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Why some thrive on hair-raising experiences

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Whether you can handle the thrill of a space ride or a free fall depends a lot on your T Type; a recent glimpse of your own mortality also helps

You won't catch Stephanie Anevich on a roller coaster. The idea of hurtling around at high speeds and plunging down steep slides gives her the jitters. Yet the 56-year-old Toronto executive has no qualms about catching a ride into space.

Ms. Anevich, executive vice-president of the Vision 2000 Travel Group, is one of about 23 Canadians who have booked a flight aboard Virgin Galactic's spaceships, expected to take off some time next year. She has already agreed to pay for the \$200,000, two-night space tourism package, which culminates in a 2 1/2-hour ride (including several minutes of weightlessness at the edge of the Earth's atmosphere).

"I don't do crazy things. I'm not bungee jumping next week or anything," says Ms. Anevich, whose travel agency books Virgin Galactic flights. But she knew she had to try this. "The most interesting thing is to be on the cutting edge of something new, brand new."

What makes certain activities terrifying and others merely exciting? Why do some people thrive on hair-raising experiences, like spending their vacations white-water rafting or rocketing into the cosmos, while others are perfectly content staying home and maybe, if they're feeling particularly daring, washing their darks with their whites? The answer may depend on one's T Type, according to psychology professor Frank Farley of Philadelphia's Temple University, former president of the American Psychological Association.

Dr. Farley coined the term "Type T" in the 1980s to describe thrill-seeking personalities. Over the years, he has travelled the world studying climbers of Mount Everest, car racers, high-stakes gamblers, commodities traders and all kinds of risk-takers. Like Ms. Anevich, not all are adrenalin junkies, he discovered. But to varying degrees, they all share Type T traits, including a need for excitement and stimulation and a high tolerance for uncertainty. Type Ts are motivated by novelty, variety and intense experiences, and they tend to feel self-confident and in control of their own fate. They are also generally creative, innovative and energetic.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are what he calls lower-case t-types, those who are averse to risk and require a high degree of stability and security.

"Most people are neither small-t nor big-T; they're in the broad middle range," Dr. Farley says. "If the whole world were nothing but big Ts, there would be total chaos."

To some extent, genetics and biology, including one's reaction to biochemicals such as adrenalin and dopamine, determine whether people are Type Ts, he says. But their inherent psychological qualities and social environment also play a role.

While it's highly unlikely a person could go from one extreme to the other, Dr. Farley has often witnessed "Type T breakouts," or periods when people take more risks than usual, particularly when they've been reminded of their mortality.

Last year, Todd Ford experienced something of a Type T breakout when he decided to step off the 108th floor of the SkyJump attraction at the Stratosphere Hotel Casino in Las Vegas. As director of marketing at Stratosphere, he felt compelled to try the \$110 (U.S.) jump, a controlled fall from 855 feet, as part of his job. But his upcoming 55th birthday also influenced his decision.

"It's a good day to die went through my head," he says. "I just let go and enjoyed the view."

He admits he screamed at the top of his lungs and flailed "like a fool" on the way down, but he enjoyed it enough to do it three more times. "You definitely walk away feeling exhilarated."

A big part of what makes thrill-seeking pleasurable is the sense of empowerment it provides, says Toronto "courage coach" Billy Anderson. He should know. At the age of 40 he's skydived 100 times, bungee-jumped, obtained his scuba diving licence, challenged himself to perform standup comedy and quit a career in advertising.

"It's a certain need that I think everyone has to feel like they're living their life as much as they can," Mr. Anderson says.

Yet many people, he says, are held back by fear. He has coached individuals who are afraid of even seemingly mundane tasks, such as setting up a Facebook page, talking to strangers or wearing mismatched socks. The most common fear isn't of death, he says, but of failure; of looking foolish and of not being liked.

Mr. Anderson believes people can get a handle on their fears by flexing their thrill-seeking muscles. The more they expose themselves to risks, no matter how small, the better their bodies and brains will be at dealing with them.

For Mark Laroche, confronting his lifelong fear of heights atop the CN Tower is something he'll never forget. Mr. Laroche, president and chief executive of Canada Lands Company, which operates the tower, was among the first to test the upcoming EdgeWalk attraction, a \$175 walk around the narrow ledge of the roof, 356 metres above ground. The attraction opens in August.

Mr. Laroche, 52, who was previously an avid white-water canoeist, says he's never been so terrified. "I could feel my knees shaking the whole time."

After white-knuckling his way around the tower, concentrating on moving one step at a time, he felt an enormous sense of accomplishment. He even wants to do it again.

"I did it once," he says. "I should be able to do it twice."