

Radiation Safety Counseling News

Simple Tools

Dear Reader,

Next week (June 25-30, 2011) I will be conducting a workshop, as well as presenting a continuing education lecture and other papers, at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Health Physics Society being held in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Below are the abstracts for the workshop and presentations. Next month we will provide links to the presentation materials that will be available on our website.

I am also honored to share with you that I have been elected President of the [American Academy of Health Physics](#). I will begin my term as President-Elect in January 2012. In May I was also elected as Chair of the Ionizing Radiation Committee of the [American Industrial Hygiene Association](#) (AIHA) and AIHA representative to the American National Standards Institute Committee N-13 for radiation standards.

As always, I invite your feedback including any questions that you may have. You can send comments or questions via email or contact us on Facebook or our Forum (blog). I will be delighted to hear from you.

Regards,
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Radiation Safety Counseling Services



Ray Johnson

We are on

facebook

We have created a Facebook page for the Radiation Safety Counseling Institute. This is another resource for the sharing of radiation safety related information and questions.

Click below to visit our page!

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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](#)

Simple Tools for Counseling Radiation Workers and the Public (8-hour workshop)

Part I - Understanding the Basis for Upset and Fears

What is the greatest challenge in the course of your work in radiation safety - technical issues or people issues? For those of you that may answer the latter, this class will provide insights on how to better understand and be more successful with people issues. Are you stressed when confronted by emotional issues at work? Do you know how to provide a helpful response for an upset or fearful person, or would you rather avoid these people? Do you find yourself perplexed about people who are afraid of radiation? Thus, fear of radiation is a common denominator for everyone, although the extent of such fears appears to be related to technical understanding of radiation. Without special training in radiation safety most peoples' understanding is based on radiation mythology which is not supported by good science. Radiation fears are driven at a subconscious level often related to mythical beliefs and images of terrible consequences that may result from radiation exposure. Often people make assumptions about radiation effects without understanding that there are a series of steps for answering the question, "Is it safe?" Fears are always based on what we imagine and not on reality. The basis of what we imagine can be identified by asking the question "What's so bad about that?" By repeating this question we can move down through layers of images to the real motivation for upset and fear. When we understand what drives upset and fears, we can then offer the most helpful responses. Attendees should write down and bring to the class one or more specific scenarios where they would like to apply the insights from this class.

Part II - Tools for Effective Counseling and Risk Communication

Understanding the basis for worker upsets or fears can be helpful, but may not be enough without effective tools for risk communication. The most powerful tool for worker counseling is to hear, identify, and reflect their feelings (Active Listening). One of the reasons that worker upsets or fears escalate is because no one really hears them. Perhaps this should not be surprising because most health physicists are not trained to hear feelings. This class will show how this tool can be acquired and implemented in a short time. There are two keys to listening: 1) feelings are more important than what is said, and 2) listening is more important than solving problems. We will explore whether our role in radiation safety is to be the "giver of answers" or to be a resource for assisting others in deriving their own answers. We will also consider a number of barriers to effective communication, including perceptions, images, feelings, resistance, values, social roles, decision preferences, and defensiveness. Insights on dealing with each of these barriers will be presented with applications to specific radiation scenarios provided by attendees. We will look at a sorting system for feelings and how to best respond to concerns and questions about radiation. This class will conclude with a list of things you can always say when you do not know what to say. We will practice these tools on communication scenarios which each attendee is invited to write down and bring with them.

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.

Psychology of Radiation Safety

- Simple Tools for Health Physicists

(continuing education lecture)

You do not have to be a trained psychologist to use a few simple counseling tools for helpful responses to radiation workers or members of the public. The first thing to remember is that all fears are OK. Our role in radiation safety is not to change people's fears, at least not directly. Telling people, "You do not need to be afraid," may not be the most helpful approach. A better approach may be to provide good information or evidence (hands-on is best) as a basis for people to change their own views. Before a fearful person is ready to hear our best information, however, we need to let them know that their fears are OK and we understand their feelings. We can do this by an easily learned tool called "Active Listening." We will practice this tool. Another useful tool is to ask, "What do you think will happen to you, if you are exposed to radiation?" The answers to this question will help identify the underlying images that are driving a person's fears.

Behind all anger or fear there is a powerful image of unacceptable consequences. Remember not to laugh or offer a judging response to whatever people may say. Their images are based on their imagination or perceptions and may have no connection to reality as we know it or believe. Keep in mind that each person's perception is truth to them. Fearful radiation images may also be identified by responses to the question, "What's so bad about that?" This question has to be used gently and is not appropriate when a person is in the midst of their anger or fear. The answers to this question are at a subconscious level and not accessible at the time of strong emotion. We also cannot answer this question by ourselves. When we attempt to answer this question, we will likely stop when the answers become difficult. You may have to raise this question repeatedly to peel away the layers (like an onion) to get to the primary underlying image. Another tool for persons asking about safety is to help them answer the question for themselves by guiding them through the eight steps from radiation cause to effects. ***To get the most value from this class, attendees should bring real scenarios for practice of counseling tools.***

Psychology of Radiation Safety

- How to Answer Questions (session presentation)

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."

Japan Nuclear Fears

- Real and Perceived Dangers (session presentation)

The earthquake and tsunami in Japan, with subsequent damage to several nuclear plants, have given the media a new source of alarming news about perceived dangers of radiation. The media and antinuclear advocates now have a great opportunity to speculate about deadly radiation not only in Japan but wherever nuclear plants are located. The evolving drama of the nuclear plants lends itself to daily news events while the earthquake and tsunami become old news. The question is, however, how much of the response by authorities and the public is based on real versus perceived dangers? Based on what we know of radiation effects, it is likely that either none or very few deaths will be traced directly to the Japan nuclear incidents. And yet, fears of radiation are rampant, not only in Japan, but in other countries including the U.S.

On the other hand, 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 real 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 (real danger), but a manufactured fear based on images of terrible consequences (perceived danger).

Regulators in Japan and the U.S. may be driven by many fears (what if they are not seen as responsive to scared constituents, what if they do not provide for adequate safety measures, what if people are harmed from their negligence, etc.?). Radiation safety professionals may also be driven by fears as well, such as fear of criticism for not doing their jobs well, irresponsibility, carelessness, or neglect. Thus the profession of radiation safety 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.

How We Formed Our Profession

- the Psychology of Radiation Safety

(session presentation)

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 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.

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