

Fear Can Kill You Faster Than the Coronavirus

Dread Risk Bias. It's one of about 170 cognitive biases that color the way we perceive the world. It causes us to inflate the perceived risk associated with dreadful (and well televised) but infrequent events and underestimate how much risk results from ordinary everyday events.

The immediate death toll from the deadliest terrorist attack in American history was estimated at 2,977 lives lost. On September 11, 2001, nineteen terrorist hijackers overpowered the flight crews of four US airliners, ultimately crashing them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field near Shanksville, PA. In the weeks that followed the event that would soon become known simply as "9/11", ridership on US airlines plummeted. Even though the airlines were cleared to fly again within a matter of days, passenger loads remained at historic lows for months to come.

But those people did not stop traveling. Fear of terrorism, reduced flight schedules, and increased security headaches caused thousands of Americans to drive to their destinations rather than fly. Studies have estimated the increase in highway deaths over what would have normally been expected between September 2001 and September 2002 at an *additional 2,170*.

That's right - the terrorists scored an extra 2,170 dead Americans. The fact is that airline flying was no more dangerous on 9/12 than it was on 9/10. Driving was no safer on 9/12 than it was on 9/10. But the perception had changed, and the bad guys got a 73% boost in their numbers.

And we're doing it again. Airline passenger loads have dropped dramatically, as people have been gripped by fear of the coronavirus. Clearly, the coronavirus is a dangerous pathogen and common-sense precautions should be undertaken but avoiding air travel in favor of driving

is simply going to result in a dramatic increase in American deaths that wouldn't have happened if people just flew to their destinations.

The CDC has estimated that over 5,000 people are dying of influenza (the common seasonal flu virus) every month in the U.S. Worldwide, less than 7,000 people have died of the coronavirus. Yet 41% of American's (over 100 million people) choose NOT to get a flu shot. Americans are NOT making a mad rush every winter for hand sanitizer and toilet paper to protect against the upcoming flu season. The CDC says the best thing you can do to prevent infection by a deadly pathogen is get a flu shot and wash your hands. Modern airliners have high-efficiency air filters and the air is recirculated and filtered continuously. The air you're breathing on your flight is likely much cleaner and less contaminated than that in most office buildings and is on par with the air in most hospitals. The major airlines clean and disinfect their aircraft every night.

So, take care of yourself, wash your hands, and get a flu shot. Flying is still the safest way to travel. In our family, once we park at the airport, we acknowledge that the most dangerous part of our travel is now over. So, relax and fly to wherever life takes you.

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