

# The illusion of courage: Why people mispredict their behavior in embarrassing situations

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Whether it's investing in stocks, bungee jumping or public speaking, why do we often plan to take risks but then "chicken out" when the moment of truth arrives?

In a new paper in the *Journal of [Behavioral Decision Making](#)*, scientists from the University of Colorado Boulder and Carnegie Mellon University argue that this "[illusion](#) of courage" is one example of an "[empathy](#) gap"—that is, our inability to imagine how we will behave in future emotional situations. According to the empathy gap theory, when the moment of truth is far off you aren't feeling, and therefore are out of touch with, the fear you are likely to experience when push comes to shove. The research team also included Cornell University's David Dunning and former CMU graduate student Ned Welch, currently a consultant for McKinsey.

In a series of three experiments, the researchers found that people overestimate their willingness to engage in psychologically distant embarrassing public performances, and also found that they could reduce this illusion of courage by inducing immediate emotions that effectively put them in touch with the fear they would experience.

In the first two experiments, college students were asked if they would be willing to engage in a future embarrassing situation — telling a funny story to their class in one study, and dancing to James Brown's "Sex

Machine" in front of the class in the other — in exchange for a few dollars. Students were either asked outright or after being exposed to short films that aroused mild experiences of fear and anger. Students who did not view movie clips significantly overestimated their willingness to sing or dance. When they experienced negative emotions — fear and anger — as a result of watching the movie clips, students were much more accurate in predicting their own future lack of interest in performing.

"Because social anxiety associated with the prospect of facing an embarrassing situation is such a common and powerful emotion in everyday life, we might think that we know ourselves well enough to predict our own behavior in such situations," said Leaf Van Boven, associate professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado Boulder. "But the ample experience most of us should have gained with predicting our own future behavior isn't sufficient to overcome the empathy gap — our inability to anticipate the impact of emotional states we aren't currently experiencing."

The illusion of courage has practical consequences. "People frequently face potential embarrassing situations in everyday life, and the illusion of courage is likely to cause us to expose ourselves to risks that, when the moment of truth arrives, we wish we hadn't taken," said George Loewenstein, the Herbert A. Simon University Professor of Economics and Psychology within CMU's Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. "Knowing that, we might choose to be more cautious, or we might use the illusion of courage to help us take risks we think are worth it, knowing full well that we are likely to regret the decision when the moment of truth arrives."

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

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