

The Fear of Living Dangerously

Even tough guys get weak-kneed at the thought of losing everything. So why take big chances? Because win or lose, in that

derring-do outdo the wimps

BY RALPH KEYES

TEST YOURSELF. HAVE YOU EVER:

1. Used a knife to dig bread from a plugged-in toaster?
2. Put off paying bills you could afford to pay until threatening notices began to arrive?
3. Driven a car whose gas gauge registered empty?
4. Stood on the platform between two cars of a moving train?
5. Turned on an electrical appliance while taking a bath or a shower?

If you have, get in line. Nearly half of the 500 subjects who filled out my questionnaire on risk-taking admitted to poking around in the live coils of a toaster with a fork or a knife. Sixty-nine percent dared to drive a car whose gas gauge was on empty. Thirty-six percent stood between moving train cars, 29 percent put off paying bills until threatened, and almost one quarter turned on electrical appliances while bathing. "I just like to see if I can get away with it" is the way one man justified turning on the radio *after* he gets in the shower.

Although most people wouldn't call themselves bold, they take such tiny chances every day. Call these "risklets." They're the finger food of risk-taking, little acts of daring that pump tiny drops of

adrenaline into our bloodstream. We all need to take them now and then, not for any real reward but just to move the day along—to give fate a "flick on the nose," as Dostoyevski put it. Turning off the toaster before prying out a piece of bread may make perfect sense, but where's the challenge?

Deep in our primordial past, such daily gambles provided more than mere entertainment; in fact, biologist René Dubos has called the ability to take risks "a condition of [our] biological success." The reason Homo sapiens can be found in every part of the globe is that we're history's most daring animal. Back in the days of saber-toothed tigers, our ancestors were relatively weak, slow creatures who needed guts simply to outwit their more powerful predators.

Over the millennia, our nervous system grew accustomed to such risk-taking and became dependent on its physiological effects. When confronted with danger, the body is flooded not only with adrenaline but with mood-regulating stress hormones, including natural opiates called endorphins. The impact of these chemicals on the body is similar to that of morphine: Thrill seekers routinely use "e" words, such as "elated," "exhilarated," "euphoric" and "ecstatic," to describe the reward they get for braving danger.

Is it any wonder, then, that some of us take somewhat more daring chances than driving on empty? From chronic procrastination to petty theft to all-out turf wars, the work world hums with employees busily creating problems to solve. Some executives claim they can't function without constant turmoil. A friend of mine who worked for a federal agency routinely leaked secrets to the press. This man had no particular reason for doing so; it wasn't to influence policy or to smite an enemy. Yet he smuggled privileged information to reporters at some peril to his job security. For days afterward, my friend feared reprisal. Yet he found this sensation not altogether unpleasant. On the contrary, (continued on page 178)



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(continued from page 176) it felt like the adult equivalent of riding the Lightning' Loops. Leaking secrets made him feel bold. It gave *texture* to otherwise flat days. Call such activity "pot stirring"—one rung above risklets on the risk-taking ladder. In a study of stress-addiction, two business professors concluded that recurring organizational problems are typically created by managers who get "high . . . from crisis management" (e.g., George Steinbrenner, Ted Turner). "I thrive on crisis," admits one manager. "If I'm not in a crisis, I'm afraid I might create one."

Such obsessive risk-taking stems from a recognized psychological syndrome known as risk addiction. Risk junkies, as those who suffer from the disorder are sometimes

former drug use simply to being bored and wanting "some adventure."

According to University of Delaware psychologist Marvin Zuckerman, "Some individuals have an innate need for more stimulation than do others." During the past two decades, Zuckerman has studied such people, those he calls "sensation seekers." He has found that they are more likely not only to engage in strenuous sports but to smoke cigarettes, consume higher-than-average quantities of alcohol, experiment with a wide range of drugs and have more than the occasional brush with the law. High sensation seekers prefer to eat spicy foods, drive sports cars and ride motorcycles. In general, they have more sex more often with more partners and in a

more than routine. Even catastrophe is less to be feared—it poses a bigger challenge. Donald Trump has said of his recent troubles that "the bad times, while tougher, can be more interesting than the good times." While some may argue that Trump is merely trying to give his critics less to gloat over with such claims, his attitude is typical of the breed. As Atari founder Nolan Bushnell once put it, "Being successful is kind of dull."

Not just success but any pursuit that involves too much time, routine or commitment is anathema to excitement-driven types. They are sprinters, not milers, and would rather, say, campaign for office than hold office. Courtship excites them; marriage puts them off. They go wherever the

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called, will take almost any chance, more for the thrill of taking it than for any reward it may bring. Needless to say, in such cases, the risk often far outweighs any potential gain. Take Bess Myerson—a millionaire who nevertheless stole six bottles of nail polish, five pairs of earrings, one pair of shoes and a package of flashlight batteries from a Pennsylvania department store. Or Pennsylvania's former secretary of agriculture, a wealthy Republican named Penrose Hallowell, who was convicted, in 1985, of shoplifting a \$4.99 cassette of Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops from Sears. Security taped Hallowell picking up the cassette, looking left and right, slipping it into his pocket and walking off into the arms of the law. Let's assume he didn't need the cassette that badly. What's more likely is that Hallowell needed the excitement of *stealing* a cassette.

Most of us can balance our need to take risks with our need for safety. But for those who need nonstop excitement, the distinctions between useful and useless, right and wrong, good and bad, can get awfully hazy. And often it's those people with the most to lose who are willing to jeopardize it. For proof, just read the sports pages. From the sidelines, it may be hard to understand why so many successful, highly paid athletes will risk it all to use drugs. For them, taking such an extraordinary chance holds an undeniable appeal. "I've taken on challenges all my life" is the way New York Giants linebacker Lawrence Taylor explained his onetime problem with cocaine, while ex-NBA guard John Lucas attributes his own

greater variety of positions than do less venturesome types. His conclusion: "High sensation seekers are likely to have not just one but a number of adventurous tastes."

The reason, explains Zuckerman, is that risk junkies' nervous systems may need more stimulation to get up to speed. Evidence suggests that their brains don't produce enough stress hormones to keep their spirits up; seeking constant excitement may be a way to supplement their limited supply of natural mood-raising opiates. An addiction to risk-taking probably results from dependence upon these opiates, which can be as addictive as drugs, alcohol or any other kind of narcotic. More than one Vietnam vet who had problems with the law claimed in court that his crimes were due to an overwhelming need for action acquired during combat.

But such a craving does not characterize only veterans and pro ballplayers. Risk addicts are among the most—and the least—productive members of society. They can be found in prison cells and casinos as well as covering news stories, running governments and, in particular, starting new ventures. Entrepreneurs typically engage in risky behavior for the excitement of building something new. To explain why he has jumped from one pursuit to another since successfully founding a car-rental company, Warren Avis once told a reporter, "What's the purpose of getting up in the morning unless there's excitement?"

Avis and his ilk are notorious for leaving enterprises they've founded once things are running smoothly. Nothing depresses them

action is. Explains emergency-room doctor Stephen Seager, "I shoot up the ER. I crave the adrenaline rush from beating back a coma or stopping a bleeding belly. My head and muscles need the charge. I need the juice. I suppose my stomach even needs the acid."

Without a regular fix of danger, risk junkies can suffer withdrawal, which often takes the form of crippling depression. For them, boredom literally *hurts*. Novelist Graham Greene describes the feeling as being like that of a balloon swelling up inside his head until it seems ready to burst. "Boredom sickness" is what he calls it. As an antidote, Greene has played Russian roulette, and says he never felt better than when bombs were falling all around him during the London blitzes. Greene later visited war zones around the globe, seeking the same turn-on. When natives told him they wished he could have seen their country at peace, Greene says he wanted to respond "But all that interests me here is your war." Similarly, heroic figures from Lord Byron to George Patton have flourished in the midst of peril and crashed once times grew tranquil. When he was bored, Winston Churchill tended to slip into what he called his "black dog" of depression, a condition he alleviated by actively courting danger. "I think I am of an adventurous disposition," the future prime minister wrote his mother before joining a military expedition in India, "and shall enjoy myself not so much *in spite of* as *because of* the risks I run."

If risk addicts are more easily bored by

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routine than are the rest of us, their physiological reaction to danger is remarkably similar. From sky divers to stand-up comics, risktakers of all kinds describe three stages of reaction when facing a challenge. Beforehand, their fear is so extreme it can make them sick. Once they're in the action—leaping from a plane, walking onto a stage, taking out a loan to start a business—that fear is replaced by absorption in getting the job done. Then, when the endorphins have kicked in, they feel a euphoria so great it can be orgasmic.

Concentration becomes intense and almost involuntary in a dangerous situation. I discovered this when, as a Plimpton-esque exercise, I joined my first rock-climbing expedition, at the age of 37. The euphoric high afterward didn't surprise me. Nor did the crippling fear beforehand. What I didn't expect at all was the degree of concentration that quickly and totally replaced my fear once I was fifty feet off the ground examining a few square inches of sheer granite for a crack in which to stick my fingernail, or a depression deep enough to support one toe. When the alternative is

to have your body parts scattered over the ground below, giving a task your full attention is less difficult than you might think.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, of the University of Chicago, has found that such trance-like concentration is common not only among rock climbers but among chess players, performers and others who routinely face some sort of challenge. He calls it a state of "flow." Risk is an important part of this process. Unless an

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activity includes some element of uncertainty, says Csikszentmihalyi, it's hard to achieve such absorption. Flow is most likely to occur when our limits of fear are stretched but not to the point of panic. "If there is too little demand on them, people are bored," he explains. "If there is too much for them to handle, they get anxious. Flow occurs in that delicate zone between boredom and anxiety."

Athletes call this state "being in the zone": becoming so involved in a contest

that time slows down, movements become automatic, and concentration is total. "You somehow get real cool and in control at the same time" is the way Boston Celtics forward Larry Bird puts it, attributing this reaction to "some chemical in your body" triggered by stress. "I wish I could drink it," he says.

The ability to reach this state varies from one individual to the next. Some are so panicked that they can't take the risks nec-

essary to get into the flow. Others take too many risks and go far beyond it. Either way, confrontation with danger almost always produces fear, even in those who constantly tempt fate. If anything, I've noticed that those whom I would call venturesome can be more anxious about certain things than is the average person. Wire-walker Philippe Petit (who, in 1974, traversed the World Trade Towers without a net) once told me that getting married was his number-one fear. Other things that scare Petit are spiders, snakes, water, heights and wire-walking itself (obviously a fear he's successfully controlled). Similarly, one founder of a software company ran his finger down a list of fear symptoms on my questionnaire: racing heart, stomach butterflies, dry mouth, wet palms, trouble sleeping. "Check, check, check," he mumbled. Then he looked up and asked, "Is there any place to mark 'All of the above'?"

But rather than be deterred by fear, the venturesome types thrive on it. Excitement, after all, is its flip side. (One study of sky divers found that the more frightened they were before a jump, the more thrilled they felt after it.) The crucial difference between the bold and the timid isn't their level of fear, it's their attitude toward being afraid. Mike Tyson has called fear "my friend." The key to his success lies in his ability to convert fear into flow.

In researching his book *Marketing to the Affluent*, marketing executive Thomas J. Stanley found that millionaires often borrow to the hilt as much to put themselves on the line as to finance new enterprises. One of them quoted a Russian proverb to explain his philosophy: "Throw your hat over the wall and you'll find a way to get it back." Stanley contrasts the esprit of those who do with the despair of more prudent middle-aged executives who are buffered

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by benefits packages and pension plans. He suspects that many therapists in this country are earning their kids' college tuition by consoling upscale men in their fifties who are consumed with regret over the cautious lives they've led. "I was a gutsy guy when I was young" is their constant refrain. "What happened?"

During my own interviews with risk-

takers and risk avoiders, subjects continually expressed remorse over chances never taken: love interests not pursued, career moves not made, words left unspoken. Regret about playing it too safe can border on mourning. Not once, on the other hand, have I ever heard anyone say that he's sorry for having taken a risk—win, lose or draw. Those who take chances they want to take

aren't plagued by "what if's. Even after catastrophic defeats, risktakers take pride in their daring. As Woody Allen once put it, "Failure is a sure sign that you're not playing it safe."

Ralph Keyes wrote *Chancing It: Why We Take Risks*. His new book, *Timelock*, will be published by HarperCollins.

How Gutsy Are You?

INSTRUCTIONS: Circle only one number per question. Answer all questions. If no answer given feels exactly right, pick the one that comes closest. To determine your score, total all numbers circled.

1. During the past ten years, how often have you changed residence?
 1. 10 times or more
 2. 5-9 times
 3. 2-4 times
 4. 0-1 times
2. In an average week, how many hours of television do you watch?
 1. 0-5 hours
 2. 6-10 hours
 3. 11-20 hours
 4. More than 20 hours
3. How much do you smoke, on the average?
 1. More than 20 cigarettes daily
 2. 10-20 cigarettes daily, or a pipe or cigars
 3. Only on occasion
 4. I don't smoke
4. How often do you tape sealed envelopes before mailing them?
 1. Almost never
 2. Seldom
 3. Often
 4. Regularly

Assume that you are equally competent at all of the following activities. For each set, pick the one that you would most enjoy doing. (If neither activity appeals to you, pick the one that's the least unappealing.)

5. 1. Scuba diving
2. Snorkeling
6. 1. Skiing down a steep slope

2. Ski-touring through woods
7. 1. Dirt biking
2. Hiking in the desert

Circle the number of the word that best describes your feelings about the following activities:

8. Building your own house:
 1. Tedious
 2. Satisfying
9. Attending a heavy-metal concert:
 1. Arousing
 2. Jarring
10. Chairing a task force on health plans for your employer:
 1. Boring
 2. Challenging
11. With a report due at work in two weeks, would you be most likely to:
 1. Start working on it the day before it's due, then stay up most of that night completing it
 2. Work hard on the report a day or two before it's due
 3. Start working on it during the second week
 4. Budget time throughout the two weeks to produce the report
12. Which opportunity sounds more appealing to you?
 1. Starting a new business
 2. Purchasing a successful business
13. For a sales job, would you prefer to be paid by:
 1. Straight commission
 2. Mostly commission, with a substantial draw
 3. A substantial draw, with some commission
 4. Straight salary
14. Suppose you were asked to join a start-up venture within your company. Would you evaluate this opportunity primarily in terms of:
 1. The challenge
 2. Incentive compensation based on performance
 3. The amount of annual compensation
 4. Job security
15. You are about to be vested in a pension plan at work. A fledgling company in your field makes you an attractive job offer. This

job has meager benefits but does include an option to buy stock in the firm before it goes public in a few months. Would you:

1. Accept the new firm's job offer
 2. Try to put the firm off until you can see how the business does
 3. Use the offer to negotiate a raise from your current employer
 4. Reject the offer
16. If you were living on the East Coast a century ago, do you think you would have joined a wagon train heading out West?
 1. Definitely
 2. Probably
 3. Probably not
 4. Definitely not
17. When highway driving, how often do you drive faster than 65 mph?
 1. Regularly
 2. Often
 3. Seldom
 4. Almost never
18. Does motorcycle riding strike you as primarily:
 1. Exhilarating
 2. Romantic
 3. Dangerous
 4. Crazy
19. Which term best describes your behavior before age 12?
 1. Hyperactive
 2. Mischievous
 3. Basically well-behaved
 4. Very well-behaved
20. Which statement better describes you today?
 1. I get bored easily
 2. Patience is one of my virtues

INTERPRETATION

Any score below 30 indicates that you are more of a sprinter. With their high need for excitement and low tolerance for boredom, sprinters are better able to take short-term risks that may involve actual danger. A score of 30 or above puts you in the miler category. While physical risks and those involving financial security are harder for milers, they have an easier time taking long-range risks, such as building a career or training for an athletic contest. —R.K.