C. Overcoming Defensiveness

To be effective, fear appeals must provoke fear without invoking defensiveness. Simply put, people don’t want to believe they are at risk for developing an awful disease, and they will defend against this belief by denying their susceptibility if their anxiety and fear become too great (Devos-Comby & Salovey, 2002; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1997; Liberman & Chaiken, 1992; Sengupta & Johar, 2001).

Applying Steele’s (1988) self-affirmation theory (see Chapter 6), D. A. K. Sherman, Nelson, and Steele (2000) demonstrated one strategy for avoiding this pitfall. These investigators had a group of women read a research report linking caffeine consumption to the development of fibrocystic disease, a precursor of breast cancer. Some of the women were heavy coffee drinkers and some were not. Hence, the report posed a greater threat to the former group than to the latter. After reading this article, some of the women were allowed to affirm their self-worth by reminding themselves that they had many fine values, whereas other participants were not given this opportunity. Finally, all of the participants indicated how strong they thought the link was between caffeine consumption and fibrocystic disease, and how important it was for women to reduce their intake of caffeine.

Sherman and colleagues reasoned that, in the absence of any opportunity to affirm their self-worth, heavy coffee drinkers should react to the report defensively by denying its validity. This defensiveness should be reduced, however, following a self-affirmation opportunity. Figure 7.13 shows that these predictions were confirmed. In the absence of the self-affirmation manipulation, coffee drinkers believed the report was less valid than did non–coffee drinkers. These differences were reversed,

![Figure 7.13](image_url)

**FIGURE 7.13**
Self-Affirmation and Defensive Reactions to Threatening Health-Relevant Information

Coffee drinkers defensively denied the validity of a report linking caffeine consumption to fibrocystic disease when they were not given an opportunity to affirm their self-worth by reminding themselves that they possessed many fine values, but accepted the report’s validity when they were given an opportunity to affirm their self-worth.