

Your Brain's Risk Perception of the TSA



The friendly skies are not so friendly anymore.

If you were committed to flying over the Thanksgiving holiday your thoughts were probably on some simple holiday choices – white meat or dark meat, one serving or two, pumpkin or mince pie and afterwards the Macy's Day parade or the bowl game.

One potential shoe bomber and one potential underwear bomber have now upped the ante of your choices to include – body scan or intrusive body pat-down.

Choice now becomes a challenge.

- Do you **opt for low dose radiation** that is less than what you experience during your flight but more than what you had experienced in the past?
- Do you **let a stranger grope you** and every family member just to be able to fly?
- Do you think you can **physically and mentally survive a long distance drive with your family?**
- Do you **stay home safe and sound but feel guilty** because you didn't go?

Actually, your choice will depend on weighing the risks involved according to David Ropeik, consultant on risk management and risk perceptions.

In terms of **risk management**, the TSA takes *the rationalistic approach*. There is a continued threat to aviation safety and

a reasonable and logical response is to provide low radiation dose body scanners or a body pat-down alternative. Most airline passengers accept this rational risk trade-off.

But when it comes to **risk perception**, rational thought can be trumped by your brain's chemistry for feelings and emotions.

Ropeik notes that the perception of **risk for some travelers is low for terrorism but high for the issue of "radiation."** Radiation not only elicits a variety of negative associations but arouses strong feeling and emotions especially when it is imposed in the form of a body scan you have no control over.

The **alternative of a body pat-down** would seem to be the reasonable lesser of two evils. However, the same feelings and emotions escalate with the perception of loss of control over the **issue of personal privacy**.

As a result, your brain's perception of risk from the TSA leaves you evaluating only two choices.

1. Experience the exposure of additional radiation no matter how safe they tell you it is
2. Get groped by a perfect stranger and try not to think about it

But, there is another choice thanks to Corinne Theila who thought there should be a way for the TSA to make people not feel uncomfortable when going through a security check. Corinne arrived at LAX airport and underneath her coat she was wearing a bikini. It seems a bikini was a rational choice alternative for Corine.

Many of us might not be ready to use the bikini choice right now, but **just think of the potential risk advantages**.

- It would keep us from taking a second serving of anything tempting
- It would not only kick start our diet plan but keep us

committed once and for all

- It would definitely make our exercise workouts more consistent
- And, we can feel better knowing we contribute to TSA security with a shorter, healthier and non-invasive security check.

Now, that's a risk perception that could have some real friendly flying benefits.

Source: Felt up or blown up? The psychology of the TSA, body scans and risk perception By David Ropeik Nov 23, 2010 03:50 PM 22

http://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/post.cfm?id=tsa-body-scans-and-risk-perception-2010-11-23&WT.mc_id=SA_DD_20101124