

## **SIX RULES FOR GOVERNMENT AND PRESS ON TERRORISM: UNDERCUTTING FEAR ITSELF**

The main weapon the terrorists have is not bombs or anthrax, but fear itself. The U. S. government and press can either play into the hands of the terrorists by magnifying anxiety and fear or help thwart their efforts by instilling courage and calm. Several of the world's experts on countering fear, panic, and terror gathered for a workshop with administrators of large corporations to recommend steps that could undercut unreasoning fear and magnify constructive reassurance in the American public. We offer six well-documented psychological principles to guide government representatives and reporters in dealing publicly with the post September 11 world.

Although the dictionaries of quotations have abbreviated it to "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," Franklin Roosevelt made a more complex point in his first inaugural when he said, "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself--nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance." Scientific psychology provides guidance for public officials attempting to blunt nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror.

Fear is an important and sensible human response to events such as those that transpired on September 11 and to bioterrorism. Fear and anxiety increase adaptive vigilance, ready us to fight or flee and prompt searches for means of coping. High fear-provoking messages can be a powerful means of changing attitudes and inducing action if they convince audiences that: the problem is real, they are vulnerable to it, the solution will eliminate the problem, and they are able to carrying out the solution.

Fear and anxiety very easily become maladaptive. When people feel helpless to do anything about the objects of their fears, they become paralyzed, depressed, and demoralized. When people cannot distinguish safe from dangerous situations, they become chronically anxious, and avoid many innocent activities, like flying and shopping. When people cannot see a clear upper limit to the danger, fear can easily turn to panic. Here are six principles that can be incorporated into the reporting of terrorism and into government announcements about terrorism to undercut these dysfunctional states.

### **PRINCIPLES**

1. Reduce Helplessness. A danger that is uncontrollable evokes much more fear than the identical danger when it controllable. When individuals believe that they can take action that might influence the danger, even slightly, fear is much reduced (Seligman, 1975). Government and press announcements should include recommendations for actions that citizens can take. Truisms such as "be vigilant" are unhelpful unless they specify how, where, and why. If there are conceivable actions that citizens can take to avoid, minimize, or influence the danger, these should be spelled out. These actions need not result in capture of terrorists for the fear-reducing value to take hold. (See the appendix for one such program, "Citizens-on-patrol")

2. Blunt Availability. Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts than drive generalizations. Because evocative images are more available in memory, we tend to over-estimate how likely they are to occur (Tversky & Tversky, 1973). When news brings vivid photos of a plane crash, people overestimate the likelihood that planes crash. Dramatic, vivid, repeated visually evocative materials can be tools of terror or vehicles that reassure. By repeatedly showing the hijacked planes hitting the towers, news increased our sense that such crashes were likely to happen. By repeatedly showing the towers collapsing, news magnified our fear that we could be trapped in a tall building as it collapsed. By repeatedly airing stories about anthrax, news increased the likelihood that we would be fearful as we open our mail. News, of course, should be reported. However, narratives of reassurance and base-rate information should be included to blunt the over generalizing effect produced by the availability heuristic.
3. Reframe. Our perception of risk is a function of framing. Frame a choice in terms of loss and people become risk averse. Frame it in terms of gain and people are more likely to accept the risk. Although the risk expressed in each is mathematically the same, there will likely be two different responses to the following scenarios (Kahneman & Tversky, 1973). 1) Of the 18 exposed to anthrax in the past weeks, 14 were treated with appropriate antibiotics and survived. 2) Of the 18 exposed to anthrax in the past weeks, 4 have died. By focusing on those who have died not those who have survived, news magnifies our sense of risk. Similarly by focusing on the 4,000-4,500 people killed on September 11 and not the 20,000 or more survivors of the world trade center, the news magnifies our perception that terrorists will kill us and minimizes our sense that we will survive a terrorist attack. By focusing on the handful of letters thought to contain anthrax, we lose track of the over 600 million other pieces of mail that are unaffected each day. By focusing on the four planes that were downed on September 11 and not on the 39,996 scheduled to fly that day that were unaffected, we increase the fear of flying.
4. Tell Stories of Survival and Triumph. The stories we tell matter. In a contest between data and dramatic narrative, the narrative is likely to be believed (Bruner, 1990). The press has focused too much attention on stories of the country's lack of preparedness to cope with bioterrorism and too little on the capacity of the country to respond to challenges. Officials have invited stories about unpreparedness by offering the public misinformation and sometimes conflicting claims. What is missing in much of the commentary from appointed officials and also from the news media are the stories that recall past crises that were surmounted by diligence and scientific commitment. For example, many remember the fear of polio in the early fifties. Parents kept children away from swimming pools, public drinking fountains and movie theaters. Every child and adult who lived through those times remembers children in leg braces and children in iron lungs. Fear was pervasive. Uncertainty was high. Then Jonas Salk and his colleagues created the polio vaccine. We no longer feared polio.

Remember AIDS? “Diagnosis was once a death sentence. Who would have imagined that a combination of pills taken faithfully could control the virus?” Smallpox? “We have already proven that we can beat it. Anthrax? The drugs to save lives exist. Our challenge is detection. Here are the warning signs. Just as we met these challenges, we will likely meet any posed by bioterror.”

5. Model Courage; It is Contagious. Just as fear is contagious so too is courage. Those who model courage and heroism inspire it in others (Bandura, 1977). Some of the high government officials making announcements convey courage; others do not. Some of the press conveys courage, but others do the opposite. The courage-enhancing techniques of Winston Churchill and Edward R. Murrow are trainable, and we suggest such “media training” for those making these announcements. Reporters and anchors who show anxiety or sound frightened should stay off the air.
6. Use Safety Signals. During the London Blitz, there were warning sirens and all-clear sirens. People were anxious during the warning signals, but could relax and go about their lives after the all-clear signal. Our situation is more ambiguous, but we emphasize the well-documented principle that in the absence of safety signals, people are anxious all the time (Weiss, 1970; Seligman, 1968). The public has been receiving warning signals, but no safety signals. The “indefinite extension” of the late October warning is an egregious example. Continuous states of high alert create the cry wolf effect and produce chronic anxiety, depression, and helplessness. If there are times, or places, or actions during which there is reduced danger, these should be spelled out.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean, Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania (kjamieson@asc.upenn.edu)

Martin E.P. Seligman, Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania (marty@apa.org) 610 896 9098

On behalf of the committee: :

David H. Barlow, Professor of Psychology, Research Professor of Psychiatry  
Director Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, Boston University

Aaron T. Beck, University Professor of Psychiatry  
University of Pennsylvania

Judge Phyllis W. Beck  
Superior Court of Pennsylvania

David Clark, Professor of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry  
Maudsley Hospital, University of London

Jim Clifton, CEO, Gallup Co.

Raymond D. Fowler, CEO, American Psychological Association

Ray Griffin, VP for Human Relations, R.F. Weston Co.

Jim Hovey, President, The Fox Companies

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean, Annenberg School of Communications  
University of Pennsylvania

S.J. Rachman, Professor emeritus, Psychology, University of British Columbia

Joey Reiman, CEO, BrightHouse Co.

William Robertson, CEO, R.F. Weston Co.

Peter Schulman, Research Director, Seligman Research Alliance

Martin Seligman, Fox Leadership Professor, University of Pennsylvania

Elaine Wilson, Clinical Psychologist

G. Terence Wilson, Professor of Psychology, Rutgers

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