



e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

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Fear

Fear or anxiety is the emotional reaction that human beings have to the perception of a threat. Threats to one's health can certainly elicit fear.

Physiologically, fear is an energizing emotion as it involves activation of the sympathetic nervous system. A person is energized to respond to the threat with the goal of reducing the threat.

It stands to reason, therefore, that threats to one's health should generate behavior change, changes that can diminish the threats. Anecdotally, most of us can think of instances in which a health scare in oneself or in a significant other person was a trigger to adopt a healthier lifestyle. However, we have also witnessed the opposite result when a threat prompts no change. There is much research that indicates that fear messages can be ineffective in fostering behavior change.

On both an individual and public health level, the inconsistent effects of fear messages on behavior change have been of interest to behavioral scientists for years. Under what circumstances does a fear message lead to the target behavior change, rather than defensive dismissal of the message and no ensuing behavior change?

One important factor is whether or not the fear message is successful at convincing the recipients of the message that they are capable of making the behavior change. That is, does the message promote the belief that one is able to perform the target behavior (i.e., self-efficacy)? For example, if a fear

message about the consequences of poorly controlled diabetes leads the recipient to believe that she/he cannot possibly make the lifestyle changes necessary to reduce this risk, then behavior change is unlikely to occur. However, if a fear appeal about the dangers of smoking convinces an adolescent that he/she is capable of resisting peer pressure to smoke, then the desired result (no smoking) is more likely to occur.

More recently, attention has been given to self-affirmation. If a fear message highlights a threat to health but also challenges one's self-perception, the individual is most likely to be motivated to protect the view of one's self as a good and effective person. In this case, the fear message may be dismissed. For example, if a public health message says that it is "stupid" to destroy one's lungs by smoking and the recipient is a smoker who isn't particularly confident about his/her intelligence, protecting one's integrity regarding intelligence may well lead to dismissal of the threatening health message. Conversely, there is recent evidence that threat messages that include self-affirming components seem to reduce defensive reactions and thereby are more likely to result in the desired behavior change. Self-affirming components might ask recipients to think of a time when they were kind to another person, or when they had been considerate of another person's feelings. The theory is that reminding individuals of their valued attributes will allow them to maintain a sense of integrity, even when presented with information about the need to change an unhealthy behavior.

Many of us have experienced frustration with family members or friends (or perhaps even ourselves) who haven't changed a behavior that is threatening to long term health, in spite of repeated messages about the risks. It seems like fear should be sufficient to change behavior, but often it just doesn't work. Perhaps this information about self-efficacy and self-affirmation will help clarify this paradox.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is Professor of Family Medicine and Director of Behavioral Science for the Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:

e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu

phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021