

# Our Emotions Can Lead Us Astray When Assessing Risks

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(PhysOrg.com) -- If you find yourself more concerned about highly publicized dangers that grab your immediate attention such as terrorist attacks, while forgetting about the more mundane threats such as global warming, you're not alone.

And you can't help it because it's human nature, according to a new study led by University of Colorado at Boulder psychology Professor Leaf Van Boven. That's because people tend to view their immediate emotions, such as their perceptions of threats or risks, as more intense and important than their previous emotions.

In one part of the study focusing on terrorist threats, using materials adapted from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Van Boven and his research colleagues presented two scenarios to people in a college laboratory depicting warnings about traveling abroad to two countries.

Participants were then asked to report which country seemed to have greater terrorist threats. Many of them reported that the country they last read about was more dangerous.

"What our study has shown is that when people learn about risks, even in very rapid succession where the information is presented to them in a very clear and vivid way, they still respond more strongly to what is right in front of them," Van Boven said.

With that in mind, Van Boven says one of the take-home messages from the study is that when communicating to the public, people must be mindful of how and when they publicize threats, which is a tall task in the around-the-clock news cycle of today.

"Whatever the threat of the season is can 'crowd out' concern about other threats even if those other threats are actually more dangerous," Van Boven said. "Because we are so emotionally influenced when it comes to assessing and reacting to threats, we may ignore very dangerous threats that happen not to be very emotionally arousing."

Human emotions stem from a very old system in the brain, Van Boven says. When it comes to reacting to threats, real or exaggerated, it goes against the grain of thousands of years of evolution to just turn off that [emotional](#) reaction. It's not something most people can do, he said.

"And that's a problem, because people's emotions are fundamental to their judgments and decisions in everyday life," Van Boven said. "When people are constantly being bombarded by new threats or things to be fearful of, they can forget about the genuinely big problems, like global warming, which really need to be dealt with on a large scale with public support."

In today's 24-hour society, talk radio, the Internet and extensive media coverage of the "threat of the day" only exacerbate the trait of focusing on our immediate emotions, he said.

"One of the things we know about how emotional reactions work is they are not very objective, so people can get outraged or become fearful of what might actually be a relatively minor threat," Van Boven said. "One worry is some people are aware of these kinds of effects and can use them to manipulate our actions in ways that we may prefer to avoid."

The study, which involved undergraduate students as subjects, was published in the August edition of the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. Michaela Huber, a doctoral student of [psychology](#) and neuroscience at CU-Boulder and Assistant Professor Katherine White of the University of Calgary co-authored the study.

Van Boven said the study would be of particular interest to policymakers.

"If you're interested in having an informed citizenry you tell people about all the relevant risks, but what our research shows is that is not sufficient because those things still happen in sequence and people will still respond immediately to whatever happens to be in front of them," he said. "In order to make good decisions and craft good policies we need to know how people are going to respond."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder ([news](#) : [web](#))

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