Medical Xpress

Extreme athletes gain control through fear – and sometimes pay the price

May 25 2015, by Tim Woodman, Lew Hardy And Matthew Barlow

Just enjoying a sense of agency. Credit: Xof711, CC BY-NC-SA

The death of famed "daredevil" climber and base jumper Dean Potter has once again raised the idea that all high-risk sportspeople are hedonistic thrill seekers. Our research into extreme athletes shows this

view is simplistic and wrong.

It's about attitudes to risk. In his famous Moon speech in 1962, John F Kennedy said:

Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked [by a New York Times journalist] why did he want to climb it. He said, 'Because it is there.' Well, space is there, and we're going to climb it, and the moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there …

Humans have evolved through taking risks. In fact, most human actions can be conceptualised as containing an element of risk: as we take our first step, we risk falling down; as we try a new food, we risk being disgusted; as we ride a bicycle, we risk falling over; as we go on a date, we risk being rejected; and as we travel to the moon, we risk not coming back.

Human endeavour and risk are intertwined. So it is not surprising that despite the increasingly risk-averse society that we live in, many people crave danger and risk – a life less sanitised.

Dean Potter exemplified that craving. He was a pioneering climber and base jumper, well known for scaling huge vertical rock faces without ropes and with only a parachute for protection. On May 16 Potter and fellow climber Graham Hunt died in Yosemite National Park after attempting a dangerous wingsuit flight, where base jumpers wear a special suit that enables them to "fly" forwards and control their fall.

Potter's endeavours and those of George Mallory seem motivated by something very different from hedonistic thrill. Over the past ten years we have interviewed dozens of high-risk sports people and studied their profiles in detail with a view to trying to find out what that "something

different" is. Our findings are surprising.

For example, it is now clear that sensation-seeking explains very little about the motive for many of these people. Many high-risk sportspeople do not crave excitement at all – yes they seek out risky environments, but only with a view to minimising any additional risk so that they can remain in control despite the apparent danger of dangling off cliffs or jumping out of planes.

But there are two more striking features of our recent risk-taking research.

Potter and his dog Whisper, who often accompanied him on climbs and jumps. Credit: EPA/ ADIDAS AG

From pawns to players

The first is something we call "agentic emotion regulation". Feeling agency is similar to feeling in control, but more akin to the feeling "I want to be the person who decides how my life pans out". Some high-risk sportspeople purposefully seek out danger in order to make some sense of their feelings of lack of agency. In other words, in everyday life they do not feel like the chess player of their life but more like the pawn on the chessboard – they feel emotionally constrained and passive.

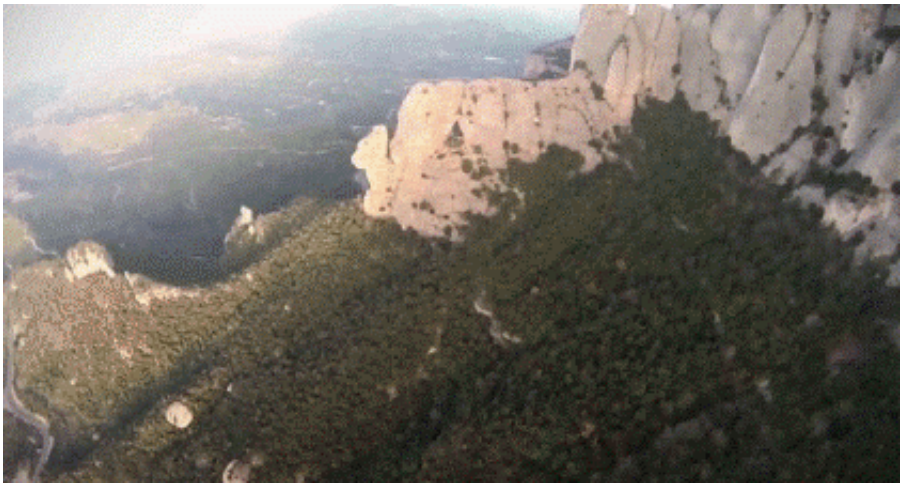
Legendary climber Patrick Berhault, who later died traversing a steep face of Switzerland's highest mountain without a safety rope, once said he didn't think he'd do it if there wasn't the notion of risk. "Ordinary life lacks intensity and attraction for me", he said, "I can't stand it; I believe we should live!"

The fascinating feature of this finding is that the lowest sense of agency is in relationships that are the most emotional: with loving partners. This feeling of low agency is made worse by the difficulty with expressing their emotions.

In this way, the relationship with risk serves as a proxy for the relationship with a loving partner, except that the risk-taker is rewarded – rather than penalised – for not expressing emotion.

The primary emotion to overcome in risk-taking activities is fear. If a person has difficulty experiencing and expressing emotions then the risk-taking arena becomes a rewarding place. It is rewarding because they

have moved from a feeling of inadequacy, "why can't you tell me how you feel??" to a sense of achievement, "wow, that was amazing how you achieved that scary feat … " In this way, the relationship with nature is more rewarding than their relationship with other humans.



Don’t try this at home.

Fear – the purest emotion

My vision turns black and white except for the searing red line.Sounds fade. I feel faint, face flushed with heat. My muscles tense, but I hold calmness in my centre and loosen my arms from the shoulders to my fingertips. The moment sickens me, and my mind tries to stop it, but I command myself to walk.

– Dean Potter on facing fear and going ropeless.

The second surprising thing we found in our research is that the difficulty with emotions leads people to take greater risks and to have more accidents in the high-risk environment – where accidents have

serious consequences. The link between emotional expression and accidents is our most recent finding and one that was so intriguing that we ran three different studies on various high-risk sports to see if we found the same thing. Each time, we found a strong link between the difficulty in expressing emotions and the chances of being in an accident.

We now understand this link. People who have difficulty identifying and describing their emotions seek risky extreme sports because they provide the experience of a more easily identifiable emotion: fear, perhaps the purest emotion of them all. The continued search for fear (and overcoming that fear) leads people to take further risks, which in turn eventually leads to a greater likelihood of an accident.

This finding was novel because the established view in emotion research is that people do not typically repeatedly approach situations that induce fear. However, extreme sportsmen and women are attracted to risk because it provides an opportunity to experience the negative emotion of fear and to turn that fear into a fantastically rewarding and positive experience (often in retrospect).

Extreme sportspeople learn something about themselves by taking risks and by embracing the full spectrum of their emotions. It is a construction of the self that is played out in nature with all its inherent dangers.

They expect more from life. A craving for life in its purest, simplest, and sharpest form. Life in direct juxtaposition to death; to live fully or to die trying. In that respect, adventurers such as Dean Potter can teach us all how to embrace life and to turn directly to face our fears.

Source: The Conversation