

# What Makes a Risk Memorable?

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The risks that are vivid in your mind are much likelier to provoke outrage than the risks that are not. What makes a risk memorable?

1. *Personal experience.* People who have lived through a hurricane or a plant accident take the risk more seriously than people who have not.
2. *The experience of others.* If a friend or family member lived through a disaster (or was killed by one), you probably take the risk seriously.
3. *News.* Love Canal, Bhopal, Chernobyl, Oklahoma City -- most people weren't there. But the news media left vivid impressions.
4. *Fiction.* Consider the memorability of biotechnology, largely a product of all those movies about runaway mutations.
5. *Signal.* Some risk signals are inborn; even infants have a startle response to strange odors and sirens. Others are learned: smoke, flares, guards with guns.
6. *Symbol.* The 55-gallon drum symbolizes chemical risks; the cooling tower symbolizes nuclear risks. Would people have worried so much about alar if it were sprayed on pork instead of apples?
7. *Psychological contamination.* After hearing that contaminated air made someone in the office down the hall sick, people are likelier to notice symptoms in themselves as well.
8. *Sympathetic, identifiable victims.* The little girl stuck in a well shaft and the endangered species photo calendar generate more memorability than statistical mortality rates.

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Peter M. Sandman, Ph.D.

59 Ridgeview Road  
Princeton NJ 08540-7601

Email: peter@psandman.com  
Web: www.psandman.com

Phone: 1-609-683-4073  
Fax: 1-609-683-0566

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