

THE VALUE OF RISK TAKING

By Dr. Ginger Blume

What, exactly, is a risk? Risks are difficult to define because they are often in the eye of the beholder. For some people, driving a motorcycle is risky. For others, investing in the stock market is risky. For another, committing to a lover through marriage is a seriously frightening endeavor. Risks are probably those things that make us all feel challenged beyond our usual comfort zone. Risk taking pushes us into areas of “uncertainty.” Risks put us to the test. But here’s my question to you: Is there any value in taking risks?

Should you push yourself to risk a sense of personal security, whether it be emotional or physical? Many people advise avoiding risks and recommend living life in as much bubble-wrap as possible! In fact, many people who consult a psychologist due to high anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, etc. have attempted to live their life avoiding risks at all costs. Sadly, their risk avoidance behavior has the effect of shrinking their life, sometimes to the point of not being able to function at home or at work.

Anxious individuals believe that eliminating fear and uncertainty will cure their woes. In reality, they must do the opposite. They must embrace fear and uncertainty and accept their inability to control all they would like to control. Embracing this reality means accepting that life is full of *risks AND opportunities* and that they can’t have one without the other. The paradox to reducing anxiety is to stop trying to control things that they believe cause their anxiety and accept that risks are a vital part of life.

Risk taking leads to progress

Consider that our species has endured because of our risk-taking ancestors who took all types of risks to adapt to a challenging and changing environment. Early man faced challenges with courage and daring. The survivors were the ones who met risks because they provided future opportunities for growth, expansion, progress, and more. The survivors knew that “fear” would limit their progress and overcoming fear would provide a sense of being fully engaged in life. And this would lead to happiness and a sense of accomplishment.

Of course, taking risks never comes with a guarantee. Risk avoiders are often looking for unrealistic guarantees of success or safety before they’ll even consider a small risk. If there were a 100% guarantee, then it wouldn’t be defined as a true risk!

Risk avoiders are most resilient and among the unhappiest

Psychological studies have shown that it is through taking *calculated risks* that we are able to become more confident and resilient as individuals. When we face our own areas of life that challenge us, we acknowledge the uncertainty of life and the fact that facing fear allows us to expand our personal development.

Our confidence grows when we push ourselves to approach something that frightens us, such as giving a public speech, and discovering that we can do it. Oftentimes, risks are emotional and include unpleasant feelings like the fear of embarrassing ourselves, looking like a failure, appearing stupid, appearing inadequate, etc. While none of these outcomes are positive to experience, we’ve all lived through them and hopefully, learned from them.

Many people believe the myth that “security” is possible. Most everything we do on a daily basis holds some degree of uncertainty or at least a questionable outcome. We can put all types of safeguards into place (such as a home security system), and yet, trip and fall on the stairs and break our neck at home! **When we live based on fear, rather than on want, we restrict ourselves and live a smaller than necessary, inhibited, and fearful life.** I observe it time and time again in therapy: People who avoid risks at all costs are the unhappiest among us.

Feel the fear and do it anyway

So am I advocating you behave in a fool-hearted manner? Absolutely, not. Some degree of realistic planning, with back up plans and safety equipment are helpful if you’re engaging in something physical like rock climbing, skin diving, race car driving, etc. But, whatever activity you are doing, remember that *unless* you perceive yourself as facing a challenge or possibility of failure, you are not going to get anything helpful from taking such a so called risk.

All types of risks always involve the possibility of failure or an unpleasant outcome. You might fail at becoming an expert gymnast; the lover of your dreams might reject you; you might never learn to play the guitar like your big brother; etc. Given failure is possible, it is interesting to note that a woman many people have admired, Eleanor Roosevelt, once offered this advice: “Do one thing every day that scares you.” Consider that this strategy certainly worked well in her life, resulting in much success, fulfillment and happiness.

Also, remember, along with the risk of failure, risk-taking obviously involves the possibility of something positive happening (or we wouldn’t engage in anything risky). This is why I believe we must make a choice: focus on the possible negative outcomes OR on the possible positive outcomes.

When serious consequences aren’t involved, even the negative outcome of failure might be a stepping-stone to eventual success. Consider the last time you engaged in a realistic risk. Regardless of outcome, did you grow from it? Did you learn from it? Did you overcome a past fear? Did you build more confidence? If you answered, “Yes,” to any of these questions, it may be time to reconsider if you have a lifestyle focused on risk avoidance. Risks can help awaken your senses and make you feel more alive and engaged in whatever you do.

Start taking some risks

Want some suggestions to begin taking some more small risks? Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- 1) Smile at someone you don’t know or talk to a stranger, even though you’re afraid of rejection.
- 2) Next time at a local restaurant, order something you’ve never tasted before instead of your trusty usual choice.
- 3) Attempt a new sport, like roller blading, windsurfing, mountain climbing, etc.
- 4) Go ahead and change your appearance (i.e. color your hair differently; break out of your usual wardrobe rut and dress out of character).