

Risky behaviour and how to manage it

Some risky behaviour is normal and part of life. However, there is a difference between normal, experimental behaviour, and behaviours which place ourselves or others at risk of harm.

Psychologists have identified five risk domains for individual behaviour:

- Financial – e.g. risky financial investment, gambling, impulsive spending or over-spending
- Health – e.g. unprotected sex, smoking, misuse of drugs and alcohol, drinking and driving, speeding
- Social - e.g. confrontational behaviours, looking for a fight
- Recreational - e.g. adrenaline-seeking behaviours, such as drag racing, or extreme sports
- Ethical – e.g. personal dishonesty at home or at work, ignoring responsibilities

Psychological literature suggests that risk taking may be linked to personality traits. On personality tests, risk-takers have been shown to score high on impulsivity and sensation seeking, and low on conscientiousness and self-control. They also tend to score high on the tendency to have negative emotions, such as anger and jealousy. The extent to which responses are innate, or influenced by external factors, is however open to debate.

Some studies suggest that impulsivity and high sensation-seeking may be genetic. Geneticists have linked genes in the dopamine system to drug and alcohol dependence. Attention Deficit Disorder has been also been linked to lowered levels of self-control and risky behaviour. Depression has been shown to correlate with risk-taking. Confidence and self-esteem, and what psychologists call self-efficacy, may also play a role. People who lack the confidence to say no when their partner or friends are pulling them in a certain direction, or who are unwilling to risk confrontation when they feel uncomfortable with a situation may take risks because they don't feel like they have other options.

Branding individuals as risk-taking or risk-averse does not provide a reliable model for predicting behaviour across domains and situations. People's attitudes to financial risk may differ substantially from their attitude toward personal and recreational risk, for example. Smokers have been shown to be more likely than non-smokers to take risks that concern their health, but are no more risk taking in other domains. Women tend to be more cautious than men in multiple domains, except for situations that relate to their social environment. There is wide cultural variation in risk taking across domains.

Age also plays a role. Risky behaviour tends to be far more prevalent in young people. Our normal curiosity and desire for experimentation is stronger when we're young. We're also far less aware of the potential consequences of our actions. As we accumulate bad experiences, we lose our sense of invulnerability and become more cautious.

Often, individuals engaging in risky behaviour won't recognise what they're doing as risky, and won't think about the possible negative consequences. This can make it difficult to talk to them about the problem, and to persuade them to consider getting help. Efforts are needed to help the person

recognise the potential harm or negative outcomes associated with their behaviour, for themselves and others.

Interventions that may help people to manage risky behaviour include:

- Working with the person to explore the values, beliefs, attitudes and experiences that may underpin their behaviours.
- Working to improve self-esteem and self-efficacy, giving people more control over the choices they make.
- Helping the person develop a positive, future-oriented focus, and recognition of the extent to which risky behaviours undermine future-oriented hopes and goals.
- Encouraging them to join a support group to share experiences and coping strategies with people in a similar situation. This could be a group that meets in person, or an online / virtual group.
- Helping them find ways to channel their energy into constructive activities.

Sources:

- <https://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/14474/title/Playing-with-Fire---Why-People-Engage-in-Risky-Behavior/>
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- Managing Risk of Serious Harm, Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, Scotland, <http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Section-5-Managing-Risk-of-Serious-Harm.pdf>