GOING IN FOR THE Thrill

Why do some people seem to purposely seek out thrill more than others and what can we learn from them?

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Thrill-seekers, daredevils, adrenaline junkies... These are just some of the many names we use to label those who enjoy living life on the edge. According to the Collins English Dictionary, a thrill-seeker is somebody who 'enjoys taking part in extreme sports and other activities involving physical risk'. However, this would appear to be a rather limited interpretation, not only for the kind of person we associate with being a 'thrill-seeker', but also for the types of activities that can elicit such feelings of exhilaration.

It might be more useful to view thrill-seeking through the lens of another term: sensation-seeking. Sensation-seeking refers to the drive to pursue new or intense experiences that produce feelings of excitement, pleasure or fear – a state that we would otherwise recognise as being 'thrilled'. Although these emotions can come from participating in adrenaline-fuelled ventures like skydiving or bungee jumping, they can also be just as easily replicated in any action that pushes someone beyond the limits of their comfort zone, such as trying an exotic cuisine or joining a new club. Sensation-seeking isn't merely motivated by danger; it is also driven by novelty and the fear of the unknown.

Different types of thrill-seeking

Research into sensation-seeking was first conducted in the 1960s by psychologist Marvin Zuckerman. He had originally been looking into the effects of sensory deprivation as a form of brainwashing, but instead discovered that sensation-seeking was an integral personality trait, with some people requiring higher levels of stimulation in their daily lives than others. This then manifested in them having a greater desire for new sensations and experiences. Zuckerman developed the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) to assess individual preferences for how much stimulation somebody might need, with extreme sensation-seeking on one end of the spectrum and extreme sensation-avoiding on the other.

The sheer complexity of the sensation-seeking trait meant that Zuckerman's test comprised of four distinct components that could contribute to how much someone might actively seek (or avoid) sensation: these were thrill- and adventure-seeking, experience-seeking, disinhibition and boredom susceptibility.

To score highly in the thrill- and adventure-seeking section is an indicator of someone who enjoys seeking out external stimulation through physical activities that are exciting and risky (or what we would typically think of as a traditional 'thrill-seeker'). Meanwhile, those scoring highly in experience-seeking require arousal through a variety of novel encounters that stimulate both the mind and the five senses, a form of internal sensation-seeking. Those with strong disinhibition scores display a natural tendency to be spontaneous and unrestrained as well as a preference for 'out-of-control' escapades, such as wild parties or excessive drinking. Lastly, those scoring highly on the boredom susceptibility scale are denoted by their dislike for repetition, boring people and predictable situations, and become extremely restless if they are unable to seek out new sensations.

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Most people fall somewhere in the middle on the Sensation Seeking Scale, but it is the extent to which an individual possesses each of these four traits that determine how they peruse their own personal supply of excitement. The first two components, thrill- and adventure-seeking and experience-seeking, are indicators of the type of thrill-seeker that somebody is, while the last two components, disinhibition and boredom susceptibility, reveal how much trouble someone is willing to get into in their pursuit of the thrill.

The blueprint of a thrill-seeker

Although anyone can be deemed to be a 'thrill-seeker', there are some biological and environmental factors that influence who is more likely to be one than others. Research suggests that sensation-seeking reaches its peak in adolescence and remains stable thereafter or is dampened over time by social obligations such as marriage or becoming a parent. Some studies have found that males score significantly higher than females in most aspects of sensation-seeking apart from experience-seeking, with divorced men ranking highest out of everyone.

The predominant factor in how likely someone is to be a thrill-seeker, though, is their response to the hormones that sensation-seeking produces. When the brain registers a potential danger, the amygdala triggers the release of a cocktail of hormones into the bloodstream, including adrenaline, dopamine and endorphins. Adrenaline increases our »

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF THE THRILL

It all begins in the amygdala, a small almond-shaped structure at the base of the brain that plays a central role in processing emotions. When we encounter something thrilling, such as a risky activity or an exciting event, the amygdala is activated. This then triggers the hypothalamus, the body's control centre in the middle of the brain, which releases a cluster of hormones, including dopamine. Next, the sympathetic nervous system, otherwise known as the 'fight or flight' system, kicks in. It suppresses activity in the stomach, stimulates the release of glucose, and dilates the pupils – all small ways to help prepare the body to face danger. The adrenal glands, found just above the kidneys, pump out adrenaline and cortisol. As adrenaline courses through the body, it acts as a signal to the heart to beat faster, pushing more oxygen into the brain. Our brain and body are now in a hyper-focused state.

> "THRILL-SEEKERS REMIND THE LESS ADVENTUROUS HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF LIFE"

heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate, pushing more oxygen into the brain and muscles, which puts us on high alert. As the response intensifies, other chemicals are pumped into our body, including cortisol (otherwise known as the 'stress hormone') and testosterone. Our pupils dilate, our senses sharpen, and we receive a vital boost of energy as our bodies prepare to confront a threat.

How someone perceives their body's reaction to this apparent threat can tell us a lot about whether their brains are wired to be that of a thrill-seeker or not. MRI studies show that high sensation-seekers, for example, have less activation in the amygdala in stressful situations and produce less cortisol compared to their more risk-averse counterparts. Furthermore, they also produce more dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure, so that they associate approaching a threat with reward rather than anxiety. For some, the coursing of adrenaline through the body, the rush of oxygen to the brain and the flooding of mood-boosting chemicals can be an addictive state that they want to chase over and over again; for others, it's something they would much rather avoid.

Thrill-seekers can come in all shapes and sizes but there are some correlations in how they tend to behave. Studies have found that those with 'Type T' (Thrill) personalities are inclined to exhibit traits such as impulsivity, curiosity, creativity, flexibility and an openness to change. Their much greater need for sensation-seeking can also influence various aspects of their lives from the careers they choose to their taste in the arts. For example, high sensation-seekers crave professions that are unconventional and which require flexibility, while low sensation-seekers prefer jobs that provide order and routine. High sensation-seekers are also more likely to listen to music or enjoy art that is arousing or striking in some way, for instance, heavy metal music or a piece that depicts a dark subject matter. When the low sensation-seeker is introduced to something new or unusual, they often reject it because it is strange and unfamiliar, whereas the high sensation-seeker welcomes it with open arms.

What these individuals share most in common, though, is what intrinsically motivates them to go after the thrill in the first place. One reason for their thrill-seeking is to achieve what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi referred to as the 'flow state'. Being in a state of flow produces feelings of joy and contentment from being fully immersed in the moment and connected to the task at hand. Although flow can be achieved through any number of callings such as gardening, writing or playing sports, high sensation-seekers usually need more stimulation than the average person to enter this state. This is why they gravitate towards more extreme activities that are both life-affirming and require concentration, like scaling a cliff. Another motivation is the high that sensation-seekers receive from facing their fears head-on and 'surviving' them. Research states that during a thrilling experience, the peak moment of exhilaration comes from the immense relief of realising that the fear we imagined did not materialise after all. Whether that's jumping out of a plane or having a close encounter with a shark, there's something intoxicating, especially for thrill-seekers, in staring death in the face and living to tell the tale.

Why we need thrill-seekers

Researchers believe that thrill-seeking has an evolutionary purpose that has set humans apart from other mammals. According to Zuckerman, thrill-seeking is "coded in our genes and our nervous system." He explained that "our early ancestors survived on hunting and food gathering. Hunting

THRILL-SEEKING WITH SAFETY AT HEART

It may seem counter-intuitive, but it can be possible to enjoy the adrenaline-pumping antics of thrill-seeking while also maintaining your wellbeing and safety. There are plenty of ways to induce exhilaration in a controlled environment with proper equipment and expertise at hand, such as whitewater rafting, skydiving or ziplining. For a less physically taxing (and cheaper) option, riding a roller coaster, playing laser tag, attending an escape room with friends or watching a horror movie can produce similar levels of arousal.

Whatever the choice of activity, it is important to balance thrilling exploits with plenty of relaxation. Practising calm activities like deep breathing, yoga or tai chi after each round of riveting antics can counter the negative health effects caused by frequent exposure to stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol.

was one of the early expressions of sensation-seeking, particularly when they began to hunt large mammals where there's a high risk involved." Risk-taking was of real Darwinian value – without the will to explore the unknown, the human species may never have flourished to the extent that it did. Our predecessors would have experienced the same physiological response as we do when facing a potential threat. The difference is that thrill-seeking back then was about survival and advancement whereas, in today's world, it's usually about chasing pleasure.

Humankind needs sensation-seekers, especially in times of crisis. Whereas most people might crumble in a high-stakes situation, thrill-seekers are able to remain calm and not become overwhelmed by 'analysis paralysis' – they simply act and trust in their ability to cope with the events unfolding. These kinds of people can be found in all walks of life, from emergency service workers and military personnel to Olympic athletes.

We also look to thrill-seekers as sources of inspiration. They remind the less adventurous among us what it is like to truly be alive and how to make the most out of life. Whether that is by rousing awe in others by their willingness to try cave-diving or acting as real-life proof that something can be achieved, high sensation-seekers serve as a reminder to the rest of us to get out of our comfort zones every once in a while.

Having a high sensation-seeking personality doesn't just benefit others either. Thrill-seekers possess a mindset of viewing potential threats as challenges to overcome which acts as a buffer against life's hardships and makes them generally more resilient. They also reportedly experience less stress, more positive emotions and greater life satisfaction overall.

Pitfalls of thrill-seeking

Although thrill-seeking is usually a positive and harmless quality, this personality type's greater need for stimulation can mean that some individuals turn to destructive behaviours in order to fulfil this. Research has correlated that those with the high sensation-seeking trait are more likely to engage in substance abuse, gambling and driving recklessly. Those scoring highly in the disinhibition subscale are also more prone to partaking in risky sexual behaviour and excessive drinking.

One possible reason for this is that thrill-seekers tend to ignore or minimise the risks that come with getting involved in these kinds of exploits. Some liken the adrenaline rush they receive from being thrilled to the same high achieved through drug use, and they can't seem to get enough of it. These individuals may become increasingly reckless in their chase of this 'natural high' and turn to illegal or dangerous feats like stealing or having sex in public to heighten this buzz. The possibility of getting caught (and punished) is all part of the excitement. Some may enjoy picking fights with others because they relish being in conflict. However, this prolonged exposure to risk can have a detrimental impact on their lives, whether through the damage done to their interpersonal relationships, reputation or career, or through being injured or even killed in the process.

Destructive forms of thrill-seeking don't always involve potentially life-threatening situations or illegal activity. Some people may get their fix in more subtle ways – one example of this is procrastinating on a deadline. Someone leaving a project to do until the night before it's due can trigger the same adrenaline rush, knowing that they must work frantically in order to beat the clock. Another example is those who purposely work in stressful environments, such as taking on a high-pressure role or always maintaining a busy schedule. These individuals believe that they perform best under pressure – but being in a perpetual state of stress can take its toll.

Although extreme thrill-seeking behaviours or adrenaline addiction aren't listed as medical conditions under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), frequently being subjected to stressful situations can be harmful to one's health. Persistent surges in adrenaline can lead to medical conditions like high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes.

If thrill-seeking is beginning to have an impact on someone's life or they are regularly putting themselves or others in danger, then it may be helpful to work with a therapist to identify the underlying motives driving this behaviour. Thrill-seeking can be a reinvigorating and wonderful pursuit but if it is causing more problems than it is joy, then it may be time to reevaluate whether chasing that next hit of adrenaline is worth the cost in the long-term. ■

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