



It makes you think...



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There seems to be a growing tendency for governments to frighten society into worrying about disaster, and the media seem to play along uncritically.

A wise person once advised whoever would listen, to not worry about terrible things which may happen, because more than 95% of them never would come to pass.

Worrying can be a big waste of energy and resources. That energy and those resources are better put to use dealing with what actually happens.

There seems to be a growing tendency for governments to frighten society into worrying about disaster, and the media seem to play along uncritically: terrorism, bird flu, environmental disasters, global warming, stranger danger, etc.

When I was growing up, the predominant disaster scenario was nuclear war – and we worried. If it hadn't been fanned by the media, feeding us constant propaganda from governments on all sides, we would have worried a lot less.

The threat may not have been less, but we would have worried less. And it is also possible that the deliberate heightening of concern in society may itself help to bring about the very thing everyone is frightened of.

I am not saying that terrorism, bird flu, environmental disasters, global warming and stranger danger aren't real, or are not serious potential or actual threats. But encouraging people into ever greater states of anxiety about these is unnecessary and counterproductive. People who are overly anxious, cannot make good decisions or wise choices. They easily feel disempowered and take on the role of victim.

I know that this is not a political journal, but the practice of medicine, the work to change that practice and the journey to become healthy and stay well cannot operate in isolation from society. It therefore must take heed of the prevailing political realities.

And this is not only a political issue – it is also a health issue.

Anxiety can produce a swag of unwanted effects on people's health (for example, see the American Psychiatric Association web site <www.healthyminds.org/highriskterroralerts.cfm>). It could therefore be argued that the process of worrying people is a process which reduces the overall state of health of a society. It is thus very wrong.

For most individuals, dealing day by day with those things which need to be done at home, at work and in the community, are stressful enough. We do not need the extra stress of worrying about things we ultimately have no direct power over.

Instead of constantly feeding the anxiety machine, governments (and the media) have a responsibility to give us information and informed assessments. These will help us make individual choices which will in turn help us deal more creatively and effectively with those things we *do* have power over and which, ideally, also improve the lot of the society we live in.

And there are many thinkers and writers (such as Professor Frank Furedi of University of Kent, UK) who points out¹ that the disempowerment brought about by the heightened 'disaster anxiety' makes people more prone to blame others for anything that goes wrong in their lives. Prof. Furedi has pointed out that this can be one reason for the increase in litigation, in claims for disability pensions and compensation, and for the growing trend for people to feel traumatised (often permanently) by events which in the past most people would have shrugged off or dealt with in short order.

Disaster anxiety can lead to a pathological sense of helplessness. As true health relies to a large degree on personal responsibility, a sense of helplessness is likely to lead to reducing the overall wellbeing of a society. It plays into the hands of those who have ready answers and solutions, including the pharmaceutical industry and people peddling useless remedies. It also allows governments to more easily control citizens with the easy 'solutions' to their perceived problems.

These easy solutions include: greater police powers to combat terrorism; drugs and vaccines for bird flu; 'clean' coal for environmental degradation. These easy solutions are often no solution at all – they get in the way of creative thinking and real (sometimes difficult) solutions.

It may make sense to look within what we already know for solutions to problems. It makes no sense to refuse to look outside what we already know, especially as the problems are sometimes the result of our sticking doggedly to what we know.

Sometimes solutions are to be found within what we already know, but reaching those solutions requires us to think in a new way about that knowledge. Examples may be found in many fields, but, sticking to medicine and health, there are plenty of examples. To mention a few:

- Endotoxins have been shown to be implicated in many cases of otherwise unexplained sudden death in babies;
- Microbes were finally accepted as a cause of stomach ulcers;

- Intravenous vitamin C is known to have a beneficial effect in the prevention and treatment of acute infections, and should thus be considered as a preventative and treatment for bird flu.
- At a meeting on ADD organised by a State Health Department, a parent volunteered from the audience that his child was improving on a gluten-free and wheat-free diet. The official speaker said that such treatment could not be recommended, but later, during a break, told the parent that if he (the official speaker) had a child with ADD, he would put him on such diet.

Thinking outside the known can be uncomfortable, because it can expose a person to ridicule and ostracism, even if that person is right. Perhaps more so if the person is right, because it threatens the status quo and challenges the years of study and research which has led to the present state of knowledge. It requires honesty, humility and courage to admit that what one has spent decades on learning and researching, may be wrong.

There is also the resistance from vested interests, such as businesses and people in positions of power, when these rely on maintenance of the status quo.

So how can this be changed? I don't think it can. I believe that it is the way human societies

operate and have always operated. This does not mean, however, that we should not try to change this situation. We must encourage those who are willing and able to think differently, to come up with unorthodox ideas and to question how things are currently done. When there is a critical mass of people who are willing to accept that a new idea may have merit, the idea has a good chance of being accepted.

"Never say that a thing is impossible, for you may be interrupted by someone doing it."
(Anon.)

1. Interview with Margaret Throsby on ABC radio, 10:05 am on Monday 3rd April 2006.

