



Fearing Well

There are plenty of things to be afraid of. So choose carefully

By Jeff Wise

Another year, another 365 days—wait, 366—in which things could go terribly, terribly wrong. But how? Identifying the most pressing threats turns out to be unexpectedly difficult. Psychologists say we innately misjudge risk, often becoming instinctively fixated on perceived threats

that aren't really hazardous while overlooking real dangers because they don't set off our subconscious alarm bells. People fear cell-phone radiation because it's a relatively new technology and the word *radiation* adds to the aura of invisible malevolence—yet numerous studies have found no convincing

evidence of health risks. Parents' fear of vaccination actually ends up exposing kids to very real risk. And during flu season, we scrub our hands religiously, wrongly assuming that it combats sneeze-borne viruses.

Conversely, as the above matrix shows, there are things you need to fear more this year. But you won't, since some threats consistently fail to set off our inner alarms, so we're apt to endanger ourselves by overlooking them. Americans consistently underestimate the danger of driving. Why? Because we feel in control, which powerfully dampens fear. We also tend to overestimate our own competence—especially when we're texting or

talking on a cell phone while driving, which dramatically increases the odds that we'll crash. Last year, more than 30,000 Americans died in car crashes, compared with zero in commercial air travel.

Do you control what you eat? Most Americans would say yes, but that opinion is largely the result of what psychologists call optimism bias. In reality, most of us are overweight and getting fatter, undermining our health and cutting our life expectancy. The illusion of control prevents us from feeling the jolt of terror that might spark a behavioral change.

Americans don't worry much about nuclear war anymore, even though

the list of nuclear states is growing. "With current stockpiles, you could come close to wiping out humanity," says Charles Blair, a risk analyst at the Federation of American Scientists. The danger doesn't register because of a mental phenomenon called the availability heuristic: we respond only to things that are easy to call to mind. Since the media hardly talk about nuclear war anymore, we don't easily imagine or fear the A-bomb.

And therein lies the problem: sometimes the only thing we have to fear is a lack of fear itself.

Wise is the author of *Extreme Fear: The Science of Your Mind in Danger*