

Risk Perception Factors

Involuntary vs. Voluntary:

People don't like to be forced to face a risk such as exposure to trace chemicals in tap water. But people will voluntarily assume risks such as smoking.

Uncontrollable vs. Controllable:

When preventing the risk is in someone else's hands (government's or industry's), citizens feel helpless to change the situation and are less accepting of it. If the citizen can prevent or reduce the risk (using household chemicals properly), the risk is more acceptable.

Immoral vs. Moral:

Pollution is viewed as an evil. Therefore, some people consider it unethical for governments and industries to decide that a risk is acceptable on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis or because there is a low incidence of harm.

Unfamiliar vs. Familiar:

An unfamiliar risk, such as an industrial process that produces an unpronounceable chemical, is a much less acceptable risk than something more familiar, such as taking a medication.

Dreadful vs. Not Dreadful:

A risk that could cause a much-feared or dreaded disease (like cancer) is seen as more dangerous than a risk that could cause a less-feared disease.

Uncertain vs. Certain:

Some people become uneasy when scientists are not certain about the risk posed by a hazard, such as its exact effect, severity, or prevalence.

Catastrophic vs. Common:

A risk resulting in a large-scale disastrous event (plane crash, nuclear reactor meltdown) is more dreaded than a risk affecting individuals (auto accidents, radon gas in homes).

Memorable vs. Ordinary:

Potential risks similar to those in a well-known event, such as the nuclear leaks at Three Mile Island or the release of toxic gases in Bhopal, are viewed as much more dangerous than the risk of some unheard-of or little-known event.

Unfair vs. Fair:

People become outraged if they feel they are being wrongfully exposed (for example, in an environmental justice issue where there is exposure to a risk that people in a neighboring community or a different economic bracket are not being exposed to, or in a situation where there is exposure to a risk with no benefit). In contrast, people will accept the risk of exposure to something like medical X-rays because they perceive a benefit that equals or outweighs the risk.

Untrustworthy vs. Trustworthy:

People become outraged if they have no confidence in the institution that is the source of the risk (such as an untrustworthy company or agency). In contrast, they tend to accept risk from what they view as a reliable source.

Sources: Kamrin, Michael; Dolores J. Katz; and Martha L. Walter. *Reporting on Risk: A Journalist's Handbook on Environmental Risk Assessment*. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Sea Grant Program and The Foundation for American Communications, 1995.

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