

What Is Risk-Taking?

A health guru's analysis of "risk-taking" that I was reading awhile back included a definition of the subject. The reference he used, a psychology dictionary, described risk-taking as "a hypothesized personality dimension, reflecting the degree to which an individual willingly undertakes actions that jeopardize something of personal value."

The guru went on to say, "The most important point to consider in this definition is 'personal value' because, although you might feel others are taking risks, they may not consider their actions risky at all."

Perhaps that kind of thinking is what made the people in the following accounts do what they did.—Ed.

My Final Rope-Swing Qual

By John Scott,
Naval Safety Center

Back when I was on active duty, I was the (self-proclaimed) best safety officer in the Navy. I used every gimmick I could come up with to make Sailors and Marines on board our large-deck amphib "think safety" before any risky undertaking. In my civilian job as a statistical safety data manager, I see more data about the results of others' follies than perhaps anyone in the Navy.

At our admiral's direction, my boss asked me what my Fourth of July plans were. I made a joke about being as safe as I could be, relative to the risks of going off a rope swing. My reserve-unit CO sent an e-mail to everyone in the unit, reminding us that our country and families needed us back in one piece.

Why do I insist on renewing my rope-swing qual each summer when visiting friends at the Allegheny River? All my friends, one at a time, have matured to the point where they no longer do it. I've always been the crazy one of the group, though—going to school 1,000 miles away, joining the Navy, learning to fly. Maybe, I just have to keep proving something to them. Getting married didn't stop me; neither did having two kids or turning 40. Heck, age is a mental barrier, not a physical one.

Not even the incident that happened a few years ago could deter me. A 15-foot, quarter-inch shot line used to be attached to a big knot at the bottom of a 30-foot one-inch line. The shot line came down to the water level so you could pull it up the bank to the launch point. Unfortunately, the line didn't actually come down to the water but to the rocks directly below the rope. Deep water only could be reached by letting go at the far peak of your swing.

That eventful year, I found myself dangling on the big knot like a serpent in slow motion, with the feeder rope slowly looping around my legs. I can't allow myself to think about what releasing at that point would have done to me. Fortunately, my helicopter-pilot, calm-response, emergency training kicked in, and I allowed myself to swing back toward land. I couldn't just wait for the swinging to stop because I still would have a 15-foot drop to the rocks. I quickly assessed that if the line unwrapped itself, I would have enough momentum to make it to deep water. Just like a tetherball, the line unwound just in time for me to let go.

Over the next few years, I had uneventful swings, but things felt differently this year. My friend said he hadn't even noticed if the swing still