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The Melbourne Times

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When the everyday becomes terrifying

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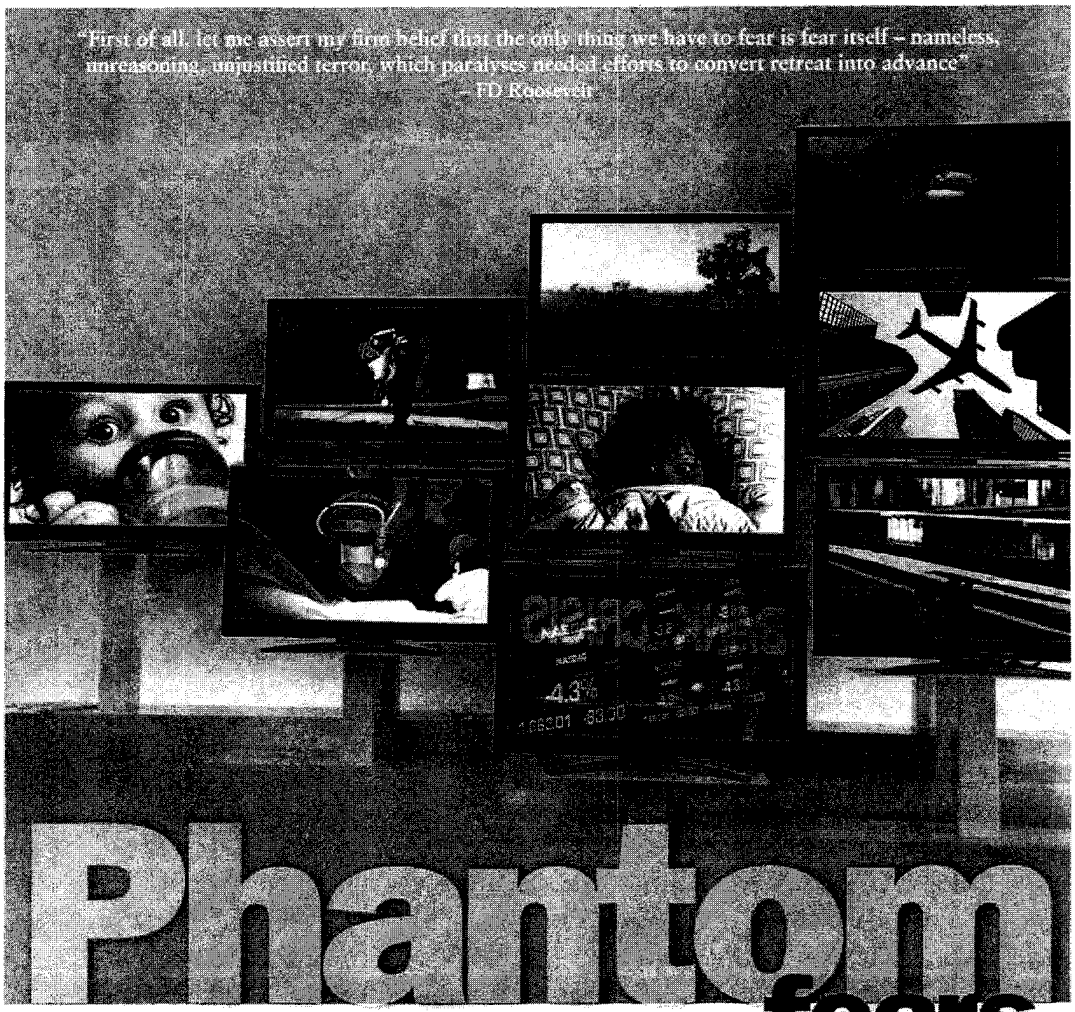
coverstory



Phantom fears

We are wealthier, healthier and live longer than ever before, so why are we so scared? Karen Murphy takes a look at our fears and whether they match reality

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Until earlier this year, I had a profound fear of flying. As some phobias do, it had snuck up on me, flight by flight, year by year, until it was so bad that not even anti-anxiety tablets could get me to board.

But then this year a most peculiar shift occurred while I waited in line to check in at Tullamarine, telling myself to keep breathing, watching the clock to determine when to take my pills, forcing myself not to panic.

As I shuffled forward towards the desk, the airline's computers crashed – not just in Melbourne but throughout the global network.

Hundreds of us, old people, families with young children, eager young backpackers and I waited and waited and waited. For three hours.

In that wait I had time to think, and this is what I thought.

I considered the fact that the events most of us are most afraid of – the traumatic deaths of loved ones and the consequent seemingly endless grief; life-changing illness and pain; the breakdown of a treasured relationship – had already happened to me. On the ground.

The worst that could occur in the air was to go down in a fiery ball, an event that would be both extremely unlikely and relatively quick.

It was, as they say, a life-changing moment, and by the time the system was up and running again all I thought was: "Let's get this bloody show on the road."

At the time I thought I was a bit of a genius to have nutted out this fearful conundrum, but according to a new book that analyses modern perceptions of fear and risk, the shift in my thinking was quite normal.

Not as common as it should be, according to author and journalist Dan Gardner, but *as* it should be.

He claims in the book *Risk* that in a world driven crazy by fear of everything from terrorists to psychopaths, pedophiles to cancer, economic meltdown to environmental disaster, we are becoming increasingly confused and irrational about the actual – rather than the perceived – risks of catastrophe.

Why, he asks, when we are wealthier, healthier, longer-lived and more comfortable than ever before, are we so afraid?

He is not the only one to ponder this. Community Safety Month, now running in municipalities across the city, is designed in part to combat this rising anxiety.

Even in relatively calm Melbourne, for instance, ask residents about their local concerns and the majority list fear of crime in the top three. However, study after study has shown most people in most neighbourhoods – up to 90 per cent in some areas – say they feel safe walking their streets alone at night.

It is a disconnection in perception that has long baffled police, sociologists and even urban planners.

After analysing myriad psychological studies designed to understand how we assess risk, Gardner says our response to fear remains predicated on the caveman.

"Every human brain has not one but two systems of thought," he writes.

"System two is reason. It works slowly. It examines evidence... When we examine the statistics and decide that the odds of being killed in a terrorist attack are far too small to worry about, Head is doing the work, but it has limitations.

"First, Head needs to be educated, it needs to understand the basics of maths, stats and logic. It also works very slowly.

"System one – feeling – is entirely different.

"Unlike reason, it works without conscious awareness, and it is as fast as lightning. Feeling, or Gut, is the source of snap judgements that we experience as a hunch or an intuition or as emotions like unease, worry or fear."

Gardner states that studies now show two central rules that seem to govern our gut instincts about what to fear.

The first is the example rule – that is, the easier something is to imagine or recall, the more the gut believes it likely to happen. If a rare event has been highlighted in the media, people think it more likely to happen to them because they remember the story.

The second rule is the rule of typical things – if groups of young people are presented as antisocial delinquents, for example, they will be seen that way, and some people will subsequently worry when they come across a happy band of teenagers.

"One might say that each of us is a car racing along a freeway and inside each car is a caveman who wants to drive and a bright-but-lazy teenager who knows he should keep a hand on the wheel but that's kind of a hassle and he'd really rather listen to his iPod and stare out of the window."

The antidote, then, to rising anxiety is to engage reason, to look at the real numbers relating to disease, disaster and crime.

The obvious starting point is life expectancy. Since 1910, our average lifespan has lengthened by almost 30 years, from 55.2 years to 78.8 years for men and 83 years for women.

We are also becoming safer, even though we may be increasingly prone to jump at our own shadows.

Consider that since 2000, crime in Victoria has decreased by 24.5 per cent, according to the latest statistics from Victoria Police.

Murder and rape, those crimes most closely associated with the concept of stranger-danger, have fallen by 14.2 per cent and 8 per cent respectively in the past year alone.

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The number of armed robberies is down, assaults between strangers are down, and drug offences are all down.

So how do we change our perceptions of urban risk?

Urban planning academic Carolyn Whitzman from the University of Melbourne has written a book on community safety that explains design components that can increase feelings of security, limit the probability of violence and calm fears.

Creating mixed-use developments is a central component of this, so streetscapes attract people throughout the day and evening to offices, apartments, cafes or restaurants.

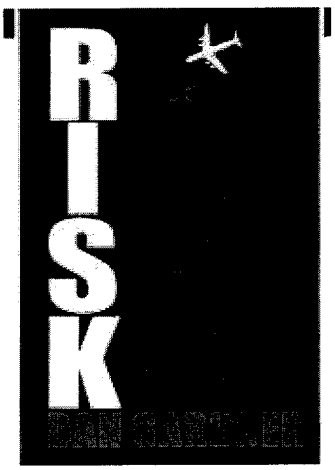
But most central, she says, is creating public spaces that bring people together.

"I think one of the reasons for the difference between how people feel and what they worry about is that people don't know their neighbours any more, and I think that means that people worry that if something does happen, no one will come to their, or their children's, assistance," she says.

"We just have to work out how best to live well together and to keep in mind that we have as much chance of being bitten by a shark while being hit by lightning than we have of falling victim to some of the things we are commonly afraid of."

Risk: The Science and Politics of Fear by Dan Gardner is published by Scribe Publications, RRP $35.

Academic Carolyn Whitzman



Gardner's guide to risk

Catastrophic potential: If fatalities occur in large numbers in a single event – instead of small numbers over time – our perception of risk rises

Familiarity: Unfamiliar or novel risks make us worry more

Understanding: If we believe that how an activity or technology works is not well understood, such as nuclear energy, our sense of risk goes up

Personal control: If we feel the potential for harm is beyond our control (like being a passenger in an airplane) we worry more than if we feel in control (the driver of a car)

Voluntariness: If we don't choose to engage the risk, it feels more threatening

Children: The risk feels worst if children are involved

Victims: Identifiable victims rather than statistical abstractions increase worry