

Frank Farley, PhD: Q&A About Risk-Takers in an Age of Stressing Over Uncertainty

Exploring why some people redefine stress-inducing situations as opportunities for positive action may help us all see change as more thrill than threat.

By [Sue Treiman](#)

Medically Reviewed by [Allison Young, MD](#)

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The motivation for risk-taking behavior is a recipe with many ingredients. But the outcome is always that risks are taken.

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Frank Farley, PhD Photo Courtesy of Temple University

Frank Farley, PhD, likes to white-water raft, fly hot-air balloons, and hobnob with Everest explorers. But Dr. Farley doesn't consider himself a risk-taker. He's just bound and determined to figure them out.

“The thrill of my life is studying thrill,” says Farley, a member of [Everyday Health's Wellness Advisory Board](#).

An L.H. Carnell Professor at Temple University in Philadelphia and president of the Society for Experimental Psychology and Cognitive Science, Farley is credited with originating the “[type T](#),” or big T, designation for the risk-seeking, envelope-pushing thrill-seeker. He credits luminary fellow PhDs — such as Hans Jurgen Eysenck, Marvin Zuckerman, and Daniel Ellis Berlyne — for their inspiration and scholarship as he continues to pursue society's daredevil innovators.

For Farley, these type T's are the vanguard of the future, with some powerful caveats. First, some big T people may need coaxing onto the path of pro-social rather than anti-social behavior. And second, the risk-averse “small T” people face huge challenges in weathering the lightning-fast changes of the 21st century.

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As Farley begins a sabbatical devoted to the study of “situational heroes,” he shares some of thoughts — with a capital and lowercase T.

Everyday Health: Who is a type T, or big T, person?

Frank Farley: Type T's are thrill-seekers. They pursue excitement and novelty; they thrive on uncertainty. You can find these people among entrepreneurs, explorers, and extreme athletes.

I believe they possess the cognitive habit of “reframing.” They redefine situations most of us would consider unthinkable dangerous or terrifying as exciting, invigorating, and fun, and they reinterpret the world to match their view.

Take skydiving, for example. For a type T, the twinge of fear as you're about to step out of the plane may be reframed as joy and exhilaration, not terror. The T may reinterpret the act of leaving the plane in mid-air as an opportunity to feel fully alive.

T's can also be mental or intellectual risk-takers, rather than just physical thrill-seekers. Albert Einstein was a mental big T who went beyond the status quo and pioneered a new and totally unconventional conception in physics.

EH: If these are the big T people, who are small T risk-avoiders?

FF: The risk-averse individuals — the “small T” people — are the opposite of the big T thrill-seekers. They flourish within prescribed rules, predictability, and order.

Metaphorically, these small T's, as I see it, grip the handrails of life, looking for security, reliability, and tradition. Since society requires rules and order to function, these people perform

an important service. A small T might be an accountant while a big T might work an inner-city police beat or launch an innovative start-up.

The trouble is that rules and predictability are where technology and automation excel. The small T is more likely to do the work that's most likely to be threatened by artificial intelligence and robotics in a 21st century workplace; a setting where change is a constant and ambiguity is the norm. It's precarious to be a small T today.

EH: You've previously noted that big T's can be "positive or negative." What differentiates the two?

FF: Both types are risk-takers, but the results of their actions differ. Positive T's engage in constructive risk-taking while negative T's follow an anti-social, destructive path.

The positive type T's drive much of the innovation and creativity we see today. As I mentioned earlier, they take chances, start businesses, invent things, and test limits. They may unravel medical mysteries or devise ways to explore space or develop artificial intelligence. Their vision inspires others. Their daring and adaptability make positive big T's perfectly suited for a 21st century where things are changing rapidly and without much obvious predictability.

EH: And the negative big T?

FF: I believe that negative T's are powerful, too, but in a destructive way. In my opinion, they're responsible for much of the violence and mayhem in our society. You can find them in prisons, in gangs, in terrorist groups, pursuing criminal activity, engaged in unsafe sex, and occasionally wreaking havoc in politics or business. They consider it thrilling to ignore limits.

My wish is that positive T's can find a way to use their creativity and talent to harness the skills of the negative T's; to help them contribute to society rather than threaten it.

EH: Are there other characteristics that differentiate among big T's?

FF: For all risk-takers, the motivation for the behavior is a recipe with more than one ingredient, and the ingredients may differ somewhat from one risk-taker to the next. But the outcome is the same for all: Risks are taken.

For the mental big T the risks are primarily psychological; for the physical big T the risks are primarily physical. For the positive big T the risks are primarily positive, healthy, or socially valuable; for the negative big T the risks are primarily destructive, unhealthy, or anti-social.

Two people might be big T but for one impulsiveness is stronger than it is for the other, so one may be more likely to act before thinking, while the other may be more likely to think before acting, but both end up taking a risk.

Two people might be big T but one might make up his or her own mind about the risk while the other might consult with someone about it. But both take the risk.

Two people might be big T but one is more optimistic than the other about the risk, so they hold different expectations about possible outcomes. But both take the risk.

Two people might be big T but one is especially focused on the risk's perceived unusualness or innovative features, whereas the other might be especially focused on the danger. Both take the risk.

EH: How does chronic stress affect the big T and the small T?

FF: I believe big T's would probably find routine unbearable. If they can't push the envelope or try something new, they may end up frustrated and miserable. For them, fulfillment is about taking on the next big challenge and beating it. And each time their risk-taking is rewarded, they may seek out another opportunity to stretch the limits.

Big T's aren't dissuaded by bad odds. She'll climb Mount Everest fully aware that many people have died making the ascent. Meanwhile, the small T finds most risk unacceptably stressful. He may become anxious when the expected sequence of events is disturbed. He'll do his best to avoid change and look for situations where things are reliable and knowable.

EH: Why do you consider this the ideal time for the big T?

FF: Charles Darwin described survival of the species as based on adaptability. Especially now, the people who can accept or contribute to change and adapt to its pace will thrive. We have to embrace risk in the 21st century. That's why I'd like to see instruction in risk become the fourth "R" in school, after "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic." Many kids need to stop fearing stress and uncertainty and embrace change.

As I said, I hope big T thinkers will use their creativity to invent ways to help small T people learn how to become comfortable with change, by becoming skilled at reframing and innovating. Maybe they can help others reinterpret situations of uncertainty as opportunities for fun, challenge, and growth.

EH: How can all of us become better at risk-taking?

FF: We can all start by trying small things that deviate a bit from the usual. It can be as simple as trying a new food or taking a different route home from work.

And we can explore a form of behavioral therapy — T therapy — that helps individual re-examine events and become more comfortable taking chances on the right things.

We can also watch for and remain aware of the possibility that some big T young people can become susceptible to the lure of negative risk-taking — drug use, or gangs, or guns. We have to find them and channel their thrill-seeking into positive activities.

And when they veer towards the negative side, we need to redirect a process that lures some young people on destructive paths. It can occur when a big T who craves action grows up in a rules-based culture and finds the benefits of joining a terrorist group very appealing, because it offers the promise of adventure, along with some social status.

Most of us, of course, aren't pure big T or small T, but fall somewhere in the middle. We may take risks, but only in unavoidable or extreme circumstances.

We've all heard the stories about people who grab someone from the path of a moving subway train or who rush into a burning building to save a child, even if it's supposedly contrary to their nature. That's the object of some of my current research; these "situational heroes."

EH: Where do you find these people and what do you hope to learn from them?

FF: We're looking at all the people who've been honoured by the [Carnegie Heroes Fund](#) over the last 100 years. The goal is to discern patterns in terms of age, gender, background, and other characteristics. We want to understand how these "big H" heroes find the strength and the resolve to go beyond their limits. Why did they feel they "just had to do something"? Did innate factors or learned values motivate them, or something else?

And where does the "bystander effect" — when some people do nothing in a disaster, figuring someone else will step in — fit into this? What compels someone to overcome this "diffusion of responsibility," where everyone assumes somebody else will do something, and take a bold, risky action?

EH: How do you determine where you fall on the big T to small T continuum? And how can you best use that knowledge to your advantage?

FF: My best advice is to [know yourself](#) and apply what you've learned. Few people spend enough time objectively examining and acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses. They just forge ahead in the same direction without wondering why or how it suits them. One day, they find themselves in the wrong job or with the wrong partner. This kind of honest reflection requires time and unvarnished self-reflection; a skill with which we have to equip more people.

On the other hand, very successful people nearly always learn from their failures. They assess what they've learned and just get started again.

Translated into 21st century workplace terms, if artificial intelligence is threatening your job, you have to explore other options. You need to think about your failures, assess your strengths, reflect on your successes, and treat your enhanced knowledge as an opportunity to learn new things. Do this often enough, and you become more successful and better equipped to handle the slings and arrows — the stressors — of daily life.

EH: Conversely, what shouldn't we do?

FF: Don't be negative. [Zig Ziglar](#), the late motivational speaker, called it “stinkin' thinkin'.” There's no future in it. Analyze what you've done in life and move forward without complaint. Believing your glass is half full makes your life fuller — and it also helps you feel less stressed.

Trust that change is possible, even if it requires baby steps. If you don't like your job, and you need to change, try a few smaller moves. Identify what you feel best doing. Check your aptitudes, perhaps with the help of a counsellor.

We all have the capacity to change. We just need the motivation. And it can make life, regardless of whether you're a big T, small T, or right in the middle, a bigger thrill.

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