

PERSPECTIVE | MAGAZINE

5 habits to build a sustainable future — without breaking the bank

In the face of unprecedented environmental upheaval, it's not only possible to make a difference with our individual decisions — it is vital.

By **Sarah Shemkus** Updated April 11, 2023, 2 hours ago



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MEGAN LAM/GLOBE STAFF/PHOTOS FROM ADOBE

The good news is we're not doomed. Not yet, at least.

Reports about the climate crisis are rarely cheerful, focusing, quite rationally, on the perils: [droughts](#) that affect food production, more [severe and unpredictable storms](#),

dangerous [heat waves](#), and many more changes — from inconvenient to catastrophic — that could be in the offing if humanity doesn't change course.

The thing is, we know how to stop these disastrous developments — or at least how to slow them down and stabilize the climate. And we have the tools needed to make it happen. We have technologies such as LED bulbs, electric vehicles, solar panels, heat pumps, and induction stoves, which are already quite good and only getting better and cheaper.

Still, in the face of unprecedented environmental upheaval, it can be hard to imagine that buying a new lightbulb — or even a new car — could make a significant contribution to slowing the climate crisis. And yet it is not only possible to make a difference with our individual decisions and actions — it is vital.

“Much of the uncertainty [about climate change], if not all the uncertainty, comes down to: What are the choices we're going to make?” says Juliette Rooney-Varga, a professor and director of the [Climate Change Initiative](#) at the University of Massachusetts Lowell.

And a little more good news: Making choices to benefit the planet has gotten easier, thanks to the federal Inflation Reduction Act's [commitment](#) of \$370 billion to support clean energy, with \$43 billion dedicated to tax credits for consumers.

So what are the best, most useful choices we can make? As a reporter covering clean energy in Massachusetts, I had some ideas, but reached out to local experts for more perspective. Here are five ways to make a difference, some of which are not only free, but could also save money.

1. Cultivate optimism: This starts off as more attitude than action, but an optimistic mind-set leads to hope, and hope leads to action, says Marcy Franck, author of [“The Climate Optimist”](#) newsletter from the Center for Climate, Health, and the

Global Environment at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Look for the stories — they are out there — of successes in fighting climate change, such as slowing year over year growth in [global carbon dioxide emissions](#) in 2022 or the [\\$90 billion](#) in investments in clean energy projects companies have announced since the Inflation Reduction Act was passed. “The story of humanity rising to meet climate change is full of things that seemed impossible until they became reality,” Franck says.

2. Drive change: Transportation is the largest emitter of greenhouse gas nationally and in Massachusetts, where 43 percent of our annual carbon emissions came from [tailpipes](#) as of 2019, the latest year for which numbers are available. “We need to zero out gasoline consumption as fast as we can,” says Larry Chretien, executive director of the Green Energy Consumers Alliance, a nonprofit that advocates for clean energy in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

Cut down on car use by biking, walking, carpooling, and using more public transportation whenever possible. And consider making your next vehicle purchase electric. It’s not as pricey as many fear: [Federal tax credits](#) plus a Massachusetts state [rebate](#) could knock up to \$11,000 off the cost for those who qualify, and even some used cars are eligible for incentives now.

3. Pump it up: Some [75 percent of Massachusetts residents](#) use fossil fuel to heat their homes, creating [more carbon dioxide emissions](#) than other methods and contributing to methane escaping from the state’s [leaky natural gas pipes](#).

Home heat pumps, which use electricity to draw heat from the surrounding air, even in cold temperatures, eliminate the bulk of these harmful gases. And state and federal incentives are making heat pumps ever more affordable; an upfront federal rebate of up to \$8,000 is set to take effect [this year](#), in addition to existing tax credits. And Mass Save, a group of utilities that administers the state’s energy-efficiency programs, also [offers](#) up to \$16,000 in rebates, depending on income level, in rebates for whole-home heat pump systems in Massachusetts. Without going into the wonky details,

many low-income homes could end up getting a heat pump free with these incentives.

4. Make a plan: So you've made up your mind to go green, but maybe, like me, you find the tangle of technologies and incentives overwhelming. I'm eager to shop for an electric car when my husband's tenacious Camry finally gives out, but does that mean we can't afford heat pumps right now? It's confusing.

Thankfully, recent federal incentives are in place for 10 years, giving aspiring green consumers more time to think things through. The best way to manage these changes — and maximize your impact — is to create a plan over a five- to 10-year span, making it less overwhelming and more financially feasible. Try the savings calculator at [RewiringAmerica.org](https://www.rewiringamerica.org) and learn about the federal tax credits and upfront discounts available for electric vehicles, heat pumps, weatherization, and more, at your income level. Every little bit helps, according to Chretien. "It's not all or nothing," he says. "Anything we can do matters a lot."

5. Speak up: While individual actions are powerful, they need to be backed up with practical and financial commitments from local, state, and federal leaders. "Consumers can do a lot to change the world, but they need the tools that policy can create," Chretien says. So write to your congressperson, go to a city council meeting, or sign that petition to install more solar panels in town.

Then, spread the word. While research suggests the [majority of Americans](#) are concerned about climate change, people just aren't having many conversations about it on a personal, day-to-day basis, Rooney-Varga notes. Making an effort to discuss your switch to bike commuting or posting about your new heat pumps on social media can ignite conversation, awareness, and, hopefully, action.

I'll even start: My electric induction range is coming next month and I'm psyched to be using less gas and breathing cleaner air.

Every additional person prompted to help is a bonus for the planet, Rooney-Varga says. “This is a problem that’s going to take action from all of us, at all levels.”

Sarah Shemkus is a frequent contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

[Show 22 comments](#)

©2023 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC