

OPEN MIND

BY MELVIN KONNER, M.D., PH.D.

RISKY BEHAVIOR

CAVEMAN'S LEGACY

In 1986, Massachusetts rescinded its seat-belt law. Within months, hundreds of drivers went slamming into their windshields. Amazed as I am by the citizenry's vote against safety, I shouldn't be. All I need to do is look at my own "risky" behavior. After all, while coauthoring a book on health, I have sat at my word processor at 3:00 in the morning guzzling coffee and gobbling Oreo cookies, pecking solemnly away about our need to take better care of ourselves.

Why do we take risks—remaining outdoors when lightning is streaking toward earth or eating delicious but unhealthy desserts—even when we know they endanger our longevity? Psychologists long ago determined that there is such a thing as a risk-taking, or sensation-seeking, personality. Men are more likely to be risk takers than women. Risk takers tend to be younger rather than older. Risk takers even share physiologic charac-

teristics: They show a change in heart rate in reaction to novelty. And in them the activity of an enzyme that breaks down certain neurotransmitters (brain-cell messengers) is reduced—suggesting that stimulating chemicals may persist longer in their brains. And risk takers have higher levels of sex hormones. In terms of behavior, they engage in more frequent, more promiscuous and more unusual sex; consume more drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and even spicy food; volunteer for more experiments; gamble more; and court more physical danger.


Chances are you consider yourself to be a breed apart from these men and women. But we all take risks, albeit to differing degrees. Granted, only a relatively few daredevils do motorcycle stunts, but the average American drives without a seat belt. And while only one to four million Americans could be clinically diagnosed as being pathological gamblers, many of us think nothing of plunking down a dollar or two to play the lottery against enormous odds.

The scientists who research risk-

taking conclude that we don't think clearly about our risky behavior. Consider, for instance, that even after years of education, 29 million Americans continue to smoke. How many of them ever stop to think that in the United States the number of yearly deaths linked to smoking is equivalent to three jumbo jets full of passengers crashing—every day?

Researchers also say we will accept greater risks if we have control over the situation. So we drink and drive, and light up another cigarette, all on the strength of the illusion that we can control these risks—by defensive driving or moderation. And we cancel the trip to Europe on the one-in-a-million chance of a terrorist attack.

All this apparent irrationality raises questions: Shouldn't natural selection have weeded out the creatures whose risk-taking behavior makes them more likely to die? Shouldn't risk-taking have disappeared far back in human evolution? To the contrary. In his book *Reason in Human Affairs*, Herbert Simon, Ph.D., professor of computer science and psychology at Carnegie-Mellon University, conjectures that as cavemen struggled to survive in an uncivilized world they developed a risk-taking rationale. Small groups of hunter-gatherers had much to gain from having a minority of reckless sensation seekers in their ranks—people who wouldn't hesitate to snatch a child from among a pack of wild dogs or to fight an approaching grass fire by lighting a counterfire.

So however much it endangers our longevity, risk-taking is part of our heritage and may well account for our being here. And we modern-day human beings simply do not have the ability to calibrate the risks we encounter every day. When my father leaves his seat belt unbuckled, my friend rides her motorcycle to work and my brother continues to smoke, they are simply being human. 



Like James Dean, many rebel against the longevity cause.

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