

WELL NOW

THE STUDENT HEALTH CENTER NEWSLETTER



(ir)Rational?

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A few weeks ago I met a friend at a local pub to catch up on life and shoot the breeze. Crowded, as this place was on this particular evening, it was impossible to not overhear the conversation at the next table, jammed up against ours. It was a scenario which left me pondering this idea of risk reduction and wellness in the 1990s in a society teeming with problems ranging from the individual microcosm to societal and even global dimensions.

Eight or so women and men were huddled around the table deep in debate about social ills. Between verbal dissertations of this problem or that, another round was ordered—scotch and sodas, gin rocks twist, bourbon splash over...round paid for, cigarettes lit: ready to go. Empty twisted boxes of Camel Lights and stray ashes littered the table as the conversation continued. Is it ethical to buy tuna given that net fishermen and women ensnare dolphins and other marine life? (Copious smoking during this one.) Can a pregnant woman be accused of child abuse if she drinks or drugs? Is nuclear power becoming obsolete given the toxic waste we cannot dispose of with a clean bill of health? Another round please. Words become laborious with alcohol's grasp and 6 or 7 drinks down apiece, they got up and piled into their cars and drove off.

I wondered how many were fit to drive? I wondered if they knew that cigarette smoking causes more death and disability per year than homicide, earthquakes and automobile accidents combined? Not that one cause takes precedence over another. This is more an essay on risk perception or better yet—how we select the causes we embrace and deliver scathing critiques to the "other side" without a contemplative moment to ponder our own actions; our own behaviors; our own choices. And our fears or concerns about this or that while overlooking that or this—

I went through a phase after watching a horror movie where I double checked every door and window at night in fear of "the slasher." At the same time, I rarely used my seat belt because it was "a hassle" or it "wrinkled what I was wearing." How-

ever, homicide was the cause of death in 18,000 instances in 1985 in the United States while traffic accidents claimed 55,350. I still chose to drive and without a seat belt at that! When adjusted for age, traffic fatality becomes more grim, being the leading cause of death among Americans ages 18-30. Add drinking and driving and the scenario becomes worse.

The nuclear power industry has been brought to a virtual standstill from its earlier boon, due to public opinion, despite the fact that it has claimed only 6 lives in accidents in the past 30 years in the U.S. The same public, of that opinion, smokes billions of cigarettes a year, but demands a ban on an artificial sweetener because of a one-in-a-million chance it might cause cancer; the same public that eats meals laden in saturated fat, flocks to cities prone to earthquakes and goes hanggliding and rock climbing while fretting about pesticides in foods. We humans are curious creatures.

The problem with assessing real risk lies in how the odds are perceived. Everyone knows that when the odds of something occurring are, for example 50-50, then on average, half the time the event will occur. But fewer realize that the average usually nears 50 percent only after a large number of events; small numbers are more prone to wide variations.

This error in reasoning is the infamous gambler's illusion. Outside the casino, the risk looms. In one study, victims of a flood thought that the chances were remote that another would happen again. A cyclist choosing to ride at night without a helmet or light is prone to the same error when they "only do this occasionally." Alas for the mortality or humankind. We have much autonomy over our choices, but we choose to gamble regardless.

Perhaps the perception of risk has something to do with our control over that risk. An individual might live in fear of flying in an airplane but feel perfectly comfortable on the turnpike with a cigarette burning in the ashtray. It has long been known, much to the frustration of some risk experts, that the public may be much more willing to accept higher risks in activities over which they

can control such as smoking, drinking, driving or skiing than in things which there is little control: industrial pollution, food additives and commercial airlines.

The feeling of control, however, lends false comfort. In one study, tickets to a lottery were sold for a dollar to people in an office. Participants in one group were simply handed their tickets; in the other group the participants chose their own. Before the drawing, the ticket holders were asked if they would be willing to resale their tickets. The average resale price of the assigned tickets was \$1.96; the chosen tickets were averaged at \$8.67. The control over selection apparently made people think their odds of winning were better. An illusion of control can actually make a dangerous situation even more so. An intoxicated drinker may assume they are a better than average driver; the illusion may mean an individual assumes they are less prone to a heart attack; less prone to a biking accident (hence, no helmet); less prone to develop lung cancer; less prone to become addicted or chemically dependent to a drug.

And finally, in assessing risk, the main provider of information is often the one who skews reality to the sensationalist extreme—the media. In vying for network ratings, homicides will beat emphysema any day; a string of assaults and rapes by a psychopath will make more headlines than an acquaintance rape. The fact remains, more people die by their own hand in smoking and more women are raped by men they know each year than by homicides or by a lurking stranger waiting for that lone pedestrian.

So—I suppose—in conclusion, remember the illusion of control as just that: an illusion. And consider your reasoning and think critically. And do the small things which matter on a moment by moment basis: wear a bike helmet, buckle-up, have a designated driver, worry about toxins and quit smoking and obey the speed limit...and that way you'll be able to continue to stand up and be counted on issues like the rain forest, the dolphins, global warming and the ozone layer.

FROM THE HIP

INSIDE

**SAFE
GUARDING
YOUNG ONES**

BUG OFF

**OPEN WATER
SWIMMERS**

**AND MUCH
MORE...**

Summer water lovers...

did you know that 7,000 people drown each year, most of them in lakes, rivers and oceans rather than pools? If you plan to go out water skiing, windsurfing or sailing, remember, the majority of drownings occur after a few drinks. Be smart so you can enjoy many summer seasons! One poorly judged episode is all it takes!

Road- trippers!

Have a safe time this spring and summer. Remember the highways are much more dangerous than flying. You may trust your skills but you never know when the car next to you is driven by an intoxicated operator. Wear your safety belt and your chances of survival are increased EX-PONENTIALLY.

Yo health nuts!

We welcome a wide range of majors and specific health interests to join us in health promotion on campus. If you are looking for fun, practical experience, upper division and/or practicum credits, consider becoming a peer health advisor! Stop by the health education center in the Student Health Center for details.

Campers, back-packers

and outdoor enthusiasts in general: is your first aid kit adequately stocked with all the necessities? Stop by the Student Health Center Pharmacy and stock up on your stash for those summer journeys into the wild and wooley planet earth!