

Different motivations for high-risk activities revealed for the first time

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(Medical Xpress)—For over 50 years the motive for high-risk activities has been thought of simply as "sensation seeking". New research unequivocally challenges that simplistic view.

When asked why he was trying to climb Mount Everest, George Mallory famously replied 'Because it's there'. This enigmatic reply clearly does not sufficiently explain why people undertake dangerous activities. Research has not fared much better and, for the past 50 years, established [psychology](#) models have simply described all risk-takers as 'thrill seekers'. However, this view fails to take account for the different motivations for partaking in different high-[risk activities](#), which can very diverse ranging from bungee jumping to [drug abuse](#) and dangerous driving.

Research at Bangor University's School of Sport, Health & Exercise Sciences has broken new ground, however, by unravelling exactly which needs are met for individuals who choose different 'risky activities'. The research also shows how some high-risk activities are beneficial for human development and likely a necessary part of human endeavour.

Using skydiving and mountaineering as examples, the researchers have proven for the first time that different motives drive people to take part in different dangerous activities. They have also created a new validated means of exploring the ways that different 'risky activities' fulfil different needs.

The psychologists at the leading Institute for the Psychology of Elite Performance argue that undertaking a mountaineering or polar expedition is not motivated by a hunger for 'thrill' in the same way that, say, sky-diving is. Indeed, taking on such expeditions involves meticulous planning and often arduous, monotonous and tedious hard work, so doesn't give an 'instant gratification' of reward. The researchers argue that it is this model of high-risk activity that has helped to shape human society. In other words, risk is not a dirty word – it is a humankind need; the world has evolved thanks to those who are willing to take risks.

So what is it that differentiates between the motivations and satisfactions of participating in the two types of 'high-risk' activity and what's the appeal of the experience for mountaineers?

Prof Tim Woodman, who led the research, explains: "Although skydivers predominantly enjoy the immediacy of the sensations gleaned from the activity, mountaineers gain something more. They learn from the experience and transfer that experience back into their everyday life. They do this by studying and then conquering the difficulty of the situation. This requires them to control their emotions in a dangerous and stressful environment. This is a constructive process.

Interestingly, these people often feel less in control of their everyday emotional life than they feel in control of the emotional high-risk environment. In this way, the high-risk environment serves as a proxy for emotional relationships with the difference that the high-risk environment is one where the participant actively chooses to expose him or herself to any negative emotions. Put simply, close human emotional relationships are fraught with emotional difficulty that is better played out by hanging off a cliff edge.

Professor Woodman adds: "Mountaineering is attractive because it

challenges the individual in ways that are not readily available in everyday life. Furthermore, we found that mountaineers have heightened expectations of their lives. These are people that aspire to higher ground, both physically and metaphorically. It is only when pushing the boundaries of what is physically possible that they feel an emotional experience that they consider to be more normal to them, and this feeling then helps them to take control in other areas of their lives. This is not perfectionism; it is having such high expectations of life generally that pushes these people to achieve great things."

The research has provided the first empirical evidence that experiencing control in a high-risk state carries benefits over to everyday life, in that the participants feel more in control in their everyday lives as well as a result. This offers scope to investigate whether this new understanding can be applied in other areas. For example, other individuals with similar emotional needs may seek an emotional outlet through anti-social high-risk means such as criminal acts, reckless driving and drug use; however, their needs might be better served through engagement with more constructive, but still high-risk, activities.

Prof Woodman suggests: "Our model can be applied to any situation which involves [sensation](#) seeking, emotional regulation and agency. It remains to be explored whether some of the risk-taking benefits of risky sports might help individuals partake in more constructive activities. Young people discover themselves through taking risks and there are likely many who follow a downward spiral in this way. This research shows a positive outlet for risk-takers and this negative-to-positive transfer is the next wave of research. What is clear is that risk is positive and necessary for growth. For example, if we are serious about rehabilitation, then young risk-taking offenders should be given an 'active' risk-taking alternative to 'passive' prison."

The research team have published their new findings in a paper: Great

expectations: Different high-risk activities satisfy different motives
published in the *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*.

More information: [doi: 10.1037/a0033542](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033542)

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