



New study: positive messaging wins over gloomy warnings

A recent study published online in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences suggests that focusing on positive results, such as enjoying better skin and more money by not smoking - rather than gloomy warnings of lung cancer and death - may be more effective in trying to educate young people.

For the study, researchers from University College London analysed participants ranging from nine to 26, by asking questions about how likely they felt they were to experience certain negative life events, like getting lung disease or being involved in a car accident. The participants were then shown the real statistics for said events, while researchers noted how each one changed his or her beliefs after learning the risk was higher or lower than they'd previously considered. However, it transpired that even when they became aware of heightened risks, the younger participants were less likely to learn from the information showing that the future could be worse than expected.

The ability to learn from positive information, on the other hand, was evident across all age groups. Lead author of the study, Dr Christina Moutsiana, says: "The findings could help to explain the limited impact of campaigns targeted at young people to highlight the dangers of careless driving, unprotected sex, alcohol and drug abuse, and other risky behaviours." The study authors say that this "good news-bad news effect" - namely youths' tendency to selectively discount bad news whilst assimilating good news - could explain why some young people tend to take risks irrationally.

The team suggests that focusing on the "beneficial outcomes of desired behaviours" - like how reduced alcohol consumption can improve sports performance - could have a better impact than focusing on the dangers of undesired behaviours. "We think we're invincible when we're young," says Dr Tali Sharot, senior author, sagely adding: "Our findings show that if you want to get young people to better learn about the risks associated with their choices, you might want to focus on the benefits that a positive change would bring rather than hounding them with horror stories."

