



RISK PERCEPTION FACTORS

*"By the animal instinct that is awakened in us we are led and protected.
It is not conscious; it is far quicker, much more sure, less fallible, than consciousness."
Erich Maria Remarque, All Quiet on the Western Front*

Humans tend to fear similar things, for similar reasons. These patterns are described by the study of risk perception, which, loosely defined, identifies the psychological factors by which we subconsciously 'decide' what to be afraid of and how afraid to be.

1. **TRUST**. The more we trust, the less afraid we'll be. The less we trust, the greater our fears.

FOUR POTENTIAL SOURCES OF TRUST

- The communicators informing us about a risk
- The process deciding whether we will be exposed to a hazard.
- The agency or company or institution exposing us to the risk
- The government agencies that are supposed to protect us.

KEYS TO BUILDING TO TRUST (Faking any of these is DESTRUCTIVE!)

- Honesty. Openness.
 - Sincere "dialogue", beginning with respect for and validation of people's emotions.
 - Competence.
 - Sharing control.
2. **RISK V. BENEFIT**. The more we perceive a benefit from any given choice the less fearful we are of the risk that choice might involve.
 3. **CONTROL**. If you feel as though you can control the outcome of a hazard, you are less likely to be afraid. This can be either physical control as when you are driving and controlling the vehicle, or a *sense* of control of a process, as when you feel you are able to participate in risk management policy making through stakeholder involvement, participating in public hearings, voting, etc.
 4. **CHOICE**. Different from controlling the risk once we are facing it, this is the question of whether we choose to take the risk in the first place or whether it is imposed on us. We are much more afraid of a risk when it is imposed on us than when we choose to expose ourselves to that risk of our own volition.
 5. **NATURAL or HUMAN-MADE**. If the risk is natural we are less afraid. If it's human-made we're more afraid.
 6. **DREAD**. The worse (more suffering) the outcome from a risk, the more afraid of it we are.



CATASTROPHIC V. CHRONIC. We tend to be more afraid of things can kill a lot of us, in one place at one time, than chronic risks which cause deaths spread out over space and/or time.

8. **UNCERTAINTY.** The greater the uncertainty about a risk, the greater our fear is likely to be. Uncertainty can exist because we don't have all the facts, or we have them but still don't understand them. (Things that are invisible are uncertain by definition.)
9. **ME vs. THEM.** Any risk seems bigger, the facts notwithstanding, if we think it can happen to us. It doesn't matter if a risk is one in a million if we think we might be that one.
11. **FAMILIAR or NEW.** When we first learn of a risk, and don't know much about it, we are more afraid than after we have lived with that risk for a while and our experience helps put it in perspective.
12. **KIDS.** Our fear of risks to kids is greater than risks to adults.
13. **PERSONIFICATION** A risk made "real" by a person/victim is more frightening than one that is statistically real, but only hypothetical in our mind.
14. **FAIRNESS/MORALITY.** We are more upset by risks to the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the handicapped, than we are about the same risk to workers, the wealthy, or the powerful. We are more upset by risks when those who suffer the peril get none of the benefits.
15. **AWARENESS.** The more aware of a risk we are, the more concern it raises. Awareness is often generated by the media, but can also arise through social or other interpersonal contact.

(This list has been peer reviewed by Paul Slovic of Decision Research and the University of Oregon in Eugene. Slovic did much of the pioneering work on which this document is based. Much of that work is included in "The Perception of Risk, edited by Paul Slovic, Earthscan Press, 2000))