



# Radiation Safety Counseling News

## How to Talk with Patients Concerned About Radiation (Part 2)

Dear Reader,

This month's article continues a series based on several 90-minute seminars which I presented to about 50 staff of the Radiology Department at the Shady Grove Adventist Hospital on February 16 and 18, 2012. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to interact with hospital staff since most of my experience has been with industrial and research facilities. The seminar included two areas for discussion, 1) understanding the basis of radiation fears and 2) how to give the most helpful response to a concerned patient.



Ray Johnson

Last month we focused on understanding the basis for radiation fears. We concluded that it is OK for people to be afraid of radiation, although such fears are often based on mythology (what is believed but not technically true). Behind radiation fears are images of unacceptable consequences. Since no one has had an experience of radiation, fears of radiation have to be based on imagination.

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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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.

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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](#)

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## Role of the Subconscious Mind

As we have heard of "deadly radiation" repeatedly over the last 50 years, it now appears that our conscious minds have transferred radiation fears to our subconscious mind. Thus, reactions and decisions for radiation safety may now be an involuntary and automatic response as part of our natural subconscious defense mechanism. People may now instinctively want to avoid radiation in the same way we respond to fears of snakes, spiders, heights, closed spaces, and submersion.

Since radiation does not give us any physical sensation to warn of us of danger, such as touching a hot pan on the stove, we have to learn to become afraid of radiation. The media has taught us to fear radiation by dramatization of radiation stories which emphasize that all radiation is harmful and should be avoided. Thus, the message of radiation dangers is now

strongly ingrained in the protective response mechanism of our subconscious minds. Even the word "radiation" alone can trigger an automatic avoidance response based on instinct and not on rational analysis. As with avoidance of snakes, our response is to fear first and think later.

### Communication with Our Subconscious Mind

Because avoidance of radiation may come from our subconscious mind, attempts to provide rational technical answers to the conscious mind of a fearful person may not be helpful.

Technical people often believe the reason people are afraid of radiation is because of inadequate knowledge. While people may not generally understand the technology of radiation safety, they believe that they have sufficient understanding of the dangers to make judgments which seem prudent for the circumstances. Most would be surprised to learn that the information which they have always heard about radiation may be largely mythology. While their fears are real, the basis for those fears may be technically wrong.

### Questions from Hospital Patients

How would you respond to the questions below?

- Is this x-ray going to harm me?
- It is dangerous to have too many x-rays?
- How much radiation is my child getting?
- Do I really need another x-ray?
- Am I going to glow?
- How long will I be radioactive?
- The TV news says x-rays are bad. Is this true?

What is the common aspect of all of these questions? Hopefully you will recognize that all of these questions express some concern or fears for x-rays and radiation. So, how would you respond? Will a better understanding of the technology of radiation, risks, etc, be most helpful for you? Will understanding of feelings, fears, and risk perceptions be most helpful? What have you tried in the past or thought of trying? Are there magic words that will make a difference? Is there "an answer?" Attendees at my seminars keep hoping that I will give them the magic answers. However, there is no single magic answer. Actually there are many answers that you could use which may open the door for further dialogue or close down the communication. Only you individually can judge whether your answer brings you closer to your goal for communication or not.

**Challenges for Patient Questions** - For many technical people or care givers, the greatest challenge is when the dialogue gets emotional. What can you do when your best information is not accepted? How do you answer hypothetical questions? What if your answers cause more upset? What if you do not have any data for answering the question? Is there any hope for dealing with fears?

Fear is the most common feeling expressed by people with concerns for radiation. Are we prepared to deal with fears or other feelings? Most of us are trained in the technology of radiation protection. And yet, our greatest day-to-day challenge on our jobs may be related to dealing with feelings.

Would our jobs be easier if people left their feelings at home? Are feelings difficult to comprehend? Are feelings a foreign language? Does logical analysis of feelings help? In our best efforts, do our own feelings get hooked? Do you find yourself getting defensive and arguing your views? When feelings are expressed, would you like to just run away? If we

## 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.

open the door to other's feelings, will we be overwhelmed? Do we have any training to deal with fears? Are we perplexed by people's fears of radiation? Do we know how to provide helpful responses to an upset, angry, or fearful person?

### Responses Which May Not be Helpful

**Correcting Technical Errors** - Attempts to correct technical understanding may further upset a fearful person, especially in the midst of their fears. While in the grip of fear, a person cannot logically process new technical data. Your best information may seem confusing and contradictory to what their gut instinct is telling them. They may well get frustrated that you do not understand their fears and they may become suspicious of your motives. They also know that you have not heard their feelings, which may be what they are hoping you will hear.

**Telling Them, "It is Safe"** - Some may hear this favorably, if they have confidence in your judgment. However, some may see this response as your answer and not theirs. There are several questions about the word "safe." The first is, "What does safe mean?" The second is, "How do we know?" The third question is, "Who decides if it is safe?" Safe is in the eye of the beholder and consequently decisions on safety have to be made by each person individually. They may look to you for guidance, but ultimately they have to decide for themselves.

**Telling Them, "You do not Have to be Afraid of Radiation"** - This is the same as telling a person fearful of snakes, spiders, or heights that they do not have to be afraid. While such conclusions may seem technically justified by the circumstances, they do not change a person's fears. Fearful persons will hear this response as a discount of their feelings. Psychologists tell us that all feelings are OK and not to be judged as good or bad, or right or wrong.

These responses are demonstrating only one attribute of effective risk communication, namely that you are the master of your technical specialty. They are missing the other attribute, which has to do with how you show that you care. There is an old adage which says, "People may not care how much you know, until they know how much you care." Thus, the most helpful responses to a fearful person may be a matter of how you demonstrate caring.

Next month we will explore an option for helpful responses to a fearful or upset persons that will demonstrate caring. This option is called, "Active Listening."

Your comments on this article are welcomed. Notice also we have added a link to our website ([Ask a Question](#)) where you can post questions for which you would like answers. Be well and God's blessings to you.

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