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Cliff diving isn't a typical activity for anyone, much less a person who is afraid of heights. But Mike,¹ a 20-year-old intern living in Atlanta, does it as often as he can, despite this fear. He's also gone skydiving at least four times. The first time, he was a little disappointed. "I actually wasn't scared at any point, which was weird." The second time Mike actually told his guide, "The last guy failed to scare me, so I want you to scare me." Even by his own reckoning, this isn't something you should say to a skydiving coach. I couldn't help but ask, "Well, did he scare you?" "Yeah," he said, "he went about it very cleverly. Beforehand he told me that when they've got somebody who isn't cooperating (apparently some people will grab the guide's arms or something when they should be pulling the chute), they spin the person around really fast. Because this increases G-force, the person passes out and the instructor can get them safely to the ground. So we're in the middle of free fall and that is basically what he does to me. He takes my hand and bends it down slightly, so I start spinning extraordinarily fast in one direction. Then he stops me, and we spin in the other direction extremely fast. Then the next direction extremely fast, and the next. My eyes were pretty much popping out of my head . . . eventually he pulls the chute, and before I knew it we were just coasting again."

My heart started racing and I felt dizzy just hearing about this, but Mike explained all of it in a voice that seemed a little too calm for someone who insists he doesn't like heights. And his

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aeronautic feats don't end with skydiving and cliff diving. He also hang glides. The more terrifying, the better, and Mike seems to reserve that label for his cliff diving exploits. "As far as utter and complete fear beforehand, I'll give that to cliff diving every time . . . 'cause I am quite scared of heights. Even if it's only a 35 foot jump it still gets the blood pumping quite a bit . . . Each time I am like, 'why am I up here?' I'm literally jumping from heights that I hate into the water that's not my favorite." (Mike is not a big swimmer.)

Mike is partial to spending his leisure time participating in activities that seem dangerous to the rest of us like bull runs, zorbing, and eating strange foods. As for bull runs, the Pamplona run is perhaps the most famous. Originally, its purpose was to move the bulls from the fields to the bullrings for bullfights that celebrated various festivals across Spain. Now it has become a local tradition and a worldwide phenomenon. Across the United States you can find great bull runs that are held in arenas and on racetracks. The idea? Well, you get out on the track and a pack of bulls is released behind you. You run like crazy or get trampled by a herd of cattle. Some people even take selfies along the way. It might seem like a strange way to spend your downtime, but they are actually pretty popular. Mike loves them. "Once you're in the actual run it's a sort of out of body experience, but intensely adrenaline packed." Mike has also been zorbing – a sport in which you are strapped inside a capsule that is then placed inside a gigantic transparent ball. The ball is rolled along the ground or down hills. It's like an enormous hamster ball for humans. It sounds nauseating, but apparently some people can't get enough of it. And Mike has eaten fugu (pufferfish – which numbs the tongue and lips). Although, disappointingly for him it was only the moderately poisonous type. And things he's not done yet that are on his to do list include: swimming with sharks, bungee jumping, and saving a human life.

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Sophie can't seem to get enough out of life. Endurance athlete, blogger, marketer, model, and motivational speaker, she's a lover of challenges, determined to experience life's adventures. Sophie quit her job running the commercial division at a major UK tech startup because she was tired of being safe and was ready to live her life guided by her personal mantra, "one life, live it!"

And she's not kidding. She's packed more in the last few years than some people do in a lifetime. She's completed an

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adventure race through the jungle of Borneo, cycled the 244 miles from London to Paris in 24 hours, and in 2014 she was the first (and so far only) person to cycle the Alps and climb the highest mountains in all eight alpine countries. She says she enjoys her “pain cave.” “I love pushing myself physically and mentally. I love being in the pain cave because it’s there I find out the most interesting things about myself and that helps me to learn and grow into the person and athlete I’d love to become.”

Sophie writes a fitness lifestyle and adventure blog and recently moved from Great Britain to France to prepare for her next adventure. She cycles, she climbs, she runs, she travels.² She tried skydiving but didn’t enjoy it because she says she’s not into high adrenaline activities. For Sophie, the satisfaction comes from pushing herself in order to conquer challenges. She’s on a mission to inspire others to undertake extreme adventures too.

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Kirill Vselensky loves taking pictures, especially travel photos. He shoots landscapes, buildings, bridges, landmarks, selfies, nothing too unusual – except that his shots are captured from atop some of the world’s tallest buildings. Kirill loves to climb to the top of skyscrapers, bridges, anything climbable, and take pictures of himself dangling hundreds of feet above the ground – suspended without any safety gear. Known as the Russian Spider-Man, he is one of Russia’s extreme climbers, called roofers, who are known to hang off buildings by only their fingers. He snaps incredible, whoa-tastic photos.³

Kirill should have “do not try this at home” permanently tattooed on his forehead. Roofers like Kirill sneak their way to the tops of buildings and perform tricks like standing on one leg, balancing on the side of window ledges, teetering on the edge of roofs, and climbing up huge structures without any safety rope or climbing gear. His biggest fear? It’s not falling – it’s “to be detained.”

Although he now has over 55,000 followers on Instagram, he was seeking out sights long before anyone was watching. “As a kid I used to love to visit people as every time there was a new view from the window, it was an easy way to find adventure in your own city,” Kirill explained to a newspaper reporter. Now what he sees is much more extreme. He started scaling buildings in 2008, because he “likes the views.” When he was asked what goes on

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inside his head, he replied, “Nothing special. I just try to think about hanging tight and staying alive.”⁴

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This is a book about Mike, Sophie, and Kirill. It’s about people who perform their best in highly stimulating and emotionally charged environments. It’s a book about some of your friends, family members, or coworkers who fit the bill. It might be a book about you too, if you’re one of those people who craves new experiences in work, in friends, and in fun. It’s a book about people who base jump, spelunk, drive ambulances, and chase tornadoes. It’s about thrill-seekers, adrenaline junkies, people looking for a buzz. It’s about what became known in psychological circles as “the high sensation-seeking personality” or HSS for short.

If you aren’t a thrill-seeker, it’s entirely likely that these kinds of actions appear irrational and maybe even foolhardy. It may seem like thrill-seekers have a death wish. This is what Sigmund Freud might have believed, as you’ll discover later in this chapter. It’s also what I believed for a long time. In fact, it’s one of the reasons I’ve spent so much time reading about, researching, and interviewing thrill-seekers all around the world. I began to wonder what could drive a person to intentionally seek out activities that were so utterly intense, even chaotic. Why would someone risk their life running with the bulls? Why would someone hang from a building or quit a high-paying desk job to spend more time in their “pain cave”? What drives people to seek out the most dangerous, even outrageous experiences they can find? Why would they risk swooping around in a wing suit when they could relax with a nice book on the beach? Do they really have a self-destructive urge? Is it genetic? Biochemical? Is it a modern social phenomenon? Or is something else at work here?

These are the questions we’ll explore in this book. We will investigate the lifestyle, psychology, neuroscience, and environmental factors that influence people with high sensation-seeking personalities. We’ll examine both the healthy and the unhealthy aspects of high sensation-seeking. We’ll look at the habits and havoc this kind of personality creates. Along the way, you’ll discover that high sensation-seekers’ motivations and their experience of the buzz are not what most people might assume.

But what is “high sensation-seeking”? What does that term even mean?

What is High Sensation-Seeking?

To some extent, we all crave complex and new experiences – that is, we all seek new sensations. Whether it's our attraction to the new burger place down the street, the latest shiny gadget, or the newest fashion trend – newness tugs at us. It's simply human nature.

What sets the high sensation-seeking personality apart is that it craves these exotic and intense experiences, despite physical or social risk. Consider Kirill. He knows that hanging off buildings is risky (who doesn't); but he does it anyway. Is it because he's seen people on TV, in the movies, and on YouTube do this stuff? That's certainly part of it. It's true that the extreme products, activities, and entities that have emerged in the last decade – X-games, The Extreme Sports Channel, and Red Bull – responded to our collective interest in thrill-seeking as a spectacle if not a personal endeavor. And these extreme activities have spread quickly as their early adopters – people with high sensation-seeking personalities – devoured them with gusto and shared their experiences enthusiastically online. However, I don't think we are currently inspiring more thrill-seekers through TV and social media as much as these outlets are giving those who are already high sensation-seekers permission or even new ways to indulge in their passions. Why do I believe this? Because thrill-seekers have been around a long, long time, and people have been trying to understand them since the very birth of psychology.

A History of Thrill-Seeking

Bolting from bulls for fun isn't new. The first recorded running of the bulls dates back to 1591 when the people of Pamplona, fed up with the bad weather in early October (when the fiesta San Fermin was traditionally held), decided to move the celebration to July.⁵ It continues to be held in early July to this day. While there are no written records that precede this, some believe that this tradition may date back to the 12th or 13th centuries. Hang gliding dates back even farther – all the way to 6th-century China where gigantic aerodynamic kites were built that allowed an average-sized person to sail in the wind.⁶ This quest was pursued in earnest centuries later when the early experiments in aviation began in the late 1800s.

Thrill-seeking and watching thrill-seekers has probably been around since there was danger to be watched. From gladiator

games in the ancient Roman arena, to modern mud runs, humans have had a passion for both thrill as a pastime and as a spectator sport. Over the years not much has dampened the passions of people who are captivated by living-on-the-edge sports, especially those that are death defying. Suffice it to say, high sensation-seeking has been around for a long time. The desire to understand why some people are driven to engage in these activities has been around for just as long.

Personality Theory: Trying to Explain the Thrill-Seeker

Our personality is our pattern of thinking, feeling, and behaving – the enduring nature of who we are. Personality determines not only what we like but also why we prefer one thing over another. Personality motivates what we do and how we do it. It influences our choice of friends and hobbies. If all that and more are true of our personality, then thrill-seeking must be reflected in some aspect of our personality.

Thanatos: The Death Wish

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis is often considered to be the founder of one of the first well-organized grand theories of personality. Freud describes the landscape of the mind as having several realms, some in awareness and some beyond. Freud suggested we have three main personality structures. I'm sure you've heard of them before: the id, ego, and the superego. The id, according to Freud, is the part of the personality that operates on the pleasure principle. What's pleasurable for the id? It's simple, the reduction of tension. This means that the id is always looking to reduce tension – mostly the tension that comes from basic physiological needs and drives. The id isn't smart, but it knows what it likes, and what it likes is reduction of tension. What kind of tension? All kinds. People have many physiological needs and drives, and when these drives are unmet, tension builds up. Being thirsty creates tension; sipping a tart lemonade will reduce that tension. Being hungry creates tension; munching on a juicy hamburger will reduce that tension. When the tension is reduced, the id feels satisfied.

Some of the physical needs that motivate the id keep us alive, cause us to eat, drink, and perpetuate the species by having sex. Freud grouped these drives into a cluster of instincts called

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Eros, or the life instinct, and those Eros instincts reduce tension associated with basic biological drives.

But life instincts aren't the only things that will motivate the id; there's another way that the id seeks the pleasure principle. Freud also suggested that the id has a death instinct, an unconscious desire to be dead – the ultimate state of tension reduction called Thanatos (see? Not that smart – but it knows what it likes). Freud suggested that Thanatos is a way in which we reduce tensions that are aggressive and destructive. Think about the amount of violence in movies and even cartoons and take a look at the top movies, video games, or sports in any given year and I'll bet hitting, killing, and shouting dominate the interactions.

There was a famous exchange of letters between Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein in 1932. Einstein wrote to Freud on behalf of the League of Nations. Einstein expressed concerns that despite our advanced civilization, war was still a reality. He wondered if Freud had insight into why. In his response Freud emphasized that both the Eros and Thanatos instincts were essential and rarely operate in isolation. In fact, it's present in every living creature.⁷ When we think of thrill-seekers as “having a death wish” we are largely channeling Freud.

But do thrill-seekers have a death wish? Probably no more so than the rest of us. The thing is, when you actually talk to most thrill-seekers they don't express a death wish at all. In fact, one of the most surprising discoveries I found on my journey to understand thrill-seekers is that it's almost the opposite. Consider what Mike said when I asked him, “Is there anything that you'd like people who are not adrenaline junkies, or thrill-seekers, to know about thrill-seekers?”

He replied, “I guess it would be mostly the nots, not what they are but what they are not. They are not suicidal for one. I have no interest in dying skydiving. It's actually way safer than getting in your car and driving to work. What I have is a kind of an addiction to life for lack of a better word. I think it's not a disregard for life, but an addiction to life and trying to intensify moments instead of dull them out.”

As odd as this might sound, this is what I heard from people over and over again, and it's a recurring theme throughout this book. It's totally counter to what most people might guess. In fact, it may well be true that high sensation-seekers are more in love with life than any of us could imagine.

Freud isn't the only expert who had a theory of why certain people seem to seek out complex and intense activities. His disciple Carl Jung had some thoughts on the matter, too.

From Death Wish to Extroversion: Jung's Response to Freud

Carl Jung had a slightly different idea about what drove human nature and why some people were drawn to the softer things in life while others were more outgoing and risky. Instead of Eros and Thanatos, Jung spoke about introversion and extroversion which he suggested were indicators of your preferences for the external world.⁸ Introverts prefer their internal world of thoughts to the extrovert's external world of people. Introverts may be reserved when interacting socially. Extroverts, on the other hand, prefer the external world to the internal world. While some introverts tend to be outgoing and sociable, the important aspect for the introversion-extroversion dichotomy is actually energy.

Some people think that introverts are shy and keep to themselves and extroverts are outgoing, but there's more to it than that. The concepts of introversion and extroversion also include how people recharge. Introverts recharge by being by themselves while extroverts tend to recharge by being around others. One way to think about it is what you find more interesting – what's inside your head or what's outside of your head? Introverts find what's going on inside to be much more interesting. That's why they can distract themselves with their own thoughts and will retreat there for comfort and recharging. They can find others exhausting. Extroverts, on the other hand, prefer the world outside their head. They find others energizing and can get grumpy if they are alone too much.

Although it's easy to imagine that these qualities relate directly to how much sensation a person desires – low sensation-seeking individuals being introverts and high sensation-seekers being extroverts – it's not that straightforward. Research has suggested that sensation-seeking and extroversion are relatively independent.⁹ This means that they are different concepts and that you can have a low sensation-seeking extrovert or a high sensation-seeking introvert. Consider the fact that there are many thrill- and adventure-seeking activities that are relatively solitary, such as rock climbing. In fact, I met many introverted thrill-seekers along the way, and you'll meet some of them in this book. So, if introversion and extroversion don't explain thrill-seekers, could it simply be a basic personality trait?

Trait Theory: Eysenck and the Big Five

The contemporary view of personality has moved away from Freud and Jung to use traits to explain personality. We use traits in our language all the time to describe the personalities of the people we know (Molly is so patient and kind). One way to think of a trait is a stable quality that differentiates one individual from another. And the trait theory of personality focuses on identifying the traits that summarize and predict a person's behavior.

One of the things that trait theorists focus on is the number and kinds of traits that you can use to describe a person's personality. Sure, you could just use every word possible in the English language to describe a person, but with nearly 14,000 available traits to choose from, you could fill a book chapter just listing someone's traits. Psychologists needed a simpler, more elegant solution. They needed to determine which traits of the thousands that exist are the most important? Hans Eysenck says you only need three.

Eysenck: The Power of Three

Hans Eysenck was a psychologist and a major contributor to the modern scientific theory of personality. He developed a distinctive three-factor model of personality structure based on three dimensions of personality: extroversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism.¹⁰

According to Eysenck, extroversion and introversion are created by either inhibition or excitation in the brain. Excitation is the brain waking itself up, while inhibition is the opposite, the brain calming down. Extroversion is associated with strong inhibition tendencies while the introvert has weaker inhibition.¹¹ According to this theory, pursuing or shunning exciting situations (such as social situations or noise) is a tactic for maintaining optimal levels of arousal. For example, researchers had subjects choose the level of background noise they preferred while working on a matching task. Introverts chose noise levels that were much lower than those of extroverts, and each group performed best under their preferred level.¹² If you think about thrill-seekers in this way, they are finding the amount of excitation that works best for them (more on this later).

While Eysenck suggested that the introversion-extroversion dimension is driven by excitation and inhibition, neuroticism, or emotional stability, is based on how easily the body's stress system is

activated. Those who trip the body's stress response easily have low activation thresholds and have a harder time inhibiting their feelings. This means that minor events can make them stressed. Those with low levels of neuroticism, on the other hand, have higher activation thresholds, take longer to experience negative feelings and are harder to unnerve.

The last trait that Eysenck described is called psychoticism. Psychoticism is a trait that describes how tough minded a person might be. Despite its name, psychoticism doesn't mean that a person has psychotic tendencies, rather the trait is associated with recklessness or disregard for convention. Those who score high on psychoticism can be inflexible, creative, sometimes inconsiderate, quick to anger, and reckless. The physiological basis suggested by Eysenck for psychoticism is testosterone, with higher levels of psychoticism associated with higher levels of testosterone.¹³

Eysenck considered thrill-seeking to be a component of extroversion and impulsivity¹⁴ which on its face makes sense. Thrill-seekers do often appear impulsive and reckless, but if you look closer some thrill-seekers are pretty methodical in their recklessness. BASE (Building, Antenna, Span, and Earth) jumps can take days to plan. What in the moment may seem a whim could possibly be the result of years of training. However, three may not be the magic number to describe thrill-seeking. Maybe it's five.

The Big Five: Is Sensation-Seeking One of Five Primary Personality Traits?

Developed by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae and nicknamed The Big Five, this theory of personality holds that there are five main personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and extroversion.¹⁵

Openness to experience is your willingness to try new things and your affection for the new. People who score high on openness to experience are curious and imaginative. People who score low might be seen as conventional. If whenever you go to a restaurant, you always order exactly the same thing, you might score low on openness to experience.

Conscientiousness is your ability to stick to the plan and act with integrity. It describes how trustworthy a person might be. People who score high on conscientiousness are seen as organized, reliable, and punctual. Those low on conscientiousness are seen as unreliable.