


Getting it together

Low risks yield low happiness

Time after time, I hear stories of people who are unhappy in their jobs or their marriages. They can't stand their boss. Their wife does not give them enough affection. To an outsider, the solution to their problem seems painfully obvious: "Why don't you just confront your boss?" I feel like saying, or "Why don't you just talk to your wife?" Of course, to the person with the problem, it doesn't seem so simple. They are afraid such a direct approach will make their boss angry.

and it may even cost them their job. They fear their mate may reject them for complaining about the relationship. Rather than risking the painful

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consequences of trying to improve their lives, people too often choose a life of low risk and minimal happiness. Because they're afraid of being temporarily jobless, people shrink from making changes in their jobs that might make them happier. Because they're terrified of a di-

vorce, people often destroy their marriage by not talking to their partners about its flaws. Sometimes, only a severe personal crisis will jar people loose from the low-risk, low-happiness life pattern. How often have you heard of men or women who finally make a drastic change in their lives after a heart attack or a divorce and are now really happy? Too frequently, it takes a trauma to force people to risk real changes. A heart attack reminds the victim of how short life is and how important it is to be happy now, not just later.

ONE OF the most insidious aspects of this low-risk approach to life is that it perpetrates itself. The fewer risks you take, the less you learn how well you can cope with consequences. The loss of a job or a big marital fight is rarely as devastating as people anticipate; but you cannot find that out if you never take the chance. Furthermore, fewer jobs and marriages are lost by people honestly trying to be happy than by those who run from problems and thus allow them to grow so large, that constructive reconciliation is just too difficult.

This self-perpetuating characteristic of the low-risk approach was demonstrated by a classic psychological experiment with dogs. Large boxes were used which had a partition across the middle. On one side of the partition, the floor could be electrified, this delivering a mild but frightening shock. Twenty dogs learned quickly that within 30 seconds after a buzzer was turned on, the floor would electrify and they would be shocked. Without exception, each dog learned quickly to jump the partition when the buzzer sounded and thus to avoid impending shock.

Soon, however, the electric shock was turned off. But the dogs continued to leap over the barrier to safety hundreds of times, every time the buzzer sounded, even though the shock no longer existed.

By some definitions these dogs could be considered to be neurotic. Their compulsive response to the buzzer no longer had a basis in reality. Their avoidance of the imagined shock kept them from finding out that it was no longer there.

In a similar way, human beings anticipate possible painful consequences and avoid them. This is true of all human beings to some extent. It is an essential part of our survival equipment. The problem comes when people over-use avoidance as a coping mechanism. This is the low-risk approach.

THE CURE for the low-risk approach is to build a higher risk-tolerance level. Like building muscles or callouses, this involves repetition and exertion. For the person who is not motivated by the intensity of a crisis such as a divorce, this can be a gradual process. Most simply, it involves taking more and more risks. Developing a risk-taking habit, forced at first, can eventually become a natural inclination.

One specific exercise people have found helpful is "creative blurt-

ing." To blurt means to spit out your thoughts, saying how you feel before you even think about it. At first this may be difficult, especially, if you are a thoughtful speaker, like the man who sucks on his pipe for minutes rehearsing his thoughts and finally speaks in perfect English with carefully chosen words. It means fighting the tendency to censor your thoughts and taking the chance that you will say something stupid or embarrassing.

Questions for Bob Trenz may be sent to the Rochester Observer & Eccentric, 410 N. Main, Rochester, Mich. 48063.

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