

# TAKING RESPONSIBLE RISKS

Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick

*"There is a time for daring and a time for caution,  
and a wise man knows which is called for."*

John Keating, Teacher in Dead Poet's Society

So, the challenge, as John Keating puts it, is how do we become wiser? When we consider how to know if a risk is a 'responsible' risk, we need to know how our brain operates as it is making such decisions.

As a teenager, no doubt you are aware that your body is going through many obvious physical changes. Less obvious are the vital changes taking place inside your brain that is in transition from childhood to adulthood. The brain is the organ that controls – or tries to control – your body's activities. Your brain is still developing and not yet fully mature.

In fact, some parts of the brain – such as the prefrontal cortex (PFC) that sits right behind your eyes – do not fully mature until you are about 24 years old! Other parts of the brain, like the walnut-shaped amygdala (AMG) that sits deep in the brain, mature much earlier.

The prefrontal cortex plays an important role in regulating your mood, attention, impulse control, and the ability to think abstractly – which includes both the ability to plan ahead and see the consequences of your behaviour. The amygdala plays a role in emotion, aggression, and instinctual, almost reflexive responses.

Many neuroscientists think that this mismatch in brain maturity may explain a lot of adolescent behaviour. The AMG matures sooner than the PFC causing a mismatch which may be contributing to the emotionality and impulsivity of adolescence – a 'normal' part of brain development.

Because it isn't completely mature, the PFC simply isn't working as fast as it will when it matures. That difference can have tragic consequences. In the heat of the moment, the relatively more developed AMG screams 'just do it' before the PFC knows what happened. As you mature, your risks become more educated. You draw on past knowledge, are thoughtful about consequences and have a well-trained sense of what is appropriate. You know that all risks are not worth taking!

Risk takers can be placed in two categories: those who see it as a venture and those who see it as adventure. The venture part of risk taking might be described by the venture capitalist. If you, as a responsible risk-taker, were approached to take the risk of investing in a new business, you would gather a lot of data first, looking at the markets, analysing how well organized the sales are, and studying the economic projections. If you finally decide to take the risk, and invest, it is a well-considered one.

The adventure part of risk taking might be described by the experiences of an entrepreneur. You are inclined to 'go with your gut'. You might take a risk based on your past experience and an intuitive feeling that it is worth the chance.

In either scenario, responsible risk-takers will take the chance if they know that there is either past history that suggests that what they are doing is not going to be life threatening or if

they believe that there is enough support in the group to protect them from harm. Ultimately, the research about learning from such high-risk experiences suggests that people are far more able to take actions than they previously believed.

When someone holds back from taking risks, they may miss many opportunities. For example, sometimes you may feel reluctant to take risks. You may be more afraid of being wrong than you are willing to take the chance of being right. You may hold back in games because you are afraid of losing. Your fear of learning by challenging yourself may outweigh the possibilities of venture or adventure.

Your mental voice says, 'if you don't try it, you won't be wrong' or 'if you try it and you are wrong, you will look stupid'. The other voice that might say, 'If you don't try it, you will never know', is trapped in fear and mistrust.

Instead, you can develop the capacity to live with some uncertainty – to be challenged by the process of finding an answer rather than by avoiding what you don't know. You can learn how to sustain a process of problem solving and finding the answer over time rather than giving up.

You can identify with being diverse, thinking differently, and going against the common grain. You can learn how to test ideas with your peers and teachers. If you learn how to take a chance, you are likely to find your creative, innovative spirit, and that will help you to solve the problems of our complex, rapidly-changing world.

*"If you let your fear of consequence prevent you from following your deepest instinct, your life will be safe, expedient and thin."*

Katharine B. Hathaway