Twitter Thread by Dr. Sweta Chakraborty



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This #NewYear we must get serious about climate change. A big obstacle: our brains.

Current risks are vastly different from our ancestors, but our brains are wired the same. Knowing the science behind decision-making helps us better talk about climate threats & spark action. 1/

I've dedicated my career to understanding what factors influence our perceptions of risk & shape behavioral outcomes, especially around climate action.

We clearly do not judge risks accurately. Let's try this example. What is more likely to kill you:

Ppl often say shark attacks even though plane parts are 30x more likely to kill us. Attacks are more sensational/easier to recall.

Brains react in certain ways to risks around us, rapidly scanning environmental cues (e.g. snake's stance) with subliminal and automated processing.

How does brain wiring relate to climate action? We're influenced by triggers such as if we can see risk or if we trust who communicates it to us.

Bluntly, we overestimate unserious risks like vaccinating children and underestimate seemingly far away risks like rising sea levels.

Sociology shows how even political identities influence risk perception. A human evolutionary trait allows us to avoid cognitive dissonance from info 1) that isn't pleasant or 2) contradicts beliefs integral to our identity/tribe. We're wired to make snap judgements for comfort.

The visceral need to belong to a tribe stems from early ancestors joining a group for survival. Just look at an increasingly polarized America where even issues historically free from politicization, like infectious disease, are no longer immune.

Correcting existing erroneous beliefs comes from first admitting to and accepting that we are all subliminally influenced by cognitive triggers outside of our control.

But we can regain control! This is where climate activists should take note.

First ask, what fuels our risk perceptions? Is it political identity, ease of recall, or trust in the communicator. Challenge perceptions that feed into our fears. Question immediate assessments of a risk. Check for overreaction by analyzing the base rate statistics of that risk

Actual risk compared to public outrage are poorly aligned across a host of risks from those we overestimate like plane crashes to those we underestimate like radon gas. Let's admit to and recognize our collective cognitive limitations and always question our judgments.

Step 1 of what individuals can do to address the looming climate crisis: make decisions based in science NOT ideology. #ScienceMatters

Be radical in your commitment to the facts and the reality of risks we face, and then you can challenge your friends/family, maybe even beyond.

There is no alternative. Inaction is costing us precious time in veering off the path towards a global temperature point we will not be able to withstand. We are currently on target to reach it by 2050.

The time for action is now. Let #2021 be the year we turn things around.

We have the human ingenuity to overcome the climate challenges we face and to take control of our perceptions. Let's start by confronting our brains, tease out our innate biases, & commit to better aligning to the data…to the science.

A good #NewYearsResolution for us all.