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Radiation Safety Counseling News

Radiation Fears and the Subconscious Mind

Dear Reader,

While pursuing a continuing quest to better understand the nature of radiation fears, two books have come to my attention which seem to explain a lot. These are: "The Power of the Subconscious Mind," Joseph Murphy, 2007 (reprint) and "The Genie Within - Your Subconscious Mind, How it Works and How to Use It," Harry W. Carpenter, 2009. I used insights drawn from these books in several presentations at professional conferences this summer (copies can be downloaded):



Ray Johnson

- Japan Nuclear Fears - Real and Perceived Dangers. A 15-minute presentation to about 150 in a special session on Fukushima Public Information at the annual meeting of the Health Physics Society, West Palm Beach, FL. June 29, 2011. [Included a handout of nine pages.](#)
- The Psychology of Radiation Safety - How to Answer Questions. A 15-minute presentation to about 200 at the annual meeting of the Health Physics Society, West Palm Beach, FL. June 29, 2011. [Included a handout of five pages.](#)
- How We Formed Our Profession - the Psychology of Radiation Safety, It's All About Fears. A 30-minute invited presentation for over 150 at an American Academy of Health Physics Special Session, Health Physics Society Annual Meeting, West Palm Beach, FL, June 28, 2011. [Included a handout of nine pages.](#)
- Japan Nuclear Fears - Real and Perceived Dangers. A 30-minute presentation to about 350 for a special session on the Japan Nuclear Incident at the annual meeting of the American Industrial Hygiene Association in Portland, OR. May 16, 2011. [Included a handout of 14 pages.](#)

To help understand the workings of the subconscious mind, we need to distinguish the functions of the conscious and subconscious. Our conscious mind functions rationally, thinks, reasons, and makes decisions and choices based on sensory input. This function occupies about 10% of our brain and serves as the captain of our ship, the giver of orders. Our conscious mind can only deal with one thing at a time. The subconscious mind makes up 90% of our brain and is the seat of our emotions and creativity. Our subconscious mind takes orders from the conscious mind without judgments. It is a multi-tasker which functions 24/7

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operating the machine we call our body. Without our awareness, the subconscious mind regulates our heart, our breathing, the digestion of food, the healing of cells, etc. Better than any computer, our subconscious handles thousands of inputs simultaneously for our health and protection.

Fear is a natural response of our subconscious to protect us from danger. We have survived by paying attention to our fears and reacting accordingly. After hearing repeatedly the message "radiation is deadly" our conscious mind has transferred this message to our subconscious for our protection. Our subconscious mind hears that radiation is very dangerous and to assure our safety our subconscious attaches terrible feelings (fears) to radiation. By linking radiation with emotional trauma, a powerful negative association is formed to avoid this source of danger and a radiation phobia is born. Thus fear of radiation is no longer a rational conscious choice based on logical analysis, but a gut instinct (feeling). Our subconscious does not consult with our conscious mind before raising the alarm of fear. For protection our subconscious has to react before we can even think about it. Avoidance of radiation is now an automatic response.

Since fears of radiation come from our subconscious, efforts to speak to the rational thinking mind may not help. Giving out facts about radiation safety does not change the feelings. Fears of radiation are based on images of unacceptable consequences. All fears are the result of imagination of what will happen next. A person afraid of heights imagines getting near the edge and falling. Appeals to the conscious mind with explanations about reality and safety may not change these images and the basis of fear. The least helpful response is to say, "You do not have to be afraid." Thus, trying to tell people that they do not need to fear radiation does not connect with their gut feelings and images of danger. The imagination of the subconscious mind will win over the rational conscious mind every time.

If we ask a person who is fearful of radiation, "Why are you afraid?" they do not know the answer which is in their subconscious. So they are likely to rationalize an answer that may not make any sense to a technical person. At this point, if a technical person attempts to correct errors of technology, the fearful person may become distrustful and even angry because their fears are not about facts, but feelings. Experts are wrong to think they can ease fears of radiation by simply "getting the facts out." While facts are evaluated by the rational conscious mind, fears come from subconscious gut feelings, not logical analysis. The gut feeling of a fearful person will tell them that even though radiation injuries are very unlikely to occur, that is not an adequate justification for ignoring risks of possible future effects.

Thank you for your continuing interest. As always, your questions or feedback are welcomed. Feel free to contact us through email, our blog, or our Facebook page.

Regards,
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Radiation Safety Counseling Services

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