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More Afraid Than We Should Be

Americans wildly overestimated the risk of terrorism after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, according to a nationwide "emotion experiment."

In surveys conducted after the attacks, people estimated there was a 20 percent chance that they would be directly affected by a terrorist attack in the next year and said the "average American" faces a 48 percent risk, said researchers examining the links between emotions, policy and reality.

"There was an overwhelming overestimation of risk," said **Jennifer Lerner**, an assistant professor of social and decision sciences at Carnegie Mellon University. For even the 20 percent estimate to be accurate, we would have had to have Sept. 11 "every day and then some," she said.

Lerner and her colleagues also found that people who watched media reports that made them fearful -- such as a report on bioterrorism -- were likely to make higher risk assessments, while people who got news that made them angry -- like a report of some Arabs celebrating the attacks -- perceived relatively less risk. Both groups, however, greatly overestimated the actual risk of future attacks.

Fear and anger prompted support for different public policies: Fearful people tended to support policies of "conciliation," such as improved ties with the Muslim world, while angry people supported more "vengeful" policies, such as deporting foreigners without valid visas, the researchers found.

Lerner's paper, published this month in the journal *Psychological Science*, also found that women tended to respond with more fear, while men tended to respond with more anger. She said the findings suggested that the government and the media can unwittingly alter risk perception by making people either fearful or angry. Used responsibly, that connection could also be used to better communicate the real degree of risk, she said.

-- Shankar Vedantam