

RISK HABITUATION

The Next Covid-19 Danger

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What is Risk Habituation?

Risk habituation is well known in the humanitarian community, especially in longer term deployments in complex conflict zones. While most agencies are realizing that providing security briefings and updates are important, it is not uncommon for these to be sidelined or minimized in the context of programming goals. For NGO's that frequently deploy to such areas, it is also common for them to tolerate more risk and only count severe security incidents as worthy of attention. While some would argue these actions are due to a lack of due diligence or neglect, I believe there is a normal brain process that accounts for this behavior.

Risk habituation is a necessary aspect of our brain maintaining its survival focus. If our brain continued to react intensely to events that did not result in harm we would not have the bandwidth to react to new actual dangerous events. Over time our brain gradually reduces its heightened alert response to previous but not actualized dangers as this wastes energy. *This does not mean the risk has become less dangerous,* it simply means our brain has automatically changed its evaluation over time without our being conscious of this shift. Risk habituation largely accounts for individuals and agencies minimizing risks in conflict zones. This also is part of the reason HEAT security training is required by most agencies to be repeated after several years. Not only do we forget some security protocols, but we have become habituated to risks we have faced.

As the weeks have dragged into months of the world responding to Covid-19 we are beginning to see risk habituation develop. All of us are getting tired of social isolation and not seeing friends and colleagues in person. We are tired of not being able to do our work as effectively and of encountering restrictions of travel and access. If we personally have not been infected or don't know anyone close who has become ill, our brain can begin the natural process of devoting fewer resources to combating this unseen and unfelt risk. This is accelerated by the reduction of infections in some hard hit areas as social distancing has been effective. *However, the actual danger of the virus has not changed at all.* It remains highly contagious with a significant death rate among certain populations. Unconsciously drifting along with habituation by downgrading our evaluation of the threat does not change the danger.

The only way to have an accurate assessment of our own risk is to be aware of risk habituation and to consciously evaluate the facts of our personal and family situation. Every humanitarian needs to soberly assess their own health in relation to the increasingly known effects of Covid-19. Do you have underlying medical issues, even ones from childhood? Are you prone to getting sick or the flu more readily than



others? Are you particularly exhausted right now? Are you older and in the identified at risk age group? *Be honest with yourself.* Covid-19 doesn't care about our rationalizations or justifications about why we are taking more risk.

As a humanitarian community I hope we can encourage every colleague, no matter what their sector or position, to engage in a conscious decision-making process about their vulnerability. We cannot let risk habituation determine our programming or actions without there being serious consequences. I also hope we can give each other the grace to accept the individual decisions colleagues make about their personal circumstances.

What You Can Do

1. **Realize** risk habituation is a normal brain survival mechanism. Become aware of it in your own actions and your felt sense of vulnerability.
2. **Understand** that unseen dangers are more likely to habituate faster.
3. **Think** of past examples where you have experienced habituation occurring.
4. **Keep** informed about the scientific and medical facts about Covid-19. Unfortunately many politicians are not good sources for this information.
5. **Evaluate** your own health history and those of your friends and family. Your risk becomes their risk when dealing with this kind of threat.
6. **Make** a conscious, thought-out decision about emerging from social distancing based on your threat/risk evaluation.
7. **Communicate** this honestly to colleagues and employers when it is appropriate to do so.

For more information or counseling support please email: support@headington-institute.org.