

Be Afraid of Being Very Afraid

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Would it reassure you to know that your risk of being killed by a sniper in the Washington area is infinitesimally low -- as of Friday, about one in 517,422? Probably not.

Is it meaningful to suggest that the risk of being shot by the sniper is tiny compared with risks you take every day, like driving, jaywalking or smoking? Of course not.

Is it arrogant to suggest that people who are wearing bulletproof vests or crouching behind their cars as they gas up are irrationally over-reacting to the risk of being the sniper's next victim? Of course it is.

Fear, born of that most ancient and genetically embedded imperative -- survival -- is real, and at times far overpowers reason. This is one of those times.

And yet it is also fair to suggest that fear is, in and of itself, a risk. Frightened people seeking a sense of safety can make dangerous choices: to drive extra miles to avoid a location they think is unsafe, to buy a gun they're not trained to use, or to reduce their physical exercise by staying indoors or close to home. In fact, just the stress of fear is dangerous. It raises levels of certain hormones that suppress the immune system, thus increasing our susceptibility to infectious disease. We have to fear the sniper, but we also have to fear fear itself.

It's a complicated conflict between our natural, self-protective emotions on the one hand and, on the other, the risk that our fears might actually exacerbate the dangers we face.

Psychologists who study this field, known as risk perception, find that humans tend to fear similar things for similar reasons. Essentially, risks have unique affective characteristics that cause us to be more or less afraid, regardless of the facts. But rather than present a dry recitation of those risk perception factors from the academics who figured them out -- Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff, Sarah Lichtenstein or Princeton University professor Daniel Kahneman, who just won the Nobel Memorial Prize in economics for his research on why people make seemingly irrational decisions -- let me introduce you to one of my relatives, who lives in Silver Spring. He's 49, married, with a daughter in middle school. He lives two miles from the site of one of the killings. He and his family are frequent customers of the crafts store where the first shooting took place. They often eat in a Chinese restaurant near the Home Depot where Monday night's killing occurred. We spoke Tuesday night about how he and his family are feeling.

He knows nothing of the academic literature on risk perception, yet he illustrates many of the factors that experts have identified as the roots of why we fear even small risks such as death by sniper:

We are more afraid when we lack control. It's often more frightening to sit in the passenger's seat than to drive the car yourself. Any risk seems worse if it feels as if we can't do anything about it. In the case of the sniper, my relative told me, it scares him that there seems to be no way to avoid being a victim, short of becoming a recluse. "Regardless of what you do, you could get shot," he said. "It's not like there's a neighborhood you can avoid, or you can hold your purse close to your chest, or avoid the guy who looks drunk . . . the kinds of things that you can do to make yourself safe from some risks."

No matter how small a risk may be, it will evoke fear in anyone who thinks he or she personally could be a victim. Fear of terrorism in the United States was negligible before Sept. 11, 2001, in part because nearly all the terrorist attacks that targeted Americans had occurred overseas. Now that we know it could happen to us, we are more worried that it actually will. Same with the sniper. "There's no way you can say, 'It's not me,' " my relative said. "The randomness means everybody's eligible. The risk may be one in a million or whatever, but you can't rationally say that you might not be that one."

The more uncertain we are about a risk, the more afraid we will be. Again, terrorism is a prime example. Who are the terrorists? What will they do next, and when, and where? But, my relative noted, at least with terrorism we have a

general idea of who's behind it. The sniper "could be anybody, anywhere, at any time. We just don't know what's going to happen next." There might even be more than one. The lack of clues, he said, makes him frightened. As more clues are found and uncertainty begins to segue into hope, we can expect people's risk assessments to change as well.

Risks to children frighten us more than risks to adults. Asbestos in our kids' schools is more alarming than asbestos in our workplaces. And you won't find any "Missing Adult" pictures on milk cartons. The sniper became more frightening to us after he attacked a 13-year-old. "It got so much worse when he shot that kid," my relative said. Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose reinforced the point when he said, "Someone is so mean-spirited that they shot a child. I guess it's getting to be really, really personal now."

The more aware of a risk we are, the more afraid we are likely to be. On July 3, 2002, amid media reports speculating that terrorists might attack on the Fourth of July holiday, FBI statistics showed that handgun purchase requests were a third higher than normal. There was little or no hard information that the risk of attack had increased; the pervasive awareness of the possibility was what provoked the fear. These days, the sniper is "all anybody's talking about," my relative reported. "It's on all the news, in all the papers. It's on your mind all the time. You can't not think about it." Other risks, less well-publicized -- obesity, smoking -- seem to have faded away. They're not gone. It's just that we're not paying as much attention to them because they're not on the radar screen of our fears.

Fear is greater when a risk is new. Though my relative didn't mention it, this is a major risk perception factor. Consider the example of West Nile virus. In areas where it shows up, headlines blare and newscasts scream. It's new, and public fears run high. But in cities such as New York and Boston, where the disease is established and kills few people every year, it's no longer new. People there have it in perspective, and the fear is much lower. The type of threat is part of this equation. New York had the Son of Sam, Los Angeles the Night Stalker; Washington's suburbs have never had a series of crimes like this. A serial sniper is new.

Can these insights make a difference? Will understanding the roots of our fears make us brave? Hardly. But perhaps by understanding how our natural human reactions can skew our perception of personal risk, we can avoid responding in risky ways. We can realize that some responses do more to make us feel safe than they do to protect us. Driving extra miles to avoid perceived danger zones increases the probability of our being in a motor vehicle crash far more than it reduces our chances of being shot. Buying a gun for protection makes us the owner of a weapon that is both reassuring and dangerous, a weapon that research shows is far more likely to be fired for reasons other than self-defense.

There are also economic, social and psychological risks to being too afraid. Avoiding shopping harms the local economy. Canceled and relocated events inconvenience thousands of people. Staying indoors deprives us of exercise and social contact. What do extreme fear and overreaction teach our kids? And worrying about the sniper distracts us from dealing with risks that are much more of a threat, such as cancer and heart disease.

Perhaps simply by understanding that it's human nature to react to risks emotionally -- or overreact, if you want to call it that -- we can measure our fears against the facts with a little more clarity and perspective. We can balance the rational against the emotional, and keep in mind that even if a risk is new, uncertain, makes us feel powerless, dominates our awareness and feels as if it could happen to us, we shouldn't ignore the fact that the actual chances of its happening are extraordinarily low.

Perhaps our goal should be to adopt the behavior of many Israelis, who have learned to cope with the now familiar, and much greater, risk of terrorism in their lives. My relative can already imagine that happening. "If this guy kept shooting someone every three days for the rest of the year, what are you going to do? Are you not going to go outdoors anymore? Stop driving? Quit your job? There's part of you that doesn't want to deal with the fear, so you get on with your life."

There is a battle between fear and fact taking place in the hearts and minds of my relatives and friends in the D.C. area, and all their friends. It's a cautionary tale for all of us, whether we're facing snipers, West Nile virus, child abductions or terrorism. Frightened people can make dangerous choices. Understanding why risks make us so afraid can help us apply both our emotional and our rational sides to the challenge of making ourselves safe. David Ropeik is director of risk communication at the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis and co-author of "RISK: A Practical Guide for Deciding What's Really Safe and What's Really Dangerous in the World Around You" (Houghton Mifflin).

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