



Sensation seeking, impulsive decision-making, and risky sex: implications for risk-taking and design of interventions

Lewis Donohew^{a,*}, Rick Zimmerman^b, Pamela S. Cupp^a, Scott Novak^b,
Susan Colon^c, Ritta Abell^a

^a*Department of Communication, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506, USA*

^b*Department of Behavioral Science, University of Kentucky Medical Center, Lexington, KY 40506, USA*

^c*Health Research and Policy Centers, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607, USA*

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Abstract

In an HIV prevention study, 2949 ninth-grade students in 17 high schools in two Midwestern U.S. cities were administered scales measuring sensation seeking and impulsive decision-making and their separate and combined relationships to a number of indicators of sexual risk-taking. Measures of sexual risk-taking included intentions to have sex, ever had sex, number of lifetime sexual partners, been pregnant or caused a pregnancy, used a condom, used marijuana, had unwanted sex when drunk, had unwanted sex under pressure, said no to sex, used alcohol or partner used alcohol before sex. Strong associations were observed between each of the measures and sexual risk-taking for most of the indicators. Strongest associations were found among sexually active students high on both sensation seeking and impulsive decision-making and weakest associations among students low on both measures. Implications for design of interventions in health campaigns are discussed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The role of a “risky personality” type in health behaviors and the importance of designing

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-606-257-3622; fax: +1-606-257-4103.

programs specifically to reach individuals on the basis of their different needs was emphasized recently by Caspi and associates following a longitudinal study of young males and females in New Zealand from age 3 to 21 on a wide range of behavioral characteristics, including health risk behaviors (Caspi et al., 1997). The authors noted that

...the origins of a personality type at risk for health-risk behaviors may be found early in life and...individual differences in personality may influence steps in the persuasion process. Thus, different types of individuals may attend to, comprehend, accept, and retain different types of messages.... If we know the personality characteristics of a target audience, it may be possible to tailor campaigns to zero-in on the characteristic motivations, attitudes, and feelings of the audience.... Knowledge of the psychological characteristics that motivate you to engage in health-risk behaviors may thus help public health officials choose more effective campaigns that would motivate risk takers to minimize harm. (p.1061)

The recommendation of Caspi and associates is consistent with findings from a substantial body of research on communication and health campaigns which has established that interventions designed to meet higher needs for *novelty* and *sensation*¹ considerably advance our ability to capture the attention of target individuals likely to engage in health-risk behaviors, enhance information processing, and motivate attitude and behavior change (Donohew, Helm, Lawrence & Shatzer, 1990; Donohew, Lorch & Palmgreen, 1991; Donohew, Palmgreen & Duncan, 1980; Lorch et al., 1994; Palmgreen & Donohew, in press; Palmgreen et al., 1991). This research draws on Zuckerman's work on sensation seeking (see, e.g., Zuckerman, 1979, 1988, 1991, 1994a) which defines it as a trait involving

the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience (1994, p.27).

Sensation seeking plays a crucial role both in susceptibility to drug and alcohol use (e.g., Donohew and associates found use of alcohol to be twice as high among high sensation seekers (HSS) as among low) and in the types of messages and other interventions likely to be attended (1990, 1991, and 1994). HSS are receptive to stimuli that are intense, novel and

¹ According to Bardo, Donohew, and Harrington (1996), the need for novelty and sensation finds biological expression through the mesolimbic dopamine reward pathway, which presumably has evolved because it subserves behaviors that are vital to survival, and particularly because it is posited to be responsible for producing reinforcement (Glickman & Schiff, 1967; Vaccarino, Schiff, & Glickman, 1989). Bardo and associates (Bardo et al., 1993; Bardo & Hammer, 1991; Bardo, Neisewander & Pierce, 1989) have suggested that novelty-seeking and drug-seeking behaviours may involve activation of a common neural substrate (in the mesolimbic dopamine system), supporting the possibility that novel or high sensation stimulation may substitute for drug reward. A number of investigators have found biological connections with novelty and sensation seeking, including levels of the male hormone, testosterone and of monoamine oxidase (MAO-B) the brain-specific enzyme which breaks down dopamine and other neurotransmitters (Zuckerman, 1979, 1988, 1994), and the D4 dopamine receptor gene which was found in work reported recently by teams conducting research at the National Institute of Health and in Israel (Benjamin et al., 1996; Cloninger, Adolfson, & Svrakic, 1996; Ebstein et al., 1996).

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