



# Spinning Fear

Sarri Gilman, MA

“The overall climate of fear is inflated well out of proportion to the reality and is its own core danger to society”

—Dr. Marc Siegel, *False Alarm* (2005).

Every generation has its own story of how fear, spread widely and without reasonable boundaries, has resulted in actions under the guise of “protection” that have been dangerous, or pointless, or served to distract us from the true nature of our problems. And it doesn’t take very much to spread fear through society. A handful of words, stated with conviction, delivered with authority, and repeated in the echo chamber of the media, will provoke fear in society.

One approach to questioning fear mongering is to take on one specific issue, such as food borne illness, to determine if our food supply is safe or unsafe. However, another interesting approach by Barry Glassner, professor of sociology, is to take a holistic approach and assess our risk of the constant threat of harm from anything identified as “dangerous.”

In his book, *The Culture of Fear* (1999), Glassner tests the reality of threats surrounding Americans from risks of cancer, airline safety, Halloween crimes, child molesters, missing children, breast implant dangers, road rage, the reports of a link between abortion and breast cancer, child safety seats, flesh eating bacteria, teen gambling, registering children’s identity kits, crack babies, cyber predators, kids and guns, Ebola virus, deer ticks, etc.

Do these fears sound familiar? Glassner is questioning why these fears sound so familiar to Americans. Why are these fears selected for widespread dissemination, and other things overlooked? In our culture of fear, Glassner wonders if as a culture we are dealing with real dangers or with fear mongering.

The definition of fear mongering is: spreading discreditable, misrepresentative information designed to induce fear and apprehension. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991), the word “monger” means a dealer, trader or trafficker. From the 16th century onwards, monger nearly always implies one who carries on a contemptible trade or traffic in what is denoted by the first element of the compound. The *Historic New York Times* (1851-2005) dates the earliest use of the word fear-monger to 1938 by President Roosevelt. Fear mongering has been an effective tool, used as a psychological weapon against people throughout history.

Fear mongering is a confusing psychological assault on people. Even when our logic tells us that perhaps fear is being overblown and distorted, we can become overwhelmed and fall victim to the idea that our safety is truly at risk. It’s easy to listen to the news on any channel and become afraid. It takes research and effort to question if everything we hear is true or truly threatening.

As a therapist and an individual, this author doesn’t always agree with every point made by Glassner. At times, he diminishes issues that many of us would see as problems. For example, I am not convinced by his arguments that we have overblown fears about cyber predators. I am deeply disturbed by cyber predators and other sexual predators and I have worked with kids who have been victims of predators. As I write this article for a large community of therapists, I am aware that you have treated people who have experienced consequences of such things as child abuse, child abduction, breast cancer, teen gambling, crack babies, etc. But recognize that our work brings us a unique view point.

The value of closely examining the culture of our fears, the genesis of fears in the population, is to equip ourselves as therapists on the front line to distinguish between fear mongering and real danger. As therapists, we need to know the difference, and our discernment could be valuable.

The entire population is currently not at risk for bird flu. But when the bird flu was widely broadcast on the news, my daughter stopped eating chicken and turkey and has not eaten it for a couple of years since. Was she truly at risk? No, but the news reports frightened her and once the fear response was triggered, there was no questioning the danger.

# We live in a time that now enables fear to become viral and virtual and literally travel at the speed of sound.

The trick to fighting fear mongering is to initiate a process of questioning the information before accepting it as a threat.

I live on Whidbey Island in Washington State. In order for me to come and go from my home, I routinely take a ferry boat between Clinton and a town named Mukilteo. The ferry runs 7 days per week, with 15-minute crossings, two every hour. After September 11, my little ferry waiting area is patrolled by dogs and officers, every crossing, every hour. After the twin towers were attacked, I did not think, "My little ferry is next!" Today, I do not feel any safer because there are dogs and officers patrolling on

our little ferry dock. I feel embarrassed that our government actually believes this is a safety improvement.

We live in a time that now enables fear to become viral and virtual and literally travel at the speed of sound. Voices of politicians and the headlines from the media are amplified and repeated with such frequency, that the repetition in and of itself can make something appear more significant or more based in truth than it actually is. In other words, more people are vulnerable to messages of fear than ever before. Our fear is compounded by a sense of volume. More people catch it quicker than in any other time in history. And this is increasing the magnitude of the dangers posed by widespread fear.

As therapists, the problems of widespread fear mongering are three-fold. The first concern is stated best by Gavin de Becker in 1997: "Recognizing real danger is the key to real safety." Fear mongering is not about real dangers; it is the art of taking an incident and using it to threaten the general population, suggesting there is an immediate, possible danger lurking relatively near enough to do terrible harm. Fear mongering distorts the dangers.

Fear mongering also results in responses that are not necessarily increasing safety. In other words, the public at large is busy trying to protect themselves from something that is not a threat. Remember fears about Y2K and all of the preparation that was done and the non-event? On the other end of the spectrum, Hurricane Katrina hit and we were woefully unprepared. The levies were a problem for years and well documented as a concern, but no action was taken. The devastation and trauma in the aftermath of the storm has continued for years.

A second concern is described by Dr. Marc Siegel: "Free floating communicated fear is harmful (2005)." Our immune systems become overloaded. We become sick. The fear is not contained to our thoughts. It literally makes people sick. As I watched our economic crisis unfold recently, my first thought as a therapist was that I would be seeing more clients with serious illness and more clients vulnerable to heart attacks, cancer, and other illnesses that spike when a person is under stress.

The third problem is systemic. We are putting our resources and efforts into protecting ourselves from things that aren't truly threats, such as screening for shoe bombers on a daily basis at every airport in America, when we could be putting our resources into real problems, such as improving our education system, or increasing access to food for people who are hungry, or ensuring healthcare access. ■



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