

Why do our emotions get in the way of rational decisions about safety products?

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A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* explores why people reject things that can make them safer.

"People rely on airbags, smoke detectors, and vaccines to make them safe," write authors Andrew D. Gershoff (University of Texas at Austin) and Johnathan J. Koehler (Northwestern University School of Law).

"Unfortunately, vaccines do sometimes cause disease and airbags sometimes injure or kill. But just because these devices aren't perfect doesn't mean consumers should reject them outright."

The authors found that people feel betrayed when they learn about the risks associated with safety products. Then their emotions get in the way of rational decision-making. The researchers studied the "betrayal effect" by looking at the example of airbags. They asked participants to choose between two cars: One was equipped with an [airbag](#) that was less likely to ultimately save a life in the event of a serious accident. The other car had an airbag that was more likely to save a life, but it also had a tiny chance of causing death due to the force of deploying it.

Most participants avoided the airbag that had just a miniscule chance of harming them, even though by doing so, they accepted a far greater chance of being harmed in an accident.

"The findings show that people have strong [emotional reactions](#) when such safety devices have even a very small potential to betray them," the authors write. "So rather than weighing the costs and benefits, they will

reject these options outright, even if it makes them worse off for doing so."

The authors found that providing positive images helped people make safer choices as well as presenting the information in a graphic format to facilitate rational thinking that allowed consumers to easily compare and not overemphasize risk.

Finally, the authors found that people could be influenced to make safer choices by having them make their choices for strangers rather than for themselves. "Although this last method may seem contradictory, it makes sense when one considers that people tend to be less emotional about making choices that don't involve themselves or people they care for," the authors conclude.

More information: Andrew D. Gershoff and Johnathan J. Koehler. "Safety First? The Role of Emotion in Safety Product Betrayal Aversion." *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2011. Further information: ejcr.org

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