

## Buzz!

Most of us crave new experiences and sensations. Whether it's our attraction to that new burger place or the latest gadget, newness tugs at us. But what about those who can't seem to get enough? They jump out of planes, climb skyscrapers, and will eat anything (even poisonous pufferfish)... Prompting others to ask 'what's wrong' with them. These are sensation-seekers and they crave intense experiences, despite physical or social risk. They don't have a death wish, but seemingly a need for an adrenaline rush, no matter what.

*Buzz!* describes the world of the high sensation-seeking personality in a way that we can all understand. It explores the lifestyle, psychology, and neuroscience behind adrenaline junkies and daredevils. This tendency, or compulsion, has a role in our culture. But where is the line between healthy and unhealthy thrill-seeking? The minds of these adventurers are explained page by page.

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# Buzz!

Inside the Minds of Thrill-Seekers, Daredevils,  
and Adrenaline Junkies

KENNETH CARTER  
*Oxford College of Emory University*



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To all those who bring delicious chaos into my life.

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# PREFACE: MY FASCINATION WITH THRILL

Do you ever wonder how two people can have the same experience but react to it in completely different ways?

I do. I think about this question all the time. As a psychologist it's sort of my job.

Consider the following: Two friends are at an amusement park and decide to take a ride on the Twisted Cyclone roller coaster. Two minutes and forty-four seconds of twists, dives, and jerks later, the ride is over. When they emerge, one is terrified, the other is exhilarated. The one who is terrified is breathing hard, his legs are shaking, and his heart is pounding. He did *not* have an enjoyable experience. The other looks almost tranquil in her satisfaction and is ready to go again, except this time she wants to ride in the front car. Two people, same situation, totally opposite experiences. Why does this happen? How can two people have such completely divergent responses to the same stimuli?

Of course, you can say, "They are different." But how are they different? Why are they different? What makes them so different?

These are the kinds of questions that psychologists bump up against all the time. On the one hand, I'm quite aware that people are unique – each of us has our own physiological, psychological, and cultural influences and predispositions that drive what we think and what we do. On the other hand, there are patterns to these thoughts and behaviors. Psychologists are always looking for ways to describe, explain, and even predict what people do; it's in the job description. I'm looking for the patterns in the seemingly unpredictable *mélange* of human behavior. My job is to find these patterns not only to understand people, but also to help them understand each other and even themselves. If you look carefully, you can see the patterns too.

I'm that guy who hates roller coasters. They aren't fun for me. I've ridden them many (many) times with friends, so it's not simply a matter of exposure. Sure, I can tolerate them and I ride when I'm pressed, but it's not fun. How someone could get off a roller coaster

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and not only be ready to ride again, but also actually feel happier, even more tranquil *after* the ride, has baffled me for years.

What's more, I am a person who is relatively staid. I'm a professional academic who spends the vast majority of his time in the library, behind the computer, or in front of students lecturing. My life is ordered. I wake up at the same time and go to sleep at the same time pretty much every day. I don't eat exotic foods. I don't seek out new experiences. I am perfectly content quietly doing my work. I bask in the subtleties of experience and my predictable day is a luxury. I crave calmness.

Yet, I see people who are almost perpetually and intentionally drawn not only to literal but also to metaphorical roller coasters. From the outside they seem to seek out chaos: students who change their entire course schedule the morning of the first day of classes; clients who propose marriage on the second date; friends who leave wonderful jobs to move to a different city on a whim. Some people seem to attract problems and drama like honey attracts ants. These folks often struggle to live in modern society where having a tolerance for monotony may have serious advantages.

You may have met people like this (or maybe you are like this yourself). Constantly moving from job to job, relationship to relationship, place to place. Some struggle with mental health issues. Most don't. But the underlying likeness between them is an inability to tolerate the mundane, an itch for excitement.

Take for example my friend Andrew. Andrew has an industrial-sized case of wanderlust. By the time Andrew was 27 he'd moved 13 times (to three different countries), been in nine different relationships, and had six different careers. When I asked him if moving so many times was difficult, he laughed. "No, it wasn't a challenge at all. It was an adventure."

I've met so many people like Andrew in my life that I began to wonder what they had in common. Are there people who are chaos junkies? Is there some psychological model to explain why some people are attracted to drama?

When I come up with a question like this, the first thing I do is hit the library and geek out, digging into thought pieces, research studies, articles, and books to see if someone has already answered the question I am pondering (you'll find these sources in the notes).

This is how I stumbled across the work of Marvin Zuckerman and his investigation into the high sensation-seeking personality. You'll learn more about Zuckerman's work in Chapter 1, but the essence

of what he discovered is that there is a subset of people who crave stimulation and thrive in environments that would seem overstimulating, even chaotic, to the rest of us.

I became fascinated by the idea that there are people in the world who seek out stimulation and thrive on chaos. It is so contrary to my own experience that I had to learn more. I wanted to see if I could get a glimpse into what it might be like to be the kind of person who came off the roller coaster exhilarated instead of exasperated.

That was the beginning of my two-year journey to better understand the high sensation-seeking personality. I dug deep into the research, I interviewed high sensation-seekers and even followed them to the tops of cliffs and into exotic restaurants. I pried into their motivations. I asked them why they crave stimulation and questioned them about how their seemingly strange behavior impacts their daily lives, their careers, their relationships and more. Over its 70-year history, psychological research has yielded fascinating findings and constructed telling theories about sensation-seeking.

In Chapter 1, we'll examine the history of sensation-seeking and learn how various personality theories have tried to understand thrill-seekers, we'll also examine the components of sensation-seeking, and you'll take a sensation-seeking scale to learn about your own thrill (or chill) seeking personality. You'll also have a chance to examine the profiles of other sensation-seekers.

High sensation-seekers are, indeed, different than the rest of us. As you'll learn in Chapter 2, there is some evidence that they experience stress differently, their neurochemical makeup may also be different than the average person, and they may even be genetically predisposed to seek out sensation for evolutionary reasons.

In Chapter 3 we'll explore the everyday life of a high sensation-seeker. We'll delve into their preferences for jokes, travel, and even what they like to eat.

In Chapter 4 we'll dive into extreme sports and other adventures that attract high sensation-seekers and explore why many people with high sensation-seeking personalities crave activities like sky-diving, rock climbing, and adventure travel. We'll look at extreme sports like tough mudder races, ice climbing, and wingsuit flying and what high sensation-seekers get out of those experiences.

We'll shift gears in Chapter 5 and consider the relationships of high sensation-seekers. Certain relationship patterns and challenges are common among people with high sensation-seeking personalities. We'll explore both friendships and romantic relationships.

In Chapter 6 we'll examine careers and work. People with high sensation-seeking personalities tend to gravitate toward certain kinds of careers. This chapter explores the often risky careers of high sensation-seeking personalities and how their personality traits can benefit and cause problems at work.

Chapter 7 looks at the dark side of sensation-seeking. For most people, high sensation-seeking isn't a problem, but for some it can be. Those with high sensation-seeking personalities sometimes struggle with problems, including anger, addiction, gambling, substance use and abuse, and crime and antisocial behavior.

And in Chapter 8 we'll try to get to the bottom of the question "Is high sensation-seeking a superpower or a super problem?" High sensation-seeking doesn't have to get you into trouble. In fact, it can be a positive force. People with high sensation-seeking personalities are active and curious, and they experience less stress and anxiety than those with low sensation-seeking personalities. While avoiding excessive risk-taking is important, high sensation-seeking can help some people get more out of life.

High sensation-seekers are different than the rest of us, but does this difference make them out of control and broken, or does it make them fascinating? Are high sensation-seekers a dangerous part of our world, or are they integral to it? Are these seekers of sensation also seekers of chaos, or is something else at play here? This book is my attempt to answer these questions. I sought to discover why high sensation-seekers do what they do, and over the course of that journey I came to see life through their eyes just a little bit. What I discovered was not at all what I predicted.

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