CHAPTER SEVEN

B. Fear Appeals

The commercial opens with the image of an egg, as a narrator intones, “This is your brain.” The egg is then cracked and placed into a sizzling fry pan. “This is your brain on drugs,” the narrator continues. “Any questions?” This public service ad is an example of what social psychologists call a fear appeal. Fear appeals are persuasive communications that are designed to frighten people, usually by portraying the seriousness of some behavior in graphic and often morbid detail. Although research in this area is not entirely consistent, fear appeals are generally effective (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Janis & Feshbach, 1953; Leventhal, 1970; Witte, 1992). Across a variety of topics (e.g., drug abuse, seat belt use, AIDS prevention), people who receive high-fear messages are more persuaded than are people who receive low-fear messages.

High-fear messages should be accompanied by two assurances in order to achieve long-term behavioral change (Dabbs & Leventhal, 1966; Leventhal, 1970; Mewborn & Rogers, 1979; R. W. Rogers, 1983). First, people need to be assured that the recommended behavior will effectively reduce the risks they are facing (Dad, de Wit, & Stroebe, 2003). Second, people need to be assured that they are capable of performing the recommended behavior. This latter assurance is usually provided by giving people detailed plans of action that specify exactly what they should do (Leventhal, Singer, & Jones, 1965; Leventhal, Watts, & Pagano, 1967). To illustrate, scaring people about the dangers associated with smoking may help them to quit only if we also convince people that quitting smoking will greatly reduce the risks they face (e.g., you can avoid lung cancer, emphysema, and heart disease if you quit smoking now) and then convince them that they are capable of quitting (e.g., you’ll use a nicotine patch, carry chewing gum at all times, and avoid restaurants and bars that allow smoking).

FIGURE 7.12
Message Framing and Persuasion

Messages framed in terms of gains (using this product provides benefits) were more effective when health prevention was emphasized, but messages framed in terms of losses (failing to use this product increases your risk) were more effective when health detection was emphasized.