# $CO_2$ – Kick the Habit: From treating symptoms to long-term recovery

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In considering how to approach this brief presentation on climate change response, it struck me that the theme for the evening, "$CO_2$ – Kick the Habit", really pointed to some rich territory, so I've taken this very literally as my inspiration tonight.

The reason that this really grabbed my attention relates to the importance of understanding the origins of our global climate change situation as comprehensively as possible if we're going to develop genuinely effective responses.

The title "Kick the Habit" obviously draws on the metaphor of addiction as a way of making sense of the global climate change situation. There are some important dimensions highlighted by the addiction metaphor that are often overlooked in understanding this situation.

The first thing that it draws attention to is the relationship between cause and effect. In this regard, I'd just point out that the title is a little misleading. Carbon dioxide of course isn't the habit itself, but a physical side effect of our collective habitual actions.

So drawing on the health and well-being characteristics of the addiction metaphor, carbon dioxide build-up in the atmosphere can be thought of as the immediate cause of the symptom that is the changing global climate system. But to get better insight into the nature of the disease we really need to look for the deeper, underlying causes.

What then is it that we're actually addicted to? What is the particular addiction associated with our climate change situation? I suspect that if we went around the room, we'd get a wide range or answers to this question. What these answers would likely have in common though is a focus on some external agent, something outside of us that we identify as the cause of the problem.

And the danger in this is that we end up treating the habits that lead to excessive carbon dioxide emissions in much the same way that we deal with substance or gambling addictions by limiting access to drugs or casinos—these of course are important aspects of a more comprehensive response, but very limited on their own.

So the other side of the coin in terms of leveraging the addiction metaphor to gain deeper insight into our climate change situation is to consider what it might reveal about us as "creatures of habit".

What do we know about addiction that could be helpful in better understanding the underlying causes our situation? Addiction is typically characterised by behaviour that is harmful to the individual who engages in it and that also has wider social impacts, but which the addict feels *compelled* to engage in anyway—in other words, the behaviour from

the addict's perspective is involuntary or outside his or her immediate control. We also know that this habitual behaviour is seen as a way of alleviating stress associated with experiences of anxiety, depression or emotional pain.

In relation to this, I happened to read recently a very timely article on the development of a comprehensive model for understanding and responding to addiction. I'll read a short excerpt from the article that is particularly relevant to tonight's conversation:

> "Now let us look at etiology [etiology means the origin and causes of disease]. Treating symptoms is often necessary in a triage situation but insufficient in terms of long-term recovery and optimal health. The five causes that must be addressed in an Integral [or comprehensive] Recovery model are:
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> - Chemical imbalance in the brain
> - Unresolved trauma from the past
> - Negative narrative stories about one's self and the world
> - Inability to cope with the present
> - Lack of purpose, meaning, or connection in one's life
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> One or any combination of these causal factors can lead to an addictive relationship with the particular substance. Once the client has crossed that line from use to dependency, the client and the treatment team must deal with the fact that the midbrain or the reptilian stem has been hijacked and is dominated by a powerful need to use and take the addictive substance, which in the addict's [direct] experience, is equated with survival itself. In other words, the felt reality of the addict using drugs is such that taking the substance is no longer a lifestyle choice but a survival necessity. This is often a hard concept for the non-addict to understand, which has lead to a great deal of prejudice and unskilful means in dealing with the problem of addiction."[1]

There are a couple of very important points that I'd like to draw from this, before moving on to look at what we might need to add to this specifically in relation to climate change.

First, the view expressed here recognises that a focus on behaviour alone is not sufficient. In order to understand harmful behaviour, we need to understand something of the interior experience associated with that behaviour. For example, what might be the connection between lifestyles and associated behaviour that are driving increasing $CO_2$ emissions, and our own "inability to cope with the present" or lack of purpose, meaning or connection in our lives?

Second, the view expressed in the excerpt highlights the importance of trying to understand the motivation for harmful behaviour from the perspective of the person engaging in that behaviour. This is particularly important in relation to climate change, as for most people going about their daily lives, it is not immediately apparent that their actions have any ill effect. In most cases, there's simply no means available to see the harm that results.

This is where the value of initiatives such as the Victorian Government's black balloons campaign comes in—but we need to pay much more attention to creating such public metaphors and the more formal indicators that go along with these that can allow us to see the impacts of our apparently benign actions more clearly.

[1] Dupuy, John and Morelli, Marco 2007, 'Toward an Integral Recovery Model for Drug and Alcohol Addiction', *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 26-42.

Given the scale of transformation that human activity systems will need to undergo in adequately responding to the climate change challenge, it's inevitable that our taken-for-granted expectations about what is normal, and even about what is ultimately good, must be seriously challenged.

To do this skilfully though, we need to go about this process of transformation in ways that honour people's existing ways of life as inherently meaningful to them, rather than dismissing these ways of life as aberrant when viewed from a more comprehensive ecological perspective.

So, individual behaviour and meaning-making need to be considered together if we are to better understand our climate change situation. But this is one part of the story only, because this individual aspect of the situation always occurs in collective contexts.

The meaning that each of us creates as we go about our daily lives, and the actions that we take as we try to make sense of things, are intimately linked with our cultural settings—that is, with our shared norms, beliefs and the very language that we use to negotiate this cultural space with others. And they are also linked with our vast networks of physical and institutional infrastructure. All of this has great power to influence and even determine what we find meaningful in the first place, and the actions associated with this "meaningfulness" that we engage in together.

The collective web of norms and institutions that we live amongst and recreate day-to-day as we go about our lives provides a myriad of incentives for maintaining our long-established habits of behaviour and disincentives for changing this behaviour. And with regard to our increasing concern in relation to climate change, many of these incentives can be considered *perverse*. In other words, these incentives that are "built in" to our social infrastructure actually encourage behaviour that increases our carbon dioxide emissions. I'll conclude by having a look at some of these in a little more detail.

In 2007, Chris Riedy at the Institute for Sustainable Futures at University of Technology Sydney updated an earlier study into Energy and Transport Subsidies in Australia, and I'll draw on this for examples of how our formal social institutions are structured in ways that drive our climate change-causing habits.

According to Chris's research, in 2005 and 2006, subsidies in support of fossil fuel use in Australia amounted to between 9 and 9.8 billion dollars. Of this, subsidies that increased GHG emissions amounted to between 8 and 8.8 billion dollars, with between 6.4 and 7.2 billion dollars of this classified as *perverse subsidies*.

By "perverse subsidy", the study refers to situations even more perverse than the type of perversion that I described before. In the study, a perverse subsidy is one that actually results in economic consequences counter to the original intent, as well as providing a "hidden" incentive for activity contributing to increased GHG emissions.

The study goes into detail with respect to the full range of subsidies, but there's one that I'd like to single out for special attention as a classic example of a perverse incentive for GHG increasing habits, and this relates to the method for determining FBT on company cars, which by the way is the largest of the subsidies for fossil fuel use at up to 1.2 billion dollars. I'd expect that many of you here will be familiar with this already, and it's now

coming more under scrutiny within the federal government, although the opportunity to address it in the recent budget was passed up.

For those of you less familiar with how this works as a perverse incentive, I'll read a summary from the report:

> "The largest of the subsidies is associated with the use of the statutory formula method for determining FBT on company cars. Currently, employees who are provided with a vehicle by their employer as part of their salary package do not need to keep a record of their business and personal use of the vehicle. Instead, they can use a special formula to calculate their tax liability. This formula assumes that the further a person drives in a year, the higher their business use of the vehicle and the lower their personal use. Their tax liability is based on their personal use, so there is a strong incentive to drive further each year to reduce the tax paid. This is a substantial subsidy that encourages higher consumption of petrol and creates a higher level of greenhouse gas emissions."[2]

So this is just one of the huge array of more formal structures that shape our behavioural habits linked to carbon dioxide emissions. Even more extensive are the informal structures, such as our beliefs about safety, our expectations of what constitutes adequate quality of life, and especially our obsessions with convenience, which is almost always narrowly defined to exclude the long term inconvenience of breakdown in our physical infrastructure and global ecological systems.

I hope this might act as useful introduction to the sorts of areas we might look at if we really are to kick the habit and promote long term generative health and well-being for ourselves as individuals and for the collective social and natural systems with which we are inextricably interdependent.

[2] Riedy, C 2007, 'Energy and transport subsidies in Australia—2007 update: Final report for Greenpeace Australia Pacific', Institute for Sustainable Futures, Sydney, p. 9.