



The Facts about Scare Tactics

What are a scare tactics/fear appeals?

Scare tactics or fear appeals are intended to scare people into engaging in a desired health behavior (e.g., quit smoking, avoid drugs, stop speeding, exercise more). They often use shocking or graphic images and statistics to scare people. Examples of scare tactics include mock car crashes, demonstrations of the diseased lungs of a smoker, and the ‘this is your brain on drugs’ commercial.

Scare tactics often do not work, especially for young people. That’s because...

- **Fear appeals often change attitudes and intentions without causing a change in behavior.**^{1,2} For example, teens may be emotionally affected after seeing a mock car crash, and immediately after they will say that they will never drive drunk. However, research shows that the mock car crash will not change their behavior when they are actually in a situation where they need to make a decision about drinking and driving.
- **People may manage their fear instead of managing the threat to their health.**^{1,2} They might ignore or discount a message instead of changing their behavior, saying things like, “I just don’t want to think about this,” or “It’s not that bad,” or “That might happen to other people, but not me.” As a result, they don’t change their behavior.
- **People often feel like there is nothing they can do about a threat, so they don’t change their behavior.**^{1,2} They might say things like, “I know it’s bad for my health if I smoke, but I just can’t quit no matter how hard I try.” They do not try to change their behavior because they don’t think they will succeed.
- **Fear messages often talk about serious but unlikely events, so people may discount or ignore them.**³ This is especially common after someone has tried something (e.g., drinking alcohol) without experiencing a serious negative consequence. They can then think, “Nothing happened to me last time I got drunk, so it’s really not a big deal.” A scare tactic does not scare them any more.
- **Repeated exposure to a fear appeal can lead people to ignore or discount a message.**³ The first time someone hears or sees a message, they might be shocked and consider changing their behavior. However, the more they see a fear appeal, the more they become desensitized to the image. This can cause a fear appeal to be less effective over time.
- **Fear messages often ignore the potential benefits people may see in engaging in an unhealthy behavior.**³
- **Fear appeals often tell people what they already know, which can make them redundant and therefore ineffective.**² For example, most young people know that smoking cigarettes can cause serious health problems, yet many still begin smoking. Using a scare tactic to tell them that smoking is bad for their health may cause an emotional reaction. However, it does not add to what they already know, and will therefore be less likely to change their behavior.



In fact, scare tactics can cause more harm than good:

- **Scare tactics may trigger the behavior they are designed to prevent.**² For example, some smokers report that fear appeal ads about tobacco make them want to smoke. They feel stressed and bad about themselves because of the ad, and they need to smoke a cigarette.
- **Fear appeals may alienate or demonize the people you are trying to help (or other vulnerable groups).**² If people feel like they are being judged, they may not seek help if the need it.
- **Scare tactics work best with people who have the most ‘psychological and social resources’ to deal with the problem and may cause harm in people with fewer resources.**² Fear appeals work best with people who have high self-efficacy – people who feel like they are able to take on the desired health behavior. For more vulnerable people with low self-efficacy and/or few resources, however, fear appeals can cause distress *without* helping them improve their health.
- **Scare tactics can also reach unintended people**² For example an anti-tobacco add that uses scare tactics may cause distress for the young children of smokers, even if these children are not in the intended audience. The ads cause harm in these children without helping them.

What are social marketing alternatives to fear appeals?

- **Appeals based on positive emotions** – Ads can be based on positive emotions such as ‘love, excitement, sex, hope, or humor’.² The idea is to help people associate positive emotions with positive health behaviors.
- **Social norms campaigns** – These campaigns focus on the people who are not engaging in an unhealthy behavior, e.g., “77% of students in our high school DON’T drink.” The ads help clear up misperceptions that ‘everyone is doing it’, and they help create more positive social norms.
- **Something like the Truth campaign** – The Truth campaign is a very effective anti-tobacco media campaign developed by the American Legacy Foundation in collaboration with young people (the target audience). It effectively uses humor and irony to show that Big Tobacco tries to manipulate young people into smoking in order to make a profit. The ads are intended to empower young people to rebel against Big Tobacco by not smoking.

¹ Witte, K. & Allen, M. (2000). A meta-analysis of fear appeals: Implications for Effective public health programs. *Health Education and Behavior* 27(5), 591-615.

² Hastings, G., Stead, M. & Webb, J. (2004). Fear appeals in social marketing: Strategic and ethical reasons for concern. *Psychology and Marketing* 21(11), 961-986.

³ Goldberg, J.H., Halpern-Felsher, B. & Millstein, S.G. (2002). Beyond invulnerability: The importance of benefits in adolescents’ decision to drink alcohol. *Health Psychology* 17(5), 447-484.