has decided to start again. This is also true of people who decided to give up flying for climate

reasons decades ago. Once you've opened your eyes to how unsustainable flying is, there's no going back, and giving up flying is definitely a trend that's here to stay. People that give up flying don't do it to "feel better about themselves", but because they want humanity (and all other life on this planet) to survive. Do people avoid setting their own houses on fire to "feel better about themselves", too?

## **26. It's too late anyway**

Occasionally I come across people who say they don't think there's any point in trying to solve the climate crisis because "it's too late anyway". This is a dangerous attitude because it risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course we won't solve the climate crisis if everyone thinks it's too late anyway. Luckily, the opposite is also true – if everyone thinks we can solve the climate crisis, we will. There's a very simple solution, which is to reduce emissions. The biggest challenge is to get more people to realise that it is possible to save the climate. If you believe that it's possible to solve the climate crisis, you act in a way that solves it.<sup>6</sup> In a study in which 400 climate researchers and experts were asked if they think solving the climate crisis is possible, 95 percent answered "yes, it'll be difficult, but it's possible".<sup>6</sup> So the people who know the most about the issue believe that it's possible to find a solution.

Although we can't be sure we'll succeed, of course we have to try. And we won't either solve the crisis or not – there's a scale in between. Even in the worst case scenario that it is too late to save humanity, we can still influence the chain of events. The more greenhouse gases we emit, the quicker global warming will be. And the faster it happens, the worse it will be for all the people living on the planet at the moment. There will be more natural disasters, which will result in more refugees, more starvation and more risk of panic and chaos. That means more suffering. If humanity actually is dying out, we still have a moral responsibility to make sure that happens in as humane a way as possible. We should still work towards the best possible society during the time we have left. That's a better solution for everyone – and we might discover that humanity won't die out after all.

## Epilogue

Thank you for taking the time to read this far. I hope this guide will help you to find the courage to talk about the climate, although it's uncomfortable, because it's also necessary. In this guide I've described what works for me. Maybe you'll find completely different ways to get people involved. If you have any really good arguments you think I should add, or any other thoughts or questions, don't hesitate to contact me.

Good luck!

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