



Getting Hit by a Car to Avoid a Dog

Human fears and perceptions are not always logical

By Michael Mountain

Jessica Kohn was strolling down a busy shopping street in Portland, Ore., on a spring morning, when she saw a person with a dog who looked like a pit bull coming toward her. In a moment of fear, she stepped off the curb to avoid the dog – and was hit by a car.

Kohn's reaction explains a little about how we evaluate danger. Psychologists call it "risk perception." We perceive some things as being more dangerous than others, even though the facts don't necessarily back this up.



Well-known examples of distorted risk perception are that while you're more likely to get killed on the road than in a plane, to be injured in a bath tub than by a shark in the ocean, or to be killed by lightning than by a dog, we're still instinctively more worried about the plane, the shark and the dog than by the bigger dangers.

Indeed, some of the biggest existential threats to our survival overall – like climate change and how we're going to feed a human population that will soon exceed 9 billion people – are barely on the horizon of our perceived threats.

*"That's because the more generalized and the more
"out there in the future" the threat is,
the less we can relate to it."*

Scientists say that some of these instinctive fears are natural and hard-wired. They come from hundreds of thousands of years of experience as a prey species, when we were being hunted by lions and leopards and needed to react quickly to the sight of a snake or spider right in front of us. But we're not equipped to respond effectively to less visible threats. So Al Gore tells you about CO2 emissions, your adrenaline doesn't start pumping the same way it did when Jessica Kohn caught sight of that dog coming toward her. "I just saw him and reacted," Kohn said. "If I'd stopped to think for a moment, I'd have at least looked to see if there was traffic on the road. But I saw the dog and I panicked."

All photos by Melody McFarland



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How We Perceive Danger

David Ropeik, an international consultant and author on risk perception, said there are other factors that come into play, too. “We commonly react more powerfully and emotionally to dangers that are represented by a face or a name,” Ropeik said. Another factor is the desire to fit into and agree with what other people may feel or think. That’s because we’re a tribal species. For thousands of years, our personal survival depended on the solidarity of our extended family, group or tribe. So we shape our opinions to agree with the tribes and groups with which we identify.

Those opinions are reinforced by the biggest voice in our environment: the mass media. And media guidelines – like “If it bleeds, it leads” and “If it scares, it airs” – are designed to make us sit up and stay tuned whenever there’s a story of a kidnapping, a murder or a dog attack.

“There’s also nothing like a viral rumor mill to stoke our fears and imaginations.”

To this day, parents are still worried that their children may be the victims of a razor blade in Halloween candy, even though there’s never been a single confirmed case of such a thing ever happening.

No surprise, then, that the story of someone, maybe even thousands of miles away, being chased down by a “pit bull” (who, as likely as not, later turns out to be a Lab or shepherd mix) tends to stoke our fears and skew our risk perceptions, while factual information about the true likelihood of being bitten by a dog doesn’t register with us in the same way.

So, how likely are you to actually be bitten by a pit bull? With about 64 million dogs currently in the United States, there are approximately 15 to 20 dog bite fatalities per year. In other words, the risk is vanishingly small.

“Dogs can be dangerous,” said Janis Bradley, author of “Dogs Bite, but Balloons and Slippers Are More Dangerous.” “And they’re more dangerous to children than to adults. Not as dangerous, of course, as kitchen utensils, drapery cords, five-gallon buckets, horses or cows. Not nearly as dangerous as playground equipment, swimming pools, skateboards or bikes. They’re not as remotely as dangerous as family, friends, guns or cars.”



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Exploring the Facts

Some dogs may be more likely to bite than others. But it has little or nothing to do with their breed. A mother dog with puppies will go through natural cycles of serious protectiveness. One day she may be fine letting the children handle the puppies, but the next day hormones may kick in and she can't tolerate the intrusion. Male dogs can become aggressively protective when they're around a female in heat – which is why all household pets should always be spayed or neutered.

And puppies from puppy mills (the ones you buy in a pet store) are more likely to grow up as biters. That's because, in the breeder's rush to ship them out to the pet stores while they're still cute, they will miss some important time with their mothers, where they learn basic rules of bite inhibition – meaning what's just play and what's going too far.

Helping People be Less Afraid

What's the best way to adjust people's perception of risk? Roepik points to two things. First, the more we understand the ins and outs of risk perception, the more rational we can be about our fears. Just being conscious of our own reactions helps us make wise decisions. Second, when it comes to dealing with other people's fears, it helps if you start by boosting their own sense of self-confidence. "People who feel good about themselves are more likely to be open-minded," Roepik said.

Studies have shown that if, before you start to try to change somebody's mind, you first ask them to remember something that gave them a positive view of themselves, then they are more likely to be open to facts and to change their opinions. In other words, if you're talking to someone with a deep-rooted fear of pit bulls, don't just launch into your argument. Warm the situation up with a discussion of something that will have them feeling less defensive.

Two other things are worth bearing in mind, as well.

One is not to alienate a person from their "tribe." Don't keep telling them that their family, friends or peer group are all wrong – at least not unless they're ready to jump into your tribe of dog lovers and become part of that. We humans have a strong need to belong. We feel safer when we're part of a group, even if it's a group that's irrationally afraid of something. (Check out any of the daily talk shows that reinforce tribal beliefs and create fear of everyone else: other groups, political parties, religions, etc.)

And the other is to help the person get to know a real dog. A positive experience is worth a million facts and figures. It's not unusual to hear people say, "I was terrified of pit bulls, but when I met such-and-such dog at a friend's house, I discovered that they're really no different from any other dog."

Indeed, while Jessica Kohn was in the hospital recovering from a broken leg after she'd stepped into the road to avoid that pit bull, she met a volunteer who brings her therapy dog in once a week. The dog happened to be a pit bull. "It was funny," Kohn said. "It really perked me up. It changed my view of dogs in general and pit bulls in particular. I'm not nearly so afraid of them now."

All photos by Melody McFarland