

The Health Benefits of Being Adventurous



Trying new things and taking on challenges makes you stronger and happier. Here's how to tap into your inner thrill-seeker. Climbing mountains. Skydiving. Surfing. These are things that might come to mind when you think of adventure.

But it's different for everyone, says Frank Farley, Ph.D., a professor at Temple University and a former president of the American Psychological Association. For some people, thrill seeking involves mental challenges, like creating art or finding innovative solutions for problems.

Whether it's physical or mental, adventurous behavior makes us feel good: It fires up the same regions of the brain that getting a reward does, according to a study in the journal *Neuron*. This may be why we're motivated to try new things even when they're intimidating, says study author Bianca Wittmann, Ph.D., of the Center for Mind, Brain, and Behavior, the University of Marburg, and Justus Liebig University Giessen in Germany.

Over time, adventurous activities may actually improve your brain health, says Abigail Marsh, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Georgetown University. That's because you're constantly learning, which creates new synapses and strengthens existing ones, a process known as neuroplasticity, she says. This can make your brain sharper.

And that's just one of the many things adventure does for you. Here are four more potent perks of being an adventure seeker.

Change Comes More Easily

People who are drawn to thrill-seeking activities have a high tolerance for uncertainty, says Farley. They enjoy engaging with unfamiliar things, are innately curious about the world, and creatively adapt to change instead of being fearful of it.

To nurture this quality in yourself, seek out situations that feel adventurous to you, whether that's taking a drawing class online or signing up for a workout you've never done, he says. Afterward, cement the experience in your mind by thinking about what you gained from it: meeting new people, learning a skill, pushing past your trepidation. Considering the ways you've successfully taken chances will help you see yourself as a more adventurous person, which can make you more courageous in the future.

Your Confidence Keeps Evolving

Participating in an adrenaline-pumping physical activity can lead to higher levels of what experts call self-efficacy, or a belief in your abilities, research shows. Other types of adventure—running for public office, doing improv at your local comedy club, taking virtual singing lessons—build your confidence too, says Farley. The more you push past your comfort zone and feel proud of yourself for doing so, the more confident you'll become.

A Sense of Flow Takes Over

When you're in the zone, meaning highly focused and engaged, everything else except what you're concentrating on falls away, and a general sense of well-being takes over. "You go out of time, out of yourself," says Marsh. This intense feel-good state is known as the flow, and research shows that participants in adventure sports are able to achieve it. If you looked at our brains in the flow state, you'd likely see rhythmic spikes of dopamine, which is associated with engagement and pleasure, says Marsh. Even better, those positive feelings can last beyond the activity itself.

Life Is Much More Fulfilling

Adventurous people tend to have stronger feelings of satisfaction about how they're living their lives. "They have a sense of flourishing," says Farley. Researchers who have studied this phenomenon say that participating in something challenging is associated with happiness, and that even when the activity itself is difficult, accomplishing it brings joy.

The lesson here: Don't hold back. Pick something you've always shied away from, and vow to conquer it. Tackle it in small doses, says Marsh. That will help you gradually build your mental strength. Also key: training yourself to relax on cue. Regularly practicing breathing exercises and meditation will help you lower your anxiety and embrace the challenge.

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