

Back away, please: Study finds general tendency for humans to fear things approaching, even if non-threatening

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In our long struggle for survival, we humans learned that something approaching us is far more of a threat than something that is moving away. This makes sense, since a tiger bounding toward a person is certainly more of a threat than one that is walking away.

Though we [modern humans](#) don't really consider such [fear](#), it turns out that it still plays a big part in our day-to-day lives. According to University of Chicago Booth School of Business Professor Christopher K. Hsee, we still have negative feelings about things that approach us—even if they objectively are not threatening.

"In order to survive, humans have developed a tendency to guard against animals, people and objects that come near them," Hsee explains. "This is true for things that are physically coming closer, but also for events that are approaching in time or increasing in likelihood."

In "Approach Aversion: Negative Hedonic Reactions Toward Approaching Stimuli," recently published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Hsee, along with Chicago Booth doctoral student Yanping Tu, and Zoe Y. Lu and Bowen Ruan of the University of Wisconsin, provocatively suggest that this fear, or as they call it "approach avoidance," is actually an innate tendency.

The team conducted a battery of eight tests in support of their thesis and

found that even nonthreatening objects and beings evoked [negative feelings](#) in participants as they came closer. Even seemingly docile entities, such as deer, had a fear factor attached to them since participants could still attach some uncertainty to a wild animal's behavior.

These initial investigations into approach avoidance are of practical use in a number of areas. Marketers, for example, can use this information to determine if they should gradually move a product closer to viewers in a television commercial, or whether that will actually harm the image of the product. Similarly, speakers who tend to move closer and closer toward their audiences during their speeches should think twice, as doing so may cast an unfavorable impression on listeners.

"Approach avoidance is a general tendency, humans don't seem to adequately distinguish between times they should use it and when they should not," Hsee adds. "They tend to fear approaching things and looming events even if objectively they need not fear."

More information: [faculty.chicagobooth.edu/chris ...vita/Papers/Approach%20Aversion.pdf](http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/chris...vita/Papers/Approach%20Aversion.pdf)

Provided by University of Chicago

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