



Radiation Safety Counseling News

Radiation - To Fear or Not to Fear?

Dear Reader,

The following essay was drawn from several presentations which I made to professional societies last summer. I thought you might find this a helpful compliment to slide presentations for which links were provided last month.

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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Radiation: To Fear or Not to Fear?

Most everyone will admit that they are afraid of radiation, at least under some circumstances. Even career radiation safety professionals may find themselves in situations which raise concerns for radiation exposures. Notice I used the word "concerns." Often men, in particular, will tell me that they are not afraid, but they may have concerns. Our society seems to encourage men not to be afraid. However, I suggest that the words "concern" and "fear" essentially mean the same thing.

Gavin De Becker tells us that fears are natural and OK. Fear is a gift for our protection as a natural response of our minds for safety. Our minds are always on the alert for danger. We have survived as a species by paying attention to our fears and reacting as needed for protection. Psychologists define fear as a response to a specific stimulus, such as pain or imminent danger. De Becker would call such responses a true fear as part of our defense mechanism. However, since radiation does not produce any physical sensation or stimulus, fear of radiation is not a true fear, based on something happening right now (real danger). Radiation fears are based on images of predicted unacceptable consequences (perceived danger) of radiation exposure.

Fears based on imagination of perceived dangers have to be learned. They are not a natural or instinctive fear, such as fear of snakes. Radiation fears are more of a worry or anxiety related to what we are told about radiation effects. Images of consequences may include cancer and death as conveyed by the media which typically reports radiation as "deadly radiation." Unfortunately much of the fear inducing reports on radiation are based on mythology (something believed which is not technically true, based on false premises and misunderstanding). De Becker says that we worry about what has a low probability of

happening, because if the probability is high, we take action. Worrying about radiation is a distraction from what is happening in favor of what we imagine might happen. Will Rogers reportedly said, "I have experienced a great many terrible things in my life, a few of which have actually happened." Imagination can conjure powerful possibilities.

Media reports often link radiation with cancer. To give the media some leeway, we could say they are simply reporting what "everyone knows" namely, radiation is deadly. Such reports raise fears and as public concerns rise reporters respond with more fearsome stories of radiation, and the loop expands. Stories about cancer get our attention because cancer is a word which is dark and frightening, and stirs bleak feelings. One writer describes cancer as a crab-like scavenger reaching its tentacles into the life of the soul as well as the body. It destroys the will as it gnaws away at the flesh. Therefore, it is easy to conclude we should avoid any prospects of cancer by the precautionary principle, "It is better to be safe than sorry." Interestingly, while people worry about radiation causing cancer, more than half of all cancers might be prevented by lifestyle changes, such as exercise, weight control, and not smoking.

Fear of radiation itself may be a danger to us. Our thoughts of being harmed may actually be harming us. Fear, anxiety, stress, and worry kill through: high blood pressure, addictions, drugs, heart disease, weight loss or gain, depression, insomnia, suicides, abortions, and post traumatic stress disorder. Psychological effects may be equally, if not more, damaging than physical health effects from radiation. In 1933 President Roosevelt said, "...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." Unreasoning fear may cause us to make increasingly foolish choices in daily decisions about risks.

Our Culture of Fear

Daniel Gardner says that we live in an interesting time where people commonly shrug off great risks, such as automobile travel, and yet live in great fear of typically trivial risks such as radiation. Part of the answer about why we live in a culture of fear is self interest. Fear sells. Fear makes money. Fear is a fantastic marketing tool. We cannot turn on the news or open a paper without seeing fear at work. The countless companies and consultants in the business of protecting the fearful from whatever they may fear know it only too well. The more fear, the better the sales. Activists and NGOs know that their influence with the media depends on telling the scariest stories possible. Gardner says the media, too, know the value of fear. The media are in the business of profit, and crowding in the information marketplace means the competition for eyes and ears is steadily intensifying. Inevitably and increasingly, the media turn to fear to protect shrinking market shares because a warning of mortal peril-"A story you can't afford to miss!"-is an excellent way to get someone's attention.

Fear wins elections, expands budgets, and sells news media. Fear is an excellent way to promote the interests of groups to boost memberships, and donations, and enhance political clout. We encounter these messages of fear daily. The opportunities for finding a fear, promoting it, and leveraging it to increase sales are only limited by imagination. Fear of death is a great promoter.

Drug companies like to show how we have lost control of our lives and can regain control with a medication. There is money to be made by marketing fear. "Unreasoning fear" is bad for society, but great for marketers.

De Becker calls the promotion of fear by the media "electronic terrorism" and devotes a whole chapter to the newspeak of fear. Media stories are popular because we are good with stories and bad with numbers. A touching story is more memorable than the best analysis, even

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though anecdotes are not data and don't prove anything. Thoughts of risks are hard to turn off when fear is sprayed at us like tear gas from every TV- next up, another nightmare, next up, another tragedy, next up, another terrible thing from someone's imagination. Language, images, and graphics are carefully chosen to make each story seem urgent or significant. Viewers are left swimming in pictures of fear without a balanced perspective on the situation.

De Becker says that news should focus on what is known, instead news often focuses on what is not known and builds on speculation, supposition, rumor, gossip, projection, and conjecture. The role of the media is to promote what makes news - novelty, conflict, impact, and human interest. Dramatic stories, such as the Fukushima reactors, out sell the slow, routine, and massive toll taken by smoking, alcohol, and obesity. It seems like the definition of news is "bad news." Although we do not like to hear bad news, we have to pay attention in case it's coming our way. De Becker suggests that with fearful images filling our minds, qualifying words, such as "allegedly, unconfirmed, possibly, could, potentially, conceivably" drop from our consciousness, leaving us with a sense that danger is everywhere around us. Perhaps TV news should just begin by saying: "We are surprised that you made it through another day, here is what happened to those that didn't.

The media like to portray radiation as "deadly." This implies that all will die if exposed to radiation and begs the question whether radiation is deadly in any amount. In truth, we are extremely resistant to harmful effects of radiation. Truth in advertising should say, "Today a person was exposed to highly survivable radiation." However, after sixty years of bad news about radiation we are fertile soil for fear mongers. The "War on Terror" has done well to establish a culture of fear. Fear obscures reason, intensifies emotions, and makes it easier to mobilize public opinion. Consequently, Americans remain inordinately fearful of unlikely dangers, such as radiation.

References

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