

Psychologist researches 'sensation seeking' people

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Whether you're a thrill seeker, or someone who'd rather be safe than sorry, clinical psychologist Ken Carter is looking for you.

Carter, professor of psychology at Emory University's Oxford College, is casting a wide net in gathering research for an upcoming book project on "high sensation seeking" people.

He's looking for people to visit his website, buzz.drkencarter.com, where they can complete a brief survey showing how much of a "sensation seeker" they are. The survey is a modified version of a sensation seeking scale personality test developed in the 1960s by Marvin Zuckerman of the University of Delaware.

Zuckerman says that sensation seeking is "a personality trait expressed in behavior as a tendency to seek varied, novel, complex and intense sensations and experiences and to take physical risks for the sake of having such experiences."

Know anyone like that?

One of the things Carter noticed in some of his friends, his clients and some of his students, too, is that there seem to be certain people who tend to have more chaotic lives than others.

"I didn't know how much of that they were creating themselves or whether they just happened into these situations," he says. "I thought about them as 'chaos junkies,' as people who loved a chaotic life, who feed off that chaos. The concept of sensation seeking seemed to explain what I was seeing."

While there are people who get their thrills from really high sensation seeking activities, "it doesn't have to be jumping off a building or sky diving," says Carter. He cites the example of fire fighters or police officers, who have fairly routine activities during long stretches, punctuated by very high sensation activities that are part of the job.

High sensation has different dimensions

The sensation seeking test shows an overall score as well as sub-scores in

four areas: thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition, and boredom susceptibility.

"Different people can be high or low on different parts of the overall concept," says Carter, "and the high sensation seeking person can look very different in different situations."

Carter says he plans to use not only the sensation seeking test results but people's stories as well. "When I did a workshop on sensation seeking recently, people's eyes light up, because they either know someone like this, or they themselves are like this," he says.

A psychologist approached Carter after the workshop and said he was an introverted high sensation seeking person.

"You'd think that introversion and high sensation seeking would be an oxymoron, but introversion has a lot to do with being in your head and recharging yourself by being alone," says Carter. "There are high sensation activities you can do alone, such as rock climbing, which an introvert would really enjoy."

Gathering people's stories

Carter says one of the great things about using social media to gather research material is that it gives him the ability to test his ideas and find out what's interesting to audiences before publishing the final product. Those wishing to share their stories can do so on Carter's Facebook [page](#), and can follow him (@drkencarter) on Twitter as well.

"I'm looking forward to collecting people's stories and experiences," he says. "For instance, sensation seeking tends to decrease as we get older, so I'm curious to see how individuals who were high sensation seeking when they were younger change as they get older."

His book is intended for three audiences and purposes: as a compendium of research on sensation seeking for academics; as a resource for counselors and therapists; and as an information tool for the public.

For therapists, more information on sensation seeking could help them help clients. "Some people may seem to have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or be bipolar, but what it really may be is high sensation seeking, which requires a very different kind of intervention than a [psychological disorder](#) might."

Benefits for high sensation seekers

"I don't want people to think that sensation seeking is a psychological disorder at all, but it can be linked to or exacerbate certain situations," says Carter. "I want to explain to people what this concept is, how they how it can manifest itself in different ways, but also help them get the most out of that awareness."

For example, "some research indicates that people who are high sensation seeking have lower levels of stress and anxiety, that there's a protective factor for them," says Carter. "You'd think they'd be more stressed out, but apparently they can tolerate a lot more chaos."

While lower sensation seeking people may be more easily thrown off base, says Carter, "high [sensation seeking](#) people can more easily roll with the punches, so there are some great aspects of it, too."

Sky diving, anyone?

Provided by Emory University

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