

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

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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

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was up. We had our 1-year-old on the water with us. My friend had a new high-capacity pontoon boat, so we had lots of spectators. I had turned 40. My wife warned me to be careful. I promised everyone I'd be careful as I jumped off the boat to swim ashore.

My friend hadn't seen the rope because it was a new half-inch, blue, nylon rope that didn't stand out like the old white one-inch line. Gone was the feeder line; the new rope made it all the way down to the rocks. Was it tied off to the same place? I'm not sure—I only do this once a year.

"I wonder if that heavy line making it all the way to the ground will suck up some of the momentum the old quarter-inch line didn't," I couldn't help thinking. Since all these warning signals were going off, I decided to swim around the landing area, assessing for underwater rocks and reminding myself where the drop-off point was.

Finally, I climbed the bank, backed up for a running start to get extra momentum, and leaped. I immediately realized something was wrong. I was swinging more slowly than I remembered from past years, and it was a bit of an arching swing, rather than straight out. Because I'd never been able to let myself down the rope in previous years, I eliminated that as an option this time, too.

To the horror of the crowd in the boat, I assessed that I could make it to the water but not the deep water. From their perspective, I appeared to be heading straight into the rocks. I released and consciously decided to do a back-smacker to avoid going to the bottom in the 3 to 4 feet of water for which I was aiming. Now on a ballistic trajectory, I thought I was a bit right of where I had checked for underwater obstacles. As I hit the water, I wondered if I was going to experience a burst of white light, then wake up in a helicopter on the way to a hospital, where doctors would tell me I'd never walk again. However, I instantly surfaced—unbroken but not undamaged.



In case the message still hadn't sunk in, the safety gods gave me 24 hours of kicked-in-the-groin pain as a reminder of my folly.

Perhaps ORM saved my life, or maybe it was luck. Maybe, if my judgment had been further clouded by the influence of alcohol, my luck wouldn't have been enough. The only explanation I can offer is that I didn't think it could happen to me—just like it does to many Sailors and Marines every year. All too often, a fun day at the beach, park or river turns into a tragedy for them, their families, and friends.

The real world offers plenty of dangers and challenges to conquer. Next year, I'm not going to add an artificial one on an unsafe rope swing. ■