

# Shrink Rap: Thrill-Seekers Do It More Intensely

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Originally published in *Coast Magazine*, October 2006

How much of a thrill-seeker are you? Does the thought of parachuting from an airplane and free-falling excite you? How about soaring like a bird in a hang-glider? Or maybe, you prefer bungee jumping or racing dune buggies in the desert?

Psychologists have long studied those who are high in sensation-seeking. These people love varied, complex, novel, and intense stimulation more than the rest of us. Sure, we all desire a certain amount of change and excitement in our lives, but high thrill seekers thrive on it - always searching for more intense forms that bring higher levels of risk and adrenaline. There is even evidence of differences in the cortex of the brain and biochemistry of those who are high in sensation-seeking.

High sensation-seeking reaches into every aspect of life, affecting one's engagement in risky sports; relationship satisfaction before and during marriage; tastes in music, art and entertainment; food preferences; job choices; and social attitudes. Compared to low sensation-seekers, highs are more likely to smoke, abuse alcohol and use drugs, and are more attracted to high-stress careers. But despite its association with risky behavior, high-sensation is a normal personality trait.

Thrill-chasing can take both positive and negative forms. When channeled positively, high-sensation seekers are attracted to pro-social jobs such as law enforcement, firefighting, medical emergency work, stock trading, and competitive team sports. They are also among those who are pioneers in business, showing the courage to become inventors and entrepreneurs. Or, they may be creative in science or the arts. In contrast, the dark side of the trait may take the form of crime, violence or foolish risk-taking just for the excitement of it.

A high sensation-seeking type may be more inner-directed and find satisfaction in mental challenges, rather than physical ones. Albert Einstein was a sensation-seeking type who found great thrills in intellectual discovery - as are many of those who end up in research and writing careers. This "quiet" form of thrill-seeking obviously does not entail bodily risk as do extreme physical challenges, but the excitement motivating the search for mental discoveries captivates the seeker just as it does for those who prefer outward challenges.

Over the years, I've worked with two groups who represent high sensation-seeking types. One was less obvious than the other and neither job is what you would consider physically risky. The first group: touring professional golfers and the second, professional stock traders.

The golfers relish the nervous pressure they're under when playing in big tournaments and are in the hunt to win or finish high. They talk about the pressure as excitement and something to enjoy. They are always testing themselves under pressure, even when their bodies may not like the forms nervousness takes, such as upset stomachs, headaches, shaking, etc. But they interpret these nervous symptoms in a positive manner - that they are nervous because they're playing well - and that's what distinguishes them from those who buckle under the pressure. Unlike fast-moving sports, in golf, nervousness has more time to work in destructive mental ways. And when otherwise good players don't learn how to perform under the pressure, they don't last long at the higher levels.

Stock traders are forced to process and manipulate a lot of information very quickly with large amounts of money on the line. The combination of speed and knowing that mistakes can be very costly puts a lot of pressure on them to stay clear-minded and refrain from getting too emotional in their trading. But those who are successful love to have their heart beating quickly when making their electronic trades. They talk about how they like the adrenaline rush when holding a position for a short time and the great feeling of knowing how to get in and out of the market in a timely manner.