K&A BrainCandy No. 116

K&A Brand Research

The risk with risk avoidance.
A motivational impulse

Reading time 14 minutes

My reading list of psychology newsletters is extensive, yet the keyword “risk” immediately caught my attention. It quickly became apparent that this was just right for BrainCandy, especially after the Easter season and given the particularly challenging times we are currently experiencing. I will present the most important arguments of author Josh Zlatkus and supplement them with some current examples.

“It's strange: many of the safest people in human history are fearful. In fact, fear has increased in the United States – especially among young people – while the greatest sources of danger have decreased, from violent crime to fatal car accidents.”

That doesn't make sense. Fear is the expectation of a future threat. As the threat of violence, traffic fatalities, infant mortality, theft, infectious diseases, kidnappings, etc. decreases, fear should also decrease.

“To be fair, threats can also be social in nature, and life is increasingly taking place online. In these curated environments, there is a constant and insidious threat that others are doing better than oneself. Social media platforms also stoke negative emotions such as anger, disgust, and fear to keep users engaged, and the more time spent on these platforms, the more intensely these emotions are felt.”

It's not for nothing that this effect is colloquially referred to as “doom scrolling.”

Finally, there is the difference between reality and perception. The media's persistent preference for disaster makes the world seem much more dangerous than it is. You never hear about the thousands of mail carriers who weren't bitten by a dog.

So there are many explanations for the prevalence of anxiety among some of the safest people in history. However, Zlatku's preferred explanation is based on the mechanism of acquired risk tolerance. Let's use a modern analogy to illustrate this—the peanut, which is threatening more and more people's lives.

The peanut saga:

The short story is that a few decades ago, an increase in peanut allergies led experts to recommend that children avoid peanuts altogether. This well-intentioned strategy backfired: children who were protected from contact with peanuts at an early age never developed a natural tolerance, and in the end, more children developed peanut allergies than before. Oops.

Fortunately, the FDA could soon save the day with a drug called Palforzia. Its secret? Exposing children to peanuts: Palforzia attempts to treat peanut allergies by exposing sufferers to the very thing that could kill them. It can help to get the body used to the allergen by consuming it in tiny amounts at first and then in increasingly larger portions.

Vaccines work on the same principle: the body learns how to attack a specific pathogen by being exposed to a low dose of it. For all types of threats, humans therefore need appropriately dosed exposure in order to build resilience. This is a much better strategy than avoidance.

It is one of the wonderful facts of life that the method of natural selection has been able to develop body systems that adapt to the demands of the environment. The immune system, for example, works within the limits of what it encounters and avoids waste by not preparing for threats it does not encounter. The downside is that when these systems are exposed to a higher dose than they "expect," they go into overload. This explains a variety of phenomena, from muscle tears at the gym to drug overdoses. Tolerance must be built up in tolerable doses.

Quelle istockphoto.com / Vanz Studio

Living and learning: Risk as our teacher

The same applies to the systems of the mind as to those of the body.

If we want to have a robust fear system, we must expose it to risk in the same way—and increasingly so—and for the same reason—increased tolerance—as we expose our immune system to peanuts and pathogens. Pampering only leads to peanut allergies and anxiety.

If the purpose of our fear system is to detect threats, how does it know what is threatening? In short, it learns. But it would be very costly to learn everything from scratch, so there are some shortcuts to learning through experience. First, some things in our history have been more reliably threatening than others, so evolution has prepared us to learn them more quickly. That's why it's much easier to learn to fear snakes than butterflies.

Second, other people can tell us that something is dangerous – "Look both ways before you cross the street." The different ways of learning about threats – being told, observing, and experiencing – have their own disadvantages. When you are told something, the risk of harm is lowest, but you are less likely to remember it and are also susceptible to error and deception. You are much more likely to remember a lesson if you experience the result yourself, and the lesson is likely to be more reliable. "Next time, I won't put my hand on the stove." This is the riskiest, yes, but also the most reliable. Observation lies somewhere in between.

A quote often attributed to Confucius is: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand."

"To achieve the opposite of fear—whether we call it self-confidence, self-esteem, competence, or serenity—a person must be able to divide the world into threats and non-threats.

Experience has another advantage. It teaches us not only what is dangerous, but also why. If you understand the mechanism of danger—if, for example, you know the warning signs of a dog before it bites in defense, you pull your hand back in time.

In other words, the antidote to risk is skill. Know-how. A skilled skateboarder goes to the Olympics; an unskilled one ends up in the hospital.

Of course, experienced skateboarders still end up in hospital, and the reason for that is that they occasionally bite off more than they can chew. But Olympians acquire their skills in the same way as everyone else: by pushing their limits further and further, one manageable step at a time. No one can watch their way to the top—or be told how to get there. We just have to do it. The same goes for fear in general: those who push the boundaries of risk perceive more of the world as manageable, even safe.

A final advantage of experience is what Zlatkus calls the spillover effect. It's not just skills that can be transferred from one area to another, but also confidence. When a skateboarder learns how to do a kickflip, they also learn that they can learn. Even though skateboarding and wallpapering have nothing in common, a skilled skateboarder can tackle wallpapering with confidence in their ability to learn new skills. tackle it because they are confident in their ability to succeed in general. However, if a person has been told what to do for most of their life, they will want to rely on advice when something new comes up.

Quelle istockphoto.com / Vera_Petrunina

SUP on the Pegnitz

Many years ago, as a beginner, I wanted to try paddleboarding on the Pegnitz, a small river in Franconia. I was quite nervous because friends had warned me that paddling on rivers was dangerous, as the fin of the board could get caught on the abundant driftwood and many shallow areas, throwing the paddler off the board and onto the obstacle. It's a good thing I went ahead and did it anyway. Yes, the fin did touch something a few times, but I stayed upright and was able to chalk up a new experience and skill. All athletes know the phenomenon: it's only by overcoming the next small hurdle in sports that you can eventually ski down the mogul slope with ease or enjoy the mountain passes on a heavy motorcycle.

It's much easier to tell someone what can go wrong than to explain how to do something right. So when the author says about skiing, “Yes, there is a possibility that you will fly off a cliff,” but a little squatting and weight shifting can prevent that,” the average reader will probably be horrified. They can well imagine what it's like to fly off a cliff, but they can't translate ‘squatting’ or ‘weight shifting’ into a physical understanding that inspires confidence. The truth is that beginners often succeed. But only when they do.

No risk, no cookie: Risk is reward

The ability to divide the world into threats and non-threats is best achieved through action. And knowing where the line is drawn is a skill in itself. A general rule of thumb is that anything less risky than what you have done safely before should be manageable. So by taking increasingly risky steps in appropriate increments, you expand your own realm of trust.

There are indeed two ways to make the world safer. One is to actually make it safer. (The modern world has done this, by and large.) The other is to learn how to deal with the risks. (Modern humans, by and large, do not do this.)

In the modern first world, however, people do not develop familiarity with risk for an understandable reason: they don't have to. As Jean Twenge argues in Generations, it makes sense to reduce the risk we are willing to tolerate as environmental risk decreases. Therefore, as technology makes life less physically demanding for each generation, each generation is gentler than the one before...

For today's children—and adults, too—it would not make sense to take risks that our ancestors routinely had to face. But if we remember the peanut saga, it is also not good for people to be risk-free. Ideally, people expose themselves to a level of danger that is slightly above what their environment requires.

In other words, there is a relationship between our bodily systems and the environment in which they operate, and a good strategy is to be slightly overprepared. When it comes to fears, people should strive to take risks that fall somewhere between foolish and safe, so that most of life seems not only bearable but even worthwhile.

Summary of the risk

The solution to fear is obvious: develop familiarity with the risk. Psychologist David Rosmarin puts it this way: “The main cause of fear is intolerance to uncertainty.” The more uncertainty people experience, the more tolerance they develop. The right amount of exposure is the remedy.

Risk, danger, challenge—these are the antidotes to fear, not therapy, adaptation, or medication.

Quelle: istockphoto.com / Pheelings Media

A cultural shift that recognizes the benefits of risk would encourage parents to expose their children (and themselves) to more risk. It's not that the desire to protect ourselves or our children is new. The difference is that today we are in a position to act on that desire. It is to be hoped that books such as Bad Therapy and The Anxious Generation (BrainCandy 106) will provide the social permission and justification to resist this instinct.

Two current examples that we can observe in Generation Z are important to me:

They have less sex than older generations. Older people had to expose themselves to the risk of rejection in order to expand their social contacts with the desired sex. The shift of social interaction to the internet has reduced tolerance for live frustrations. Among young adults, the number of sexual partners in the last year is most often zero or one. About 10-20% of young adults have a lot of sex with each other, while the rest are either asexual or in committed relationships

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1. Talking on the phone is scary!
   A recent study by Bitkom shows that almost half of Gen Zers between the ages of 16 and 29 are afraid of talking on the phone and even put off important calls. Instant messaging is more accessible than talking on the phone and reduces risk tolerance. Every generation is becoming gentler, even when it comes to talking on the phone.

Our safety-enhancing technologies have an obvious advantage—they protect and prolong life—but they have the much less obvious disadvantage of filling that life with fear and uncertainty.

As long as modern environments eliminate the kinds of challenges that calibrate our risk system and shape our character, we will be left with a society where everything seems dangerous—and hardly anything is

Only personal encounters with danger allow humans to say with certainty: This is scary, that is not.

The Left Party in Germany would prefer to take an even gentler approach and is calling for the abolition of grades and homework in order to reduce the burden on students and lessen the impact of structural differences between social classes. What could possibly go wrong?

I prefer to live as self-sufficiently as possible. I have learned to observe where my comfort zones lie and consciously seek out areas where I can take more risks in small steps. The rewards are what motivate me to take the next step

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Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to order.

Feedback, suggestions or criticism about this article:
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The author
Ralph Ohnemus, CEO. Board member and main shareholder of K&A BrandResearch since 2001.
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