

Radiation Safety Counseling News

The Psychology of Radiation Safety

Dear Reader,

This month we share with you information on how our profession was formed and the psychology of radiation safety.

As with prior newsletters, we encourage your questions and feedback. Feel free to contact us through email or via our blog or Facebook page.

I thank you for your continued interest.

Regards,

[Ray Johnson](#)

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Radiation Safety Counseling Services



Ray Johnson

How We Formed Our Profession - the Psychology of Radiation Safety

Where would our profession be if people were not afraid of radiation? Fears have made our profession what it is today. The primary motivation for developments in technology and regulations has been fears of radiation. Fears are the basis of antinuclear sentiments and aversion to nuclear power, nuclear wastes, and especially nuclear bombs. Fears of radiation have moved our profession to very conservative practices in the name of radiation safety. And yet, psychologists know that fear is a good thing as a natural response of our brains for our protection. We have survived as a species by knowing when to be afraid and when to react for safety.

Psychologists define fear as an emotional response to a specific stimulus, such as pain or immediate threat of danger. Since radiation does not produce any sensation in our bodies, then our fears of radiation have to be based on imagination. Thus, fear of radiation is not a true fear based on something happening right now, but a manufactured fear based in images of terrible consequences. Our imaginations drive worries and anxieties. The primary delivery vehicle for radiation fears is the news media. As the wealthiest nation in the world, we also have the luxury of being afraid of virtually everything. Although, it's hard not to worry when fear is sprayed at us like tear gas from our TV 24/7.

The media thrives on telling us of calamities and dangers everywhere in the world, and seems to especially like stories of "deadly radiation." In fact those words have been used to portray

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Got Questions?

If you have a question about radiation safety that you would like to share, please post your question on our Forum (blog) or our Facebook page. Each week our experts will select a question and post an answer that will also be included in our monthly newsletter.

To post a question go to:

[Radiation Safety Forum](#)

or

[RSCI on Facebook](#)

radiation for so long (at least 60 years) that now subconsciously people automatically react to the word "radiation" with aversion. Unfortunately, much of what the media reports is based on radiation mythology (common beliefs which are not technically true). For example, most public concerns are fueled by misconceptions of the LNT model.

Regulators are also driven by fears (what if they are not seen as responsive to scared constituents, what if they do not provide for adequate safety regulations, what if people are harmed from their negligence, etc.?). Health physicists may be driven by fears as well, such as fear of criticism for not doing their jobs well, irresponsibility, carelessness, or neglect.

Thus our profession is built around fears. Even the words which describe our work "radiation safety" imply that there is something to be afraid of, something to be avoided, something for which caution is needed, or something which threatens us.

For more information you can visit:

<http://health.howstuffworks.com/mental-health/human-nature/other-emotions/fear.htm>

<http://www.dealingwithfear.org/>

The Psychology of Radiation Safety - How to Answer Questions

When I ask my students which are the greatest day-to-day challenges when implementing a radiation safety program, 1) technical issues, or 2) people issues, they always say, "People issues." While we may have prepared extensively by training to deal with technical issues, how well has that training prepared us for dealing with the psychology of radiation safety.

For example, the question, "Is this radiation source or x-ray machine safe?" cannot be answered by a simple technical response. The most helpful answer to this question needs to consider, "What does safe mean," "Who decides," and "How do we know?" I have come to conclude over the years, that I cannot answer the question, "Is it safe?" Each person has their own ideas of what safety means for them, based on whatever they have heard or believe about radiation. Thus, the only credible answer to that question is the answer each person derives for themselves.

My best role is to provide technically defensible information to dispel common views which are usually based on radiation mythology (common beliefs which are not technically true). Often members of the public and new radiation workers instinctively believe that radiation is dangerous. It seems that continuous repetition of messages about radiation dangers have instilled an aversion to radiation at a subconscious level in the population, such that avoidance of radiation is now an automatic response.

Therefore, fears of radiation are as involuntary as fears of heights, snakes, and spiders. Since we know that we cannot talk a person out of their fear of snakes by saying, "It is only a harmless garter snake," neither can we change a person's fears of radiation by telling them, "You do not need to be afraid, its only like a chest x-ray." Perhaps the least helpful response we can give to a fearful person is to say, "You do not have to be afraid." This response discounts the person's feelings. A better response is to use active listening and say, "Radiation makes you afraid."

Communication Insights

Each week, we post another installment of guidance to improve communication with others. To stay informed, you can go to our [blog](#) and click on Follow: RSS, then choose to "Subscribe to this Feed".

You can also go to our [Facebook](#) page and choose "Like" to have our status updates displayed on your Facebook wall.

We hope you find this information helpful and welcome your comments, questions, or other feedback.

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