Raise a Hand for Irrational Fears

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It starts with butterflies in my stomach at the realization of what I am about to do. I just need to take a deep breath and then casually move my hands from in my lap onto the desk. Oh now my palms are sweaty too. I’m just gonna reach up and scratch my neck and look around casually to see if anyone’s watching me and they all are. It’s okay casually move my hand up and scratch my head a little bit before- well, here we go. I’m past the point of no return and… I raise my hand. We all know what it’s like. We’ve all taken that one class where to have to give yourself a pep talk before raising your hand to ask a simple question. But why are we so afraid of it? I mean it’s not as if we’re going to start bleeding out evert part of our bodies or have people start pelting us with rocks. The absolute worst that can happen is having everyone briefly glance at us yet we experience that same feelings as we were to walk down a dark alley at night. We logically know that it can’t hurt us yet we fear it anyways. So why are we afraid? We have developed what is known as an irrational fear. So today let’s first take a look at some of the causes of those butterflies in our stomahcs, then we’ll pep talk about some effects before finally getting that little burst of courage to raise out hands so we can ask about some solutions.

First, let’s take a look at the causes of those butterflies in our stomachs and look at some of the sources of irrational fears in our society. We tend to fear things are a lot bigger than simply raising a hands. Fears of terrorism, increased crime rates, and flying are among some of the biggest fears held by Americans but why do we fear them? Coincidentally, our greatest fears come from one of the most prominent things in our lives: the media. John Strossel of ABC News says that the biggest way the media fools us into fearing these things is through two forms of exaggeration. First, they often give figure that aren’t quite accurate. For example, in the case of crime rates, the media often takes their figure from the FBI. These figure often show increased crime rates, so therefore crime must be going up! The world is getting more dangerous! Well, not quite. The FBI actually shows an increase in REPORTED crime. The Justice Department also has crime records and by contrast shows no increase and even a slight decrease in crime. This is because they take ALL crime into account by surveying people on whether or not they have been the victim of a crime. So really only cases of reported crime are going up while actual crime is about the same. Second, the media tends to leave a little something out in their reports. Let’s look at the example of crime rates again. Strossel how a USA today article reported a 6% decrease in all crimes but a 24% increase violent crimes! But before you freak out, realize that these numbers aren’t standardized. In other words, crime increases because the population is always increasing. USA Today found the increase by comparing to total number of crimes committed now to 20 years ago. But in that same amount of time, the population increased about the same amount so crime wasn’t going up at all. These same media antics apply to other irrational fears as well. Statistics on terrorism and school shootings can be misconstrued just as easily.

Irrational fears also cause us overestimate the risk of these tragedies happening to us. Robert Leahy of Psychology Today says that overestimate risk more when the event happened recently and if it was dramatic, especially since pictures are always available. After the Paris attacks of 2015, we saw articles with pictures of the destruction plastered across the Internet and the idea that it happened now struck fear into the lives or people everywhere. But this is 1 attack. Yes, there have been others but Leahy also says that we overestimate risk because we never see “non-events” in the news. What he means is that we don’t see times where everything goes right. We never see all the times when planes fly safely or when people go about their lives unharmed by terrorists. Think about it. Would you read an article titled “Majority of Students Arrive Unharmed to Debate Tournament Due to Safe Auto Travel?” Of course not! These stories don’t make good news because they’re common.

Now that we understand the main causes of our irrational fears, it’s time pep talk about the effects. Now being afraid may not seem like it’s all that dangerous. I mean it’s better to be safe than sorry right? Well not necessarily. A proposed bill proposed in 1990 required that infants have their own seats on a plane rather than being allowed to sit in their parents’ laps as they had done previously. It was brought upon by the event of an airplane crash that happened earlier in the year by which two infants had died. So ya it seems to make sense that in order to prevent something like this from happening again, that we should pass a law. But the result of the bill was that more people chose to drive than fly because it’s cheaper. But driving also happens be more dangerous than driving and more people died because of the it. The very thing we had done to try prevent an already unlikely scenario ended up killing more people. The same sort of thing happened after 9/11 when people overestimated the risk of flying. A recent, dramatic event caused people to let their fear get the best of them and according to scientist Gerd Gigerenzer, more people died by choosing to drive than the total number killed in all four of the planes involved in the attack. In the words of Helen Keller, “Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. The fearful are caught as often as the bold.”

Irrational fears also cause us to sort of misplace out fears. We spend so much time fearing terrorism and police riots that we ignore the things that kill a lot more people. According to Andrew Shaver of the Washington Post, in the time it has taken me to introduce this point to you, at least one American has died of a heart attack. Within an hour, one will have died of skin cancer and by the time we all go to sleep nearly 100 Americans will have died throughout the day from a car crash. These are the things that kill people. Yes, some people die in terrorist attacks or school shootings but it is nowhere as common and kills nowhere near the same amount of people. In fact, HelpGuide,org reports the odds of dying in a terrorist attack to be 9,300,000 to 1. Compare that to the odd of dying in a car crash at 8,000 to 1 and of dying from cancer at 7 to 1. These things are much more common and often we don’t see them as the top news stories anymore. The phrase out of sight and out of mind becomes a reality in this case.

Now that we’ve gotten past the butterflies and the pep talk, it’s time to just raise out hands in the air and ask about some solutions. So what can we do about our irrational fears? Well on a personal level, there are a few things we can do to tackle our causes head on. Since the media plays such a large part in our fears, the American Psychological Association suggests limiting exposure to it. Instead of being glued to the news, try only checking it once or twice a day. Without the constant exposure, you’ll fixate on it less often. Also keep in mind how the media often causes us to overestimate the chances of these tragedies happening to us. Terrorism and school shootings are much rarer than the world leads us to believe and you’re much more likely to die from something like a car crash. Now that doesn’t mean that you should exchange a fear of flying for a fear of driving but being more aware of what can actually hurt you is better than living your life fearing something with microscopic odds of harming you. As Dorothy Thompson once said “Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live.”

Now on a societal level, one thing we can do is try to invest out limited money and resources into preventing more common dangers like cars crashes. They ranks above terrorist attacks, school shootings and plane crashes in likelihood so it only makes sense that something should be done to prevent that. The National Motorists Association suggest things like roundabouts which can reduce head-on collisions by 60 to 87%. The government may end up shelling out some money but reduction in car crashes would be substantial.

Now that we’ve gotten past our pre-hand raising jitters by looking at causes and effects and asked about some solutions, we can finally see that we didn’t really have anything to be afraid of at all. Granted, a fear of raising a hand and fear of terrorism are a little different but neither one is likely to hurt you. Fear exists in our lives to keep us alert but fearing something that poses little to no danger to us isn’t what evolution intended. In the words of Aristotle “He who has overcome his fears will truly be free.” So let’s move past the things we dread and raise not just our hands, but our awareness levels so that we can all move past our irrational fears.