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Cari Bourette, *Western Kentucky University*



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Earthquake Anxiety May Be Indicator of Future Trouble

The earthquake in Haiti was a tragic incident, with devastation and loss at a scale rarely seen. The following month, on February 27, an earthquake of magnitude 8.8 hit Chile. Since then, there have been numerous interviews of earthquake experts around the world and articles addressing the pervasive public concern: Could we be next?

According to some experts, it is possible for earthquakes to trigger additional movements along the same fault line. The U.S. Geological Survey insists that the number of major quakes occurring has not increased in frequency. Yet people continue to be unusually concerned. When a 4.4 quake woke Los Angeles residents on the morning of March 16, one anxiety that needed to be addressed was the possibility of this quake being a foreshock of “the Big One.”

It is important for government officials and experts to reassure the public when no immediate danger is present. However, it may also be prudent to allow for the possibility, albeit remote, that something unusual is indeed occurring. The maps displayed at earthquake.usgs.gov may previously have been as crowded with little squares representing both major and minor quakes as they are today. Perhaps this has happened many times. Yet in the past few months, people have perceived an unusual frequency of earthquake activity, and seem to be more worried than usual about future activity.

While popular understanding of such events may oftentimes be at odds with the current scientific paradigm, it is foolish to dismiss mass perceptions as simply meaningless. “Earthquake weather” is a common belief among people who live in Southern California. Locals can be heard discussing the topic most often during the heat waves of late August and early September. While there may be no direct causal link between earthquakes and the weather, the perception being expressed is not necessarily invalid. According to a recent study, earthquakes in California, at least since 1992, seem to follow an annual cycle, with September the peak of most frequent occurrence. Apparently, in their folklore, Californians are expressing a valid correlation between time of year and earthquakes. The attribution to the current weather may be in error, a bad “naming,” but the perception of a connection may indeed be valid.

There is a widespread perception that something unusual is going on. In the past week, I had a conversation with a woman in South Korea who is making sure she is prepared for a tsunami “just in case,” and another conversation with an insurance agent in the central United States who is concerned with the “number of recent earthquakes” and whether that has implications for her and her family. I find myself double-checking emergency supplies and plans.

There seems to be a pervasive level of anxiety regarding the stability of the earth under our feet—something we normally take for granted. This feeling may be a metaphor for a general anxiety about the stability of our world and way of life, or it may be expressing a perception that we are in a season of earthquakes or natural disasters in general. Either way, it is a signal that something is not normal. Geographic research and analysis could help us better understand the relationships between people, their moods, and physical systems. Until then, the specific meaning of these mass perceptions may be unclear. For now, it would not be imprudent to take these as a cautionary sign to be prepared for the unusual and to stay alert for the out of the ordinary. Checking emergency kits and affirming emergency plans with family members would not be a bad idea.

(595 words)

Cari Bourette is a member of the [American Geographical Society's Writers Circle](#), Director of Global Risk Assessment for A New Story Foundation, Inc., and Adjunct Professor of Geography, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101-1066, USA. She can be reached at cari@anewstory.org.

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