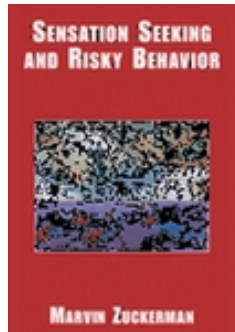


Living on the Edge: Why Run Toward Danger?

A review of



Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior

by Marvin Zuckerman

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Reviewed by

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It was the class every psychology major waited for—abnormal psychology. This course, we thought, would answer all those questions that made us psychology majors in the first place. Why are odd people odd? Why do people kill themselves? Can unhealthy behavior really be changed?

Then there was the secret set of questions rooted in our own insecurities about ourselves. Am I the only one who feels this way? Does everyone worry about his or her mental health from time to time? Is it normal to be anxious about the future?

The class covered most of my questions and concerns. It helped convince me that psychologists were making important contributions and that psychology could be a meaningful career. Still, there was one important area that we never touched.

I wanted to know what would possess someone to streak. It was the 1970s, and one of our generation's forms of rebellion involved removing your clothes and running through crowds. I wanted to know why people did this. Raised at the seashore, I also wanted to know why some kids would surf when a shark warning was posted. I wanted to know why crazy drivers drove the way they did. And what about those fraternity guys who sat on the roof drinking beer?

Meanwhile, at the University of Delaware, Marvin Zuckerman was already 10 years into his research on sensation seeking. He was asking similar questions. He was trying to determine why some people deliberately put themselves in high-risk situations. *Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior* provides a thoughtful, well-organized review of Zuckerman's work of the past 40-plus years. It carefully details the nature of sensation seeking and explains the relationship between this trait and high-risk behaviors.

According to Zuckerman (1994), sensation seeking is a trait "defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience" (p. 49). Sensation seekers do not seek risk for its own sake. Indeed, sensation seeking is evident in low-risk behaviors such as associating with interesting, stimulating people. The sensation seeker may also be the guy who is constantly channel switching. High sensation seekers are looking for novel and intense sensations and experiences. In their search, however, they are more willing than others to tolerate risk, although risk itself is typically not their goal. High sensation seekers tend to minimize the risks involved in certain behaviors. Their drive for stimulation may blind them to certain dangers. As a result, "high sensation seekers are more likely to enter into risky situations and low sensation seekers

are more likely to avoid them" (p. 67).

It is not difficult to understand the importance of this work. Sensation seeking plays a role in an assortment of behaviors, including drug and alcohol abuse, violence, unsafe sexual practices, dangerous driving behaviors (everything from drinking while driving to not using seat belts), and cigarette smoking. Sensation seeking also influences dating practices and recreational pursuits. And although much of Zuckerman's work has focused on the relationship between high sensation seeking and risky behavior, his research is also relevant to more positive behaviors. It may be that many of those who challenge uncharted territories—be they scientists, artists, or explorers—are blessed and cursed with ample amounts of sensation seeking.

As Zuckerman explains the relationship between sensation seeking and risky behavior, the question emerges, "Can anything be done to lower a person's level of sensation seeking?" With each passing chapter, the need for appropriate strategies to control or channel high sensation seeking becomes increasingly apparent. And as the pages go by, Zuckerman seems to be leading his audience in this direction. But there's a twist.

The Researcher's Researcher

Zuckerman is thorough—sometimes painfully so. He appreciates nuances. Psychologists looking for the moral without carefully reading the story may grow impatient at points in the text. Although well written and presented in a readable style, this book is not for the easily distracted. Like all good researchers, Zuckerman understands that important truths are often found in small details. Indeed, one of this book's many contributions is that it serves as a solid example of how to write a literature review. It offers the next generation of researchers a detailed map of where we are and how we got there.

Zuckerman is a researcher's researcher. He resists the temptation to conclude more than his data can support. Although the final chapter of the book addresses "Prevention and Treatment of Unhealthy Risk Taking Behavior," his chief task is neither to change nor to prevent risky behavior, but to understand it. However, there are many potential clinical applications of this research.

Earlier in my career I spent eight years working in the field of drug and alcohol treatment. At the time, neither my colleagues nor I were familiar with Zuckerman's work. We did, however, recognize that risk taking is frequently a part of drug addiction. We called these patients "excitement junkies," and some days it seemed that they constituted the majority of our case loads. For excitement junkies, the drug was almost secondary. These patients were less likely to have a clear drug of choice. They were forever looking for a new high, a new sensation. Most were involved with a variety of high-risk behaviors beyond their drug use. I suspect many psychologists treating addictions will agree that the treatment of drug addiction should, as Zuckerman suggests, "attempt to address the motivation of sensation seeking as an obstacle to successful intervention" (p. 235).

Although Zuckerman suggests that this trait is difficult to change, he does offer hope. First, there is maturity. "Almost everyone becomes more conservative, cautious, law abiding, and risk averse with age," he concludes. "These changes are usually attributed to the accumulation of wisdom, but they may also represent changes in biology. The forebrain finally masters the mesolimbic dopamine system" (p. 235).

There is also the possibility of channeling this trait in healthier directions. High sensation seeking adolescents, for example, have benefited from appropriate opportunities to channel sensation-seeking behavior. Yet Zuckerman warns that such opportunities may be unevenly distributed across socioeconomic levels.

Adolescents in lower socioeconomic classes do not have the opportunities for adventure and excitement available to middle-class children, like travel, scuba diving, surfing, rock climbing, racing their own cars, and so forth. Sex, drugs, and crime are their more accessible sources of sensation seeking, and sex and drugs may not be enough for some. (p. 169)

As *Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior* enters its final pages, it becomes apparent that Zuckerman will not fully answer the following question: What can we do to help those who engage in dangerous behaviors live safer, healthier lives? He could speculate, but that might mislead the next generation of researchers. Thus the book ends with some important questions left unanswered. Yet it is in these last pages that the purpose—and the real worth—of the book emerge.

Passing the Baton

Professor Zuckerman finished graduate school before I was born, and now I've recommended this book to my graduate student daughter. It is an important topic. More important, I'd like her to see how a good researcher thinks and writes.

Zuckerman seems to accept that he will not write the final word on sensation seeking and risky behavior. In fact, he ends the book with an unanswered question. His last two sentences read, "But many change unhealthy behaviors even without the help of therapy. Therapists should find out how they do it" (p. 235).

This is a book for people who enjoy good research. Beyond this, it is a call to those who might share Zuckerman's passion for understanding why so many people enthusiastically put themselves in danger. In *Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior*, Zuckerman reviews a lifetime of solid research in a short, readable volume. Much like Shneidman's (1996) *The*

Suicidal Mind, it summarizes—in his own words—the life's work of an important scholar. As important, it serves as a magnificent foundation for future work in this area.

Good researchers do indeed appreciate small details. So it should not be too surprising that the true purpose of this book can be found in the final sentence of the Acknowledgments section. Here Zuckerman writes, "Correct or incorrect, our ideas live on in their influences on young investigators whose names are now unfamiliar to us but who will be celebrated in years to come" (p. xix).

Sensation Seeking and Risky Behavior was written, with gratitude, for those who might continue Professor Zuckerman's research—scientists and explorers daring to ask new questions and consider fresh possibilities, and scholars who understand that discovery comes to those willing to risk.

References

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