



Radiation Safety Counseling News

How Can We Change People's Minds?

Dear Reader,

This month I would like to share with you my response to a question that was asked following a presentation that I made to my local chapter of the Health Physics Society.

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



Ray Johnson

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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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How Can We Change People's Minds?

This question was raised after I gave a 30 minute presentation Friday, May 11, 2012 on ***The Psychology of Radiation Safety and Fukushima*** at the annual meeting of the Baltimore-Washington Chapter of the Health Physics Society. After my presentation, a person in the audience said, "Ray, I have been listening to you for years and I still do not get it, how can I change the mind of a person afraid of radiation?" This is probably the biggest question confronting radiation safety professionals. This person has been attempting to provide helpful responses to allay people's fears of radiation for decades. No doubt, he has been very effective, perhaps more so than he realizes. However, he still feels frustrated by what he sees as unwarranted fears and how to address them. While I attempted to provide a response, other members of the audience joked about the need for an answer as a short sound bite. I wish I knew a short answer. Actually, I do. Strictly speaking, "***We cannot change the mind of another person.***"

What Control Do We Have?

The only control we have in any communication or relationship is over ourselves. We cannot control the other person. We always have the option of changing ourselves. However, this may not be a simple matter. We have all adopted a lifestyle and views based upon our accumulated life experience. From life's experiences we have programmed our subconscious mind to respond in an automatic pattern based on how we have consciously interpreted these experiences. The automatic functions of our subconscious mind have become a habit outside of our awareness. Thus, our response to life's situations seems natural for us. We do not realize that our responses follow a subconscious pattern developed over our lifetime.

Can We Change Our Habits?

How hard is it to change a habit? Have any of you tried to lose weight recently? Have you tried to stop smoking or drinking alcohol? Have you tried to include exercise in your daily routine? Changing our own habits can be exceedingly difficult. If we have such a hard time changing our own habits, behavior, or responses, "How can we expect to change the mind of others?" The simple answer is that we cannot. So, should we just give up on trying to deal with people who are afraid of radiation? Should we resign ourselves to a world where the prevailing view is that all radiation is deadly? Is there any hope? Yes, there is!

What Can We Do?

We can begin by evaluating our own perspectives on how others react to radiation. Do we find ourselves puzzled and frustrated by other's views which may differ greatly from what we believe to be true? Do we see their reactions as misguided, uninformed, and wrong? Do we believe that their fears of radiation are unwarranted and unjustified? Do we feel like we must correct the errors of their technical understanding of radiation? If we try to correct technical errors will we come across sounding like we have more concern for technology than we do for their concerns and fears? Perhaps it would be helpful for each of us to take stock of our own world view and how we came to the perspectives we hold dear today. How long have we thought about radiation risks before arriving at our current understanding?

A Suggested Approach

You may recall the adage given in our [monthly newsletter for April 2012](#), "**Hearing feelings is more important than solving problems.**" Thus, the most helpful initial dialogue could be to identify and reflect the other person's feelings or concerns. After the other person is satisfied that you have identified their true feelings, that you are not trying to make them wrong, and you really care about them as a person, then you can begin to share or clarify technical information. Launching into a technical response immediately may seem as if you are discounting their feelings and speaking to them as an uninformed child. By establishing rapport around their concerns or feelings, you may open the door for the other person to begin hearing more factual information. No one likes to be told that the basis of their views or concerns is wrong. How would we feel about someone telling us that our views on radiation (which we have developed over decades) are wrong? As career radiation safety professionals, do we have a sense that our views on radiation, honed over decades of study, attending radiation conferences, and debating with peers, represent a fundamental and defensible truth? Do other people believe their views on radiation, also developed over many years, are also the truth? And yet we conclude their views cannot be the truth because they may be based on misinformation and radiation mythology.

Is Telling the Truth the Answer?

While I absolutely believe in telling the truth (as I know it), presenting my perspective may not always be helpful in an opening dialogue. What others believe is also truth to them. Telling others their basis of truth is wrong, and our truth is better may become a matter of contention rather than helpful for establishing a relationship. Perhaps a better approach would be to start with letting others know that their view or position is OK and then lead them gently back to our view. It can be difficult, however, for a technical person to view another person's position as OK, when it appears their technical understanding is flawed. Assuming that you are willing to let the other person have their view, then you could inquire if they are interested in additional information.

Relating on a Personal Note

A lady recently raised concerns for x-ray exposures as part of several medical procedures for her 18 month old daughter. She said that she would like to estimate her exposures and cancer risk, but was confused by information which she found in her research. A response to

Communication Insights

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

this lady could be handled only on a technical basis by providing x-ray exposure and risk estimates as she requested. However, more data may not allay the lady's fears for the future cancer risk of her daughter. Therefore a more helpful response might acknowledge the lady's fears and point out that her concerns are to be expected from all the negative publicity about radiation. Many people share her concerns and have raised similar questions. Since most people have only heard about radiation as "bad news" it is natural to be fearful without a better understanding of radiation and its possible effects. As a career professional in radiation safety I might suggest that my studies of radiation effects show that we are very resistant to harm by radiation. While the prevailing view for radiation safety is that all radiation may contribute to some future chance of effects, in fact the chances are incredibly small. Possible consequences of the radiation exposures received by her daughter may be insignificant when compared with other future health risks related to lifestyle, diet, exercise, and weight control.

Will This Information Change Her Mind?

Possibly. However, we are not responsible for her thoughts and feelings. The best that we can do is to acknowledge her as a caring parent and offer additional information as she requested. I further suggested that we could offer a personal interpretation of the information based on our career as a specialist in radiation safety. She can process our information and agree or disagree. This is her choice over which we have no control and no responsibility. As I have noted before, a technical response is directed to the conscious rational mind, whereas fears come from the subconscious mind which does not hear or process logical data. Our role is to be a compassionate resource of information and experience to the extent that others are open to hearing.

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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