Dread Factors that Influence Our Response to Risk or Crises

Researchers have found patterns in the way we perceive some risks as more threatening than others. For instance, most people are more concerned about a plane crash than an automobile crash, even though you are far more likely to die in an auto accident than a plane crash. And people are often more fearful of sharks while at the beach than of developing skin cancer, even though annually there are only 6 deaths from shark attacks compared to 48,000 from melanoma. So, what drives this false sense of risk? Researchers have categorized the factors that influence our fears into certain "dread factors". Dread factors influence how much we worry about different risks, and thereby affect how much we educate and prepare ourselves against them. There are many "dread factors" that influence our thinking and behavior around risks; below are 10 of the most common ones.

SCALE – When an incident occurs in which multiple victims are impacted at one time, we tend to add a higher risk value to it. EXAMPLE: Airplane crash versus car accident – most people worry more about dying in a plane crash than a car accident, even though we are far more likely to be injured or die in a car accident.

IMMEDIACY – The farther out the consequences, the lower the dread factor. EXAMPLE: Flooding of a city vs. global warming – we are far more likely to take action on immediate threats that may actually be less consequential than longer term ones. Another example – why we will go to more extensive lengths to save one whale trapped in a bay than to save an entire species from extinction. Why do we give more concern to 10 miners trapped underground than to improving prevention of black lung?

IMAGINABILITY – The more easily people can imagine the consequences, the higher the dread factor. EXAMPLE: Drowning vs. food poisoning – we are much more likely to die of food poisoning than drowning, but it is hard to imagine what that would feel like, so food poisoning has a lower dread factor even though it is far more common.

PERSONAL CONTROL – The more personal control (real or perceived) that one has of a situation, the lower the dread factor. EXAMPLE: Car crash vs. airplane crash; we feel more in control of driving our own car than being on an airplane, so we have a lower perception of risk in a car, even though it is far more risky.

LACK OF CONTROL – More choices decreases the dread factor (likely related to a perception of more control). EXAMPLE: If we can get to an off-shore island by row boat, motor boat, swimming, or helicopter, we are more likely to feel the choice we made is less risky in and of itself than if there was only one choice (even if that is the same choice we would have made with multiple options.)

UNFAIRNESS – The more "unfair" a situation is perceived (consequences that hit "innocents" harder), the higher the dread factor. EXAMPLE: School shooting vs. gang shootings.

CHILDREN INVOLVED - Anything that impacts children will have a higher dread factor. EXAMPLE: A baby falling in a well is given more attention than 5 adults killed in a car accident.

LACK OF FAMILIARITY – The higher the unfamiliarity, the higher the dread factor. EXAMPLE: There is much more hype around an Ebola outbreak than a flu outbreak.

MEDIA COVERAGE – Significant media coverage increases the dread factor (based in large part on the "availability heuristic"). EXAMPLES: Baby Jessica, Humphrey the whale, school shootings, trapped miners – all are very real and potentially tragic events, but there is a much higher dread factor than more real and significant threats such as car accidents, cancer, inner-city shootings, etc., in large part because of significant media coverage.