

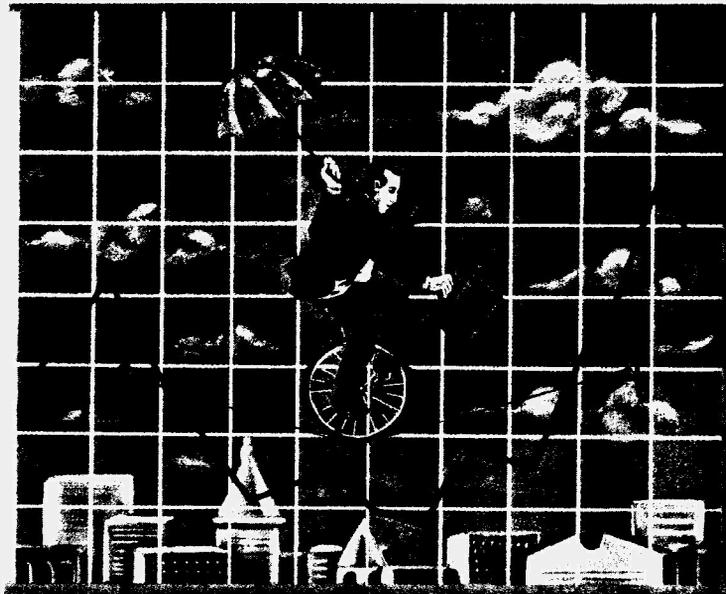
Behavior/Health

by Ralph Keyes

Meet the thrill-seeking personality. He thrives on crisis and gets bored when things become routine. In business he's good at memo wars and turf fights but would rather start his own company than be a subordinate in someone else's. This corporate thrill seeker is driven by an irresistible urge to take risks, which may be biological in origin.

University of Wisconsin psychologist Frank Farley calls them Type T personalities (T stands for thrill seeking). Farley and other researchers believe that such people may be born requiring very high levels of stimulation just to get through a typical day.

Scientists don't know for sure what the biological basis might be for that inborn trait, but there are some clues. In recent years a wide range of mood-regulating neurochemicals have been discovered in the human body. Some, called endorphins, are natural opiates that stream into our nervous systems during times of extreme stress. Their effect has been implicated in syndromes ranging from "runner's high" to the euphoria many women experience after giving birth. The soothing, mood-elevating effect of endorphins and other neurochemicals seems to be nature's way of helping us cope with tough situations. This could explain why soldiers so often report getting hyper-cool during combat and elated afterward. Or why skydivers, scuba divers, mountain



Noah Martin

THE THRILL OF IT ALL

climbers and other daredevils routinely use words like "euphoric," "ecstatic" or even "orgasmic" to describe how they feel after courting danger.

A shortage of natural opiates, on the other hand, could be what compels sensation seekers to take risks. Marvin Zuckerman, a University of Delaware psychologist, suggests that those who have a deficit of neurochemical mood regulators may actually *need* stimulation to replenish their limited supply. By that hypothesis, the more risk these people take, the greater is their flow of mood elevators and the better their spirit. Without enough excitement they suffer what Graham Greene, a self-admitted action addict, calls "boredom sickness."

Consider the case of Ted Turner. By his own admission, Atlanta's media baron is thrilled by tacking into the wind with new ventures but bored by sailing with the breeze once they're running smoothly. Success, in Turner's words, is "just a bunch of responsibility." His constantly expanding empire never consistently gets into the black because whenever it's in danger of turning a profit, Turner starts a cable network, bids on a CBS or buys an MGM. What makes this man able to roll his financial dice with such abandon is his relative indifference to profit and loss. "Making money is very dull," Turner once explained in a speech. "I never pictured myself as a businessman. I

always saw myself as an explorer, an adventurer."

Entrepreneurs like Turner are excitement driven, not income driven. One study of business founders in St. Louis discovered that salary was the only major issue they were *not* upset about while they were working for someone else. The lack of challenge and autonomy bothered them far more—explaining why so many entrepreneurs are better at founding businesses than running them. In the words of Warren Avis, who hopped from one enterprise to another after selling his car rental company: "What's the purpose of getting up in the morning unless there's excitement?"

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Are You a Risk Taker? Turn to quiz on page 14.

Those who are motivated more by the thrill of risk than the lure of wealth can be found throughout the workplace. Some are entrepreneurs-to-be just waiting to make a break; others are given roles as "intrapreneurs," who innovate and take chances within corporate ranks. Such risk seekers don't just tolerate stress well but *need* the excitement that they find on the upside of stress.

Various studies have shown that a need for stimulation is among the most basic but least appreciated of employee traits. In Israel, research on kibbutz managers identified some who were not only stress tolerant but stress dependent. They flourished in the midst of chaos but grew lethargic without a crisis to challenge them. More recently, a study of Lockheed employees found that when placed in routine work, stress-seeking employees suffered physical reactions such as heightened blood pressure.

Is stress seeking healthy? It depends on the context. Like Graham Greene, Winston Churchill was a self-confessed danger lover who was susceptible to extreme depression at normal levels of arousal. Between wars Churchill was widely scorned as a thrill-seeking adolescent passing as a grownup. But the closer Hitler got to England's shores, the better Winston Churchill's taste for danger looked to his countrymen. Then there's our own Billy Martin. With a new baseball team to manage, especially a bad one, Martin is in his element. He thrives on adversity and loves taking the risks necessary to turn teams around. No one does it faster. But Billyball works only for a year or two. After that its creator gets bored and burned out.

I call such stress seekers Sprinters. Sprinters are most effective in the short run. They crave excitement, are easily bored and will take almost any kind of risk to relieve the agony of monotony. At best this involves undertaking the challenge of a start-up enterprise or physically dangerous assignment. But in the absence of better risks Sprinters will ignore safety regulations, war with co-workers, leak company secrets or pilfer its goods just to stay stimulated.

Unlike Sprinters, when it comes to
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taking risks most of us are stress-avoiding Marathoners. With less need for excitement and more interest in security, our risks tend to be those of the time, spirit and commitment necessary for long-term projects such as managing businesses and raising families. That may not sound like risk taking to us. But you'd never convince a Sprinter. To them, lasting activities are the most dangerous ones of all. In interviews with thrill seekers I was told repeatedly that what *really* scared them was the danger of making commitments. As wirewalker Philippe Petit put it, an act such as getting married would be to him "the most tremendous act of courage of my whole life."

Understanding this difference in attitudes toward risk can help to maximize productivity and minimize conflict when making job assignments. One division manager told me that this perspective had saved him from having to fire an employee. Two men on his staff were at constant loggerheads. Their inability to work together was disrupting the entire division. He had called both men on the carpet and warned them that if they couldn't figure out how to cooperate, he'd let one of them go. He came to see that this demand was unreasonable. They *couldn't* work together, because one was a stress-seeking Sprinter, the other a stress-avoiding Marathoner. Rather than demand that they change or be fired, the manager decided to redefine the job of each to better suit his temperament, then try to keep them out of each other's way.

Is one temperament better than the other? Not necessarily. Society needs both Sprinters and Marathoners. One innovates, the other consolidates. Sprinters are better at starting a new enterprise or helping shepherd an existing one through a crisis. But when a successful new business needs a steady hand at the tiller, the reliable qualities of a Marathoner are in demand. An effective manager recognizes this difference in attitudes toward risk, knows where each one is called for, then tries to put Sprinters and Marathoners on the same team—just not in the same position. □

Ralph Keyes, author of *Chancing It: Why We Take Risks*, leads seminars on "Productive Risk Taking."

ARE YOU A RISK TAKER?

Some personalities seem to have a real need for the excitement that comes from taking risks—physical, financial or emotional. Without risk-generated stimulation, they feel bored and are likely to stir up the excitement they thrive on. To test whether you are such a personality, answer the questions below. If no answer feels exactly right, choose the one that comes closest.

- During the past 10 years, how often have you changed residence?
 1. 10 times or more
 2. five to nine times
 3. two to four times
 4. zero to one time
- Which best describes your behavior before age 12?
 1. hyperactive
 2. mischievous
 3. basically well behaved
 4. very well behaved
- If you were living on the East Coast a century ago, do you think you would have joined a wagon train headed west?
 1. definitely
 2. probably
 3. probably not
 4. definitely not
- With up to \$25,000 to spend, which one of the following cars would you be most likely to buy?
 1. Corvette
 2. Saab Turbo
 3. Cadillac Eldorado
 4. Volvo Station Wagon
- In highway driving, how often do you drive faster than 65 miles per hour?
 1. regularly
 2. often
 3. seldom
 4. almost never
- Assume that you are equally capable of doing all the activities listed below. For each pair, pick the one that you would most enjoy. (If neither activity appeals to you, pick the one that's least unappealing.)

1. riding a motorcycle	2. riding a 12-speed bicycle
1. driving a dune buggy	2. hiking in the desert
1. para-sailing	2. hot-air ballooning
1. down-hill skiing	2. cross-country skiing
1. scuba diving	2. snorkeling
- Circle the number of the word that BEST describes your reaction to the following activities:
Building a cabinet: 1. tedious 2. satisfying
Climbing rocks: 1. exhilarating 2. scary
Attending a rock concert: 1. arousing 2. jarring
Teaching school: 1. boring 2. challenging
- Which opportunity sounds more appealing to you?
 1. starting your own business
 2. purchasing a successful business
- For a sales job, would you prefer to be paid by:
 1. straight commission
 2. mostly commission with a modest draw
 3. a substantial draw, with some commission
 4. straight salary
- With a report due at work in two weeks, would you most likely:
 1. start working on this report the afternoon before it's due, then stay up most of that night completing it
 2. work hard on the report for 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
- 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 tied to performance.
 3. the amount of annual compensation
 4. job security
- Which statement describes you better?
 1. I get bored easily
 2. patience is one of my virtues
- What kinds of risks would you say are hardest for you to take?
 1. commitment risks (ones involving long-term involvement with a person, faith, activity or career)
 2. emotional risks (in relationships, or showing your feelings)
 3. financial risks (of losing money)
 4. physical risks (of life and limb)

Total all numbers circled. Any score below 40 indicates you are a risk taker with a high need for excitement and a low tolerance for boredom. A score of 40 and above indicates you are a stress avoider, most comfortable with security and long-range commitments.

—R.K.