From terror attacks to the war on terror, real estate bubbles to the price of oil, sexual predators to poisoned food from China, our list of fears is ever-growing. And yet, we are the safest and healthiest humans in history. Irrational fear seems to be taking over, often with tragic results. For example, in the months after 9/11, when people decided to drive instead of fly—believing they were avoiding risk—road deaths rose by more than 1,500.
In this fascinating, lucid, and thoroughly entertaining examination of how humans process risk, journalist Dan Gardner had the exclusive cooperation of Paul Slovic, the world renowned risk-science pioneer, as he reveals how our hunter gatherer brains struggle to make sense of a world utterly unlike the one that made them. Filled with illuminating real world examples, interviews with experts, and fast-paced, lean storytelling, The Science of Fear shows why it is truer than ever that the worst thing we have to fear is fear itself.

**Personal Review: The Science of Fear: Why We Fear the Things We Shouldn’t—and Put Ourselves in Greater Danger by Daniel Gardner**

Daniel Gardner has done a wonderful job creating a fast-read with good solid research. The Science of Fear points out how easily we are fooled by the way we process the massive amount of information we receive. Gardner compares our decisions made with our Head versus those made with our Gut, referring to our ability to use critical thinking versus our tendency to use our instinctual mind. Critical thinking would tell me that flying is safer than driving. After 9/11 my instinctual mind told me that planes are dangerous.

The book covers the evolutionary psychological concepts of Confirmation bias (I see what I already believe), the Law of Similarity (appearance equals reality), the Anchoring and adjustment heuristic (influenced by what I just heard), the Rule of Typical things (things that usually go together always go together), and the Example Rule (a story is more powerful than statistical data). Each of these is explored in entertaining detail and backed up by academic research.

The main focus of the book is that our emotions often overrule our critical thinking skills. We are convinced through anecdote, stories we recently heard, stray statistical information that is incorrect and incorrectly cited, how we feel about events, and our life experience. We see something on talk TV and are convinced that it is true. Many people around us are sure of their information and we are swayed by their conviction. We are told by some commercial that we are at risk from strangers, dangers, disease and drugs and we change our buying habits. We hear that 600 people die in the US every year from something and we demand new laws.

How dangerous is the world? Gardner would argue not as dangerous as we have convinced ourselves. Our very complex brains still respond to danger they way our evolutionary ancestors did, listen to the herd and run, or fight, if there is something we do not understand. Gardner’s suggestion? Focus on what we have to be grateful for.

This is a great read. I recommend it to anyone interested in brain research, human behavior, human cognition, and group behavior. It is fun, well balanced and well supported.