The Effectiveness of Fear-Based Appeals for Public Health Programs

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What is Fear Arousal?

- A persuasive communication attempting to arouse fear, promoting precautionary motivation and self-protective action.

- Fear appeals first try to arouse fear by presenting a threat (e.g., serious painful injury) to which the recipient is susceptible (e.g., car accident) and which is severe (e.g., people die from car accidents)

- Then try to recommend specific action (e.g., by not texting and driving, you are less likely to have an accident)

Examples

- Showing the horror caused by the crash to its victims
  - Showing objects symbolizing people hurt in a crash (e.g., helmet with blood)
  - Showing crushed cars or sounds of a crash
  - Showing “hard hitting” and graphic portrayals of death, or dead or mutilated human bodies
  - Showing visuals or sounds from actual crashes

- Focusing on the culprit
  - “Anyone can become a killer”: Dramatizations of “everyday” scenes ending with fatal crashes
  - Using insults or disparaging language (Shaming and labeling)
  - Showing the long-lasting guilt people feel for causing a crash

Example PSA
Do fear appeals work?

- Meta-analysis conducted by Carey, R.N. et al. (2013)
  - Reviewed studies conducted between 1990-2011 that examined the impact of threat appeals on driving
  - All studies had experimental design (experimental and control group)
  - Identified 54 studies

- Excluded studies that...
  - Lacked a control group (n = 38)
  - Lacked necessary data to calculate effect sizes (n = 15)
  - Did not examine the difference in driving behaviors between participants exposed to threat appeals and those in a control group (n = 10)
  - Resulted in 13 studies (age range 17 – 24, 25-30, and 30+ years; n = 3,044)

Do fear appeals work?

Results

- Fear was increased among participants in experimental groups compared to control groups
- However, no significant effect of threat appeals on driving outcomes
  - Intentions to take driving risks
  - Driving simulator speed
  - Speed during a video speed test

Do fear appeals work?

- Nirenberg, T., et al. (2013) randomized youth who had a high risk driving police charge and/or alcohol related police charge and who are drivers (n = 992) to one of three 20 hour interventions:
  - Community service (e.g., Salvation Army, YMCA)
  - Motivational Intervention with typical community service
  - Motivational Intervention with exposure to a hospital trauma center

- Conducted baseline assessment and 6-month follow-up

- Measured drinking patterns, police charges (e.g., speeding, reckless driving, DUI, DWI), emotional arousal, high risk driving behaviors speeding and distracted driving; alcohol drugs, and driving; and dangerous driving)

Do fear appeals work?

Results

- Youth who received either Motivational Interventions had fewer police charges at 6-month follow-up compared to youth who participated in community service only (control group).

- However, youth who received either Motivational Intervention reported significantly more hazardous drinking and greater amount of speeding and distracted driving than the control group at 6-month follow-up.

- Trauma room exposure did not result in better outcomes than the Motivational Intervention with community service.

Do fear appeals work?

- Lenon et al. (2010) evaluated the 2 public service announcements to see if they influenced participants’ intentions of engaging in unsafe driving behaviors.

- Recruited 673 young adults from 4 universities (average age was 21.6 years).

- Participants viewed 2 public service announcements that were produced by the Los Angeles Department of Transportation as part of their “Watch the Road” program.

- Participants completed a pre- and post-test questionnaire.

- Measured level of distraction (talking on a cell phone, texting, eating, and playing music while driving) and their likelihood of engaging in these behaviors in the future.

Do fear appeals work?

After viewing the 2 PSAs, participants indicated a statistically significant higher likelihood of engaging in distracted driving in the future than they currently do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Current Behavior Mean</th>
<th>Future Behavior Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk on cell phone</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play music</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Higher scores indicate more likely to engage in the behavior.

I will not do it again. I will not do it again.
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I will not do it again. I will not do it again.
Characteristics of Effective Programs

- Based on Theory
- Reinforces key messages
- Accurate
- Includes activities on social pressures
- Integrates skill-building activities
- Interactive
- Uses personalization
- Age appropriate
- Culturally appropriate
- Sufficient in length
- Committed teachers

Characteristics of Effective Facilitators

- Relates well with young people
- Willing and enthusiastic to teach the subject
- Clear on values
- Open-minded and non-judgmental
- Respectful of others' beliefs
- Respects the rights of parents as primary educators
- Respected by others (students, parents, etc)
- Sensitive to potential fears and concerns that may be present in the classroom
- Believes adolescents are intelligent, resourceful and can be responsible if given tools
- Had adequate and current knowledge of the curriculum's material
- Committed
What does **NOT** work?

- Control
- Shame
- Negative Emotion
- Threats
- Fear
Questions?

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