

ATTITUDE AND OPINION CHANGE

JANIS, IRVING L., and FESHBACH, SEYMOUR. "Effects of Fear-Arousing Communications." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 48: 78-92; January 1953.

Purpose: "The experiment was designed so as to provide measures of the effects of three different intensities of 'fear appeal' in a standard communication on dental hygiene, presented to high-school students."

Procedure: A 15-minute illustrated lecture on dental hygiene was prepared in three different forms. Each form contained the same information about tooth decay and the same recommendations concerning oral hygiene practices. But they differed in intensity of fear appeal: (a) the Strong Appeal, emphasizing the threat of pain, disease, and body damage; (b) the Moderate Appeal, describing the same dangers in a more moderate factual manner; and (c) the Minimal Appeal, in which the unpleasant consequences were rarely referred to. Each was recorded, accompanied by different sets of slides, and presented by the same speaker. The subjects were 200 Connecticut high-school students, divided into three experimental groups and a control group. The first questionnaire, in the form of a general health survey, and in which the dental hygiene questions were interspersed, was given one week before the communication. Immediately after the communication, the subjects completed another questionnaire. One week later a follow-up questionnaire was given.

Results: (a) The "fear appeals" successfully aroused affective reactions. (b) All three forms were equally effective in teaching the factual content of the communication and modifying beliefs concerning the characteristics of the proper kind of toothbrush. (c) The Strong Appeal resulted in a more mixed or ambivalent attitude toward the communication, this group appraising it as more interesting and of high quality, yet showing the greatest amount of subjective dislike and making more complaints about the content. (d) The greatest amount of conformity to the recommendations of the communication was produced by the Minimal Appeal, the Strong Appeal failing to produce any significant change in dental practices. (e) When counterpropaganda to the main theme of the communication was presented a week later, the greatest resistance to such counterpropaganda was evidenced by the Minimal Appeal group.

General Conclusions: "The main conclusion which emerges from the entire set of findings is that the over-all effectiveness of a persuasive communication will tend to be reduced by the use of a strong fear appeal, if it evokes a high degree of emotional tension without adequately satisfying the need for reassurance. The evidence from the present experiment appears to be consistent with the following two explanatory hypotheses: (a) When a mass communication is designed to influence an audience to adopt specific ways and means of averting a threat, the use of a strong fear appeal, as against a milder one, increases the likelihood that the audience will be left in a state of emotional tension which is not fully relieved by rehearsing the reassuring recommendations contained in the communication. (b) When fear is strongly aroused, but is not fully relieved by the reassurances contained in a mass communication, the audience will become motivated to ignore or to minimize the importance of the threat."—William Allen