

Risking Life and Limb

We let our reputation and good name depend upon the judgement of other men. . . . Merely in order to make them decide in our favour we imperil our peace of mind and way of life in countless ways.

— LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

In February 1836, a small band of Texans converted a Spanish mission in San Antonio into a fort to challenge the armies of Mexican emperor Santa Anna. Although the ensuing engagement was, from a military point of view, an unmitigated disaster, with annihilation of the Alamo's entire force (including folk heroes David Crockett and James Bowie), the battle of the Alamo has held a favored place in American history and lore ever since. One compelling aspect of the story is that the Alamo's defenders knew that they could not fend off Santa Anna indefinitely. Toward the end of the 10-day siege, the Texans recognized that no reinforcements were coming, the Mexicans outnumbered them about 20 to 1, and Santa Anna had declared that it would be a fight to the death. Yet the defenders chose to stay and die even though they probably could have slipped out of the Alamo up until the last day or two.

According to legend, Colonel William Travis explicitly offered his men the opportunity to leave. According to the story, which many historians dispute, Travis drew a line in the dirt with his sword and invited those who wished to defend the Alamo to the death to cross over. All but one of them crossed; even James Bowie, incapacitated by pneumonia, asked to be carried over on a stretcher. Whether or not the line-in-the-dirt episode actually occurred, the point remains that the men stayed in the Alamo even though they had achieved their goal of detaining the Mexican army so that Sam Houston could amass troops elsewhere, most of them were volunteers who had no compelling reason to stay, and they could have abandoned their position and lived to fight another day.

The defenders of the Alamo were clearly willing to die for a cause they regarded as important. Yet one must wonder why they chose to stay at the Alamo beyond the point at which they could achieve no additional good; in fact, it could be argued that nearly 200 men dying in a senseless battle might even reduce the Texans' chances of ultimate success against the Mexicans. So why did they stay?¹

In the frontier culture of the American South and West in the 1800s, images of toughness, strength, and bravery were highly valued.² Within such a culture, men felt compelled to defend their public reputations against suggestions that they were weak or afraid, and each man at the Alamo would have felt implied pressure to fight to the death if he thought it was what his comrades expected him to do. A man who walked away from such a fight would not only find his image irreparably damaged but also would likely find it hard to face himself the next day. The pressure was almost certainly not explicit. It is difficult to imagine the Alamo's defenders prodding one another into staying. ("C'mon, Davy, you ol' yellow-bellied coward. Come on across that line.") Yet the pressure would have been intense nonetheless, particularly if Travis's line-in-the-dirt routine really happened.

The point is not that people risk their lives to defend their principles or pursue important goals; many brave people do that. Nor is the point that people sometimes act braver than they feel; we all do that, as well. And I do not wish to imply that the Alamo's defenders were not fighting for a cause; they clearly felt a deep conviction to stand up to Santa Anna's tyranny. Rather, my point is that the defenders presumably did not really want to wait for the Mexicans to breach the Alamo's walls and viewed their plight as both hopeless and senseless, yet their desire to be seen as brave, or at least not to be seen as cowardly, led them to remain at the Alamo.

As we discussed in chapter 1, one of the self's functions is to allow us to get inside the heads of other people—to imagine what they may be thinking, and particularly to imagine what they may be thinking about us. Indeed, many early analyses of the self (by writers such as William James, Charles Horton Cooley, and George Herbert Mead) stressed this function, and some contemporary theorists also suggest that its primary role is to infer what others might be thinking.³ As we have seen, the capacity to self-reflect is accompanied by the ability to take other people's perspectives. With the benefit of a self, people can think about how other people perceive them and worry about the impressions they make on others. They can also deliberately behave in ways that convey certain im-

pressions of themselves, even when doing so diverges from the truth or has negative consequences. In part, the men in the Alamo stayed to fight because they could imagine how they would be regarded if they fled. Concerns surrounding their egos and public images were so strong that they held sway over self-preservation. Without in any way diminishing the significance of their sacrifice, it seems clear that the Alamo's defenders stayed to fight because their egos prevented them from leaving.

The defenders of the Alamo were by no means unusual in this regard. Virtually everyone has engaged in dangerous, potentially life-threatening behaviors because they thought that doing so might make a desired impression on other people or bolster their ego.⁴ And, often, the ostensible goal of their behavior is far less principled than that of the Texans. In this chapter we examine ways in which the self can lead people to do things that pose risks to their health and well-being, if not their life.

■ Taking Risks to Make a Point

Accidents are the third leading cause of death in the United States; among people under the age of 45, they are the number one killer.⁵ In addition, hundreds of thousands of people are injured each year in accidents that are not fatal. We generally think of accidents as inherently unavoidable (after all, people don't intend to have an accident), but in fact, many so-called accidental injuries and deaths are the direct result of people's deliberately doing dangerous things.

Modern society, like most others throughout history, values boldness. At minimum, most people do not want others to think that they are overly cautious, and often they want to be seen as brave, daring, or risk-taking. As a result, people sometimes do dangerous things for the sole purpose of showing others how brave they are. Of course, in order to convince other people of one's courage, a person must do things that are potentially dangerous, and therein lies the problem.

A few years ago, Kathleen Martin and I surveyed nearly 300 adolescents in the United States and Ireland to find out how many of them admitted taking unnecessary risks in order to impress other people.⁶ Given that we had done such things ourselves, the study's findings were not surprising, though they were nonetheless sobering. For example, approximately 25% of both male and female American respondents indicated that they had driven dangerously in order to make an impression on other people. As one woman wrote: "I was speeding while driving

with friends because one of the people in the car thought I was an up-tight, overly-safe driver. Although I usually don't speed, I went fast to impress them." One wonders, then, about the number of traffic accidents, injuries, and fatalities that are caused solely by people trying to make an impression. Perhaps this is one reason that the likelihood of a teenage driver's having an accident increases with the number of passengers in the car.⁷ The more people in the car, the more reason there is for the driver to speed in order to appear brave, cool, or fun-loving. It is unsettling that the conditions that increase the chance of a self-induced accident also put more people in harm's way.

About a third of the male students in our study also reported doing admittedly stupid stunts simply to make an impression.⁸ They reported a variety of hair-raising tales about jumping from high places (bridges, cliffs, second-story windows, roofs of buildings), hanging out of or riding on the tops of moving cars, juggling knives, eating fire, lighting flatulence, and daredevil acts such as jumping over a car on a bicycle and being pulled down the highway on a skateboard. The incidence of these kinds of stunts may have increased with the popularity of the television show and movie *Jackass*, in which the cast engages in a variety of dangerous stunts such as racing down hills in runaway grocery carts, shooting one another with riot-control beanbags, riding golf carts off ramps, and firing bottle rockets that have been inserted in the anus (facing outward, of course).

Ten percent of the men in our study also said that they had gotten into physical fights solely to look brave or cool in other people's eyes. Many of these men did not really want to fight but thought that their public image would be damaged if they walked away. Interestingly, only 3% of the female respondents reported doing dangerous stunts, and only 2% reported fighting for self-presentational reasons.⁹ Apparently, women's egos and social images are not as linked to this sort of recklessness as are men's.

I recall a *Fair Side* cartoon in which a terrified little dog is shown darting between speeding cars on a busy highway. As he breathlessly reaches his four friends on the other side of the road, one of the other dogs proudly exclaims, "All right! Rusty's in the club!" The cartoon is cute because we know that dogs don't try to impress one another by doing risky things or join clubs that require members to pass dangerous initiation rituals. Human beings, in contrast, are not that smart. Tens of thousands of people are injured and killed each year doing precisely what the dog in the cartoon was doing—taking unnecessary risks to prove themselves to

other people. Fraternities are perhaps the most maligned organizations in which members do dangerous things to impress one another, but in fact, people undergo dangerous hazing in military units, athletic teams, marching bands, religious cults, and even professional groups. Initiation may involve being showered in cold water, beaten with wooden paddles, kept awake for days at a time, or forced to consume large quantities of alcohol. Sometimes the consequences are truly disastrous, as when a student at a Midwestern university was permanently paralyzed from the waist down after jumping into a mud pit on the orders of a more senior group member, or the cases in which initiates have died from alcohol poisoning.¹⁰

Many people wonder why anybody would take such risks simply to join a particular organization, but the issue runs deeper than simply wanting to belong. Often, what is at stake is not simply acceptance by members of the group but one's ego and public image to the world at large. Even if people did not care about being a member of a particular group, they still might consent to dangerous behaviors to show that they are not afraid.

The military particularly prizes courage, and military leaders typically want to be seen as brave. As a result, they sometimes put themselves in unnecessary danger simply to convey the impression of being courageous. For example, during the Southern military barrage during the Battle of Gettysburg, Brigadier General Carl Schurz walked "calmly" up and down the ranks smoking a cigar.¹¹ Some field generals who have employed such risky self-presentations on the front lines were cut down in mid-stride. In a more bizarre demonstration of fearlessness, the pirate Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard, would light candles he had put in his beard.¹² Setting one's beard on fire obviously entails a certain degree of risk, yet Blackbeard did so for its intimidating effect.

Although they usually do not resort to behaviors as extreme as Blackbeard's, most people have taken risks to convey images of themselves as daring, fun-loving, a good sport, or part of the gang. We do things that we would never have done if other people were not present and that, deep down, we know are dangerously foolish.

We would not do these kinds of dangerous things if not for the self. Only because we can imagine how we are seen by other people, anticipate how they will react to our behavior, and think about how we want them to view us do we concern ourselves with making impressions on them. Many other animals have impressive automatic displays to convince other animals of their ferocity (hackles rising on a wolf or cat make

it appear larger, for example) or attractiveness (the display of a peacock), but they do not deliberately manage their impressions in the wide variety of ways that human beings do. And they certainly don't put their safety and lives at risk just to make an impression unless something very important, such as food or a mate, depends on it. Only an animal with the capacity for self-awareness would, as in the case of one nominee for the annual "Darwin Awards," blow his head off to prove to his friends that he wasn't too "chicken" to put a gun in his mouth and pull the trigger.¹³ Whether his friends were impressed is not known.

Risky behaviors decrease with age, probably because behaviors that might be regarded as "cool" for an 18-year-old are viewed as immature and downright irresponsible for a 45-year-old with a job and a family. However, older people are by no means immune to concerns with how they are perceived. Although they are not particularly concerned about fostering an image of being a bold risk-taker, they are often worried about appearing old and infirm. As a result, some older individuals resist using a cane or walker even when they need these devices to navigate safely.¹⁴ When they later injure themselves in a fall, possibly breaking a hip, it would not be an exaggeration to conclude that it was literally a self-inflicted injury.

Throwing Caution to the Wind

Not only do people sometimes do unnecessarily risky things to bolster their egos or public images, but they also resist taking precautions when engaging in otherwise reasonable but potentially dangerous activities. Although most people agree that they should wear helmets when riding bicycles and motorcycles, goggles when using power tools, and mouth guards when playing contact sports, many individuals resist taking these kinds of precautions because they are concerned that other people may perceive them as fearful or overly cautious—as a "wuss," "wimp," or "weenie." (My father preferred the label "cream puff," but this may have been idiosyncratic with him.)

These concerns start at a young age. There are reports of young hockey players wearing modified throat guards that provide little protection for their throats but yet conform to the rules that govern youth hockey, thereby showing that they aren't actually worried about their safety. My 7-year-old son resisted wearing kneepads when he skated around the neighborhood because he was afraid he would look like a "sissy."

After a university chemistry professor told me that his students resisted wearing goggles and other protective gear during chemistry labs because they would look overly cautious and "dorky," we decided to conduct a study to see whether people would, in fact, put themselves at risk simply because they were concerned with others' impressions of them.¹⁵ We conducted a study in which research participants were led to believe that they would be working with potentially hazardous chemicals (under the premise that we were studying communication in industrial work groups). Before working with the chemicals, we gave them the opportunity to don an assortment of protective gear, including goggles, latex gloves, face masks, shoe covers, aprons, and surgeons' scrubs. Participants were told to put on whatever items made them feel comfortable, but that we would not insist that they wear them if they did not wish to do so. To determine whether concerns with others' impressions would result in risky behavior, we also led some participants to believe that the other members of their lab group already perceived them as very cautious individuals, whereas other participants thought that the others saw them as average in cautiousness.

The results of our study showed that male participants who believed that the other group members already perceived them as cautious consented to wear significantly less safety gear than those who thought that others perceived them as average in cautiousness. Thus, men who were concerned with appearing overly cautious were willing to place their safety and health at risk to dispel the unflattering impression that they were wimps. Furthermore, men who valued the image of risk-taker wore significantly fewer safety items than men for whom risk-taker was not an important image to cultivate. Given that participants in our study were willing to place themselves at risk to convey an impression of riskiness to complete strangers despite any explicit pressure to do so, one can only imagine the extent to which people do dangerous things in everyday life when the social pressures are more intense.

Female participants in our study wore the same amount of safety gear whether or not they thought other group members viewed them as excessively cautious. The fact that the effect was obtained for men but not for women again attests to the fact that being perceived as a risk-taker is more important to men's social images than women's. People are willing to put their well-being at risk only to the extent that they believe that the conveyed impression is valued by others. As I will explore in a moment,

however, women also engage in unnecessarily dangerous behaviors, but they tend to take risks that will make impressions that are culturally valued for women—such as starving themselves to maintain an unrealistically low body weight.

Unsafe Sex

Even with widespread education about AIDS and the push toward safe sex in the past 20 years, a high percentage of sexually active Americans still do not use condoms regularly. If they did, we wouldn't see 1 million teenage girls becoming pregnant each year, and sexually transmitted diseases wouldn't be as rampant as they are. Health educators often suppose that the problem is primarily educational—that people simply don't understand that unprotected sexual intercourse is dangerous or that its risks can be reduced by practicing safe sex. Yet a large percentage of people who don't use condoms certainly know how STDs are transmitted and have heard about condoms, but they nonetheless continue to have unprotected sex with new partners. Why?

As with any complex behavior, unsafe sex results from many factors. One that is relevant to the curse of the self involves the fact that some people are worried that their sexual partner will think badly of them if they request or introduce a condom in a sexual encounter. In the survey of first-semester freshmen that Kathleen Martin and I conducted, 8% of the respondents said they had engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse because they wanted to be seen as cool, laid back, risk-taking, fun, or mature.¹⁶ One woman wrote: "Twice in the last three months I had sex without using a condom. I met this guy and thought I liked him a lot. He knew I was on the pill, so he told me it was ok. When I said I didn't want to get any diseases, he just said, 'Don't worry.' I didn't want to come across in a way to make him not like me, so I gave in."

Some respondents reported that they had unprotected sex even though they had a condom with them at the time! Women reported that they hadn't mentioned the condom because they were worried that the man would think that they were promiscuous or "slutty." ("What kind of a woman carries condoms with her?" one asked.) Men said that they sometimes didn't mention the condom in their wallet because they did not want the woman to think that they had come prepared for or expecting to have sex. Most frighteningly, two research studies found that people who tested positive for HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) sometimes

failed to insist on using a condom because they were afraid that their insistence might "give them away" to a new partner!

Intrigued with the idea that people may do blatantly unhealthy things so as not to appear overly cautious or prudish, we started thinking of ways to examine this phenomenon in a controlled laboratory setting. Assuming that the university's ethics approval committee would not allow participants to have unprotected sex in our lab, we devised a somewhat more ethical analogue. After considering several unsanitary, potentially unhealthy behaviors that participants might do in the service of their self, we settled on the behavior of drinking out of a stranger's water bottle. Most people view drinking after strangers as unsanitary, if not downright "gross." Not only do we not know what kinds of diseases the person might have (meningitis can be contracted by sharing drinks, for example), but there's always the potential for "backwash." Drinking after a stranger is something most people would prefer not to do. But would they do it to avoid being seen as uptight, cautious, or prudish?

To find out, we had participants arrive in our lab along with an experimental accomplice who pretended to be another participant.¹⁷ Believing the study was investigating the relationship between personality and taste perception, the participant and accomplice were first shown the participant's scores on a personality test he or she had completed earlier. Two bogus personality profiles were created. Participants in the high-image concern condition were shown a profile that indicated that they were average on most personality dimensions but had scored high on "cautiousness, neuroticism, and obsessiveness." A statement at the bottom of the profile indicated that a high score "is consistent with a personality profile of individuals who avoid risky situations and decisions and tend to worry unnecessarily over small concerns." In contrast, participants in the low-image concern condition received a profile showing that they scored average on all personality dimensions, including cautiousness. Thus, as in our earlier study of people's willingness to wear safety gear while working with dangerous chemicals, some participants in this study believed that the other individual thought that they were very cautious, if not neurotic.

After seeing their (bogus) personality profile, participants engaged in a taste test while observed by the accomplice. The purpose of the taste test was simply to lead participants to want a drink of water. We mixed up some foul-tasting concoctions, such as a mixture of soy sauce, mustard, and concentrated unsweetened Kool-Aid. After the participant had tasted and rated these nasty flavors, the researcher apologized for not

having water available for participants to wash out their mouths. On this cue, the accomplice pulled a half-empty bottle of water out of his backpack and offered it to the participant. For half of the participants, he simply said, "that stuff must have tasted pretty nasty. Do you want a drink of my water?" For the other half, his offer was followed by a somewhat challenging statement: "... if you're not worried about drinking out of the same bottle as me." We believed that this challenge would make participants even more concerned with not appearing cautious, perhaps increasing their willingness to drink from his bottle to show that they weren't actually squeamish after all.

The results of this experiment showed that participants were more likely to accept the accomplice's offer to drink from his half-empty bottle when they thought that he already saw them as cautious and the accomplice implied that they were afraid of drinking after him. Not only were these participants more likely to take a drink from his bottle, but they actually drank a larger amount. (You need not be concerned about sanitation; all participants actually received a clean bottle half-filled with purified water.)

The dynamics of this study are admittedly not completely analogous to having unprotected sexual intercourse. The health risks of drinking after a stranger are obviously lower than those of having unprotected sex with a new partner. So perhaps it is not surprising that participants who were worried about their image were willing to drink after the stranger. At the same time, however, the participants in our study had no good reason to impress the accomplice. He was not in a position to affect their lives, and they did not anticipate ever interacting with him again. In real-world sexual encounters, the stakes may be much higher as people want to be liked and, often, to pursue a relationship beyond the immediate situation. Perhaps, then, we would see even more risky behavior in real life than in the artificial confines of the social psychological laboratory. Whether or not the study's findings generalize directly to real life, they demonstrate that people are willing to do unsanitary, even unhealthy things when they are worried about other people's impressions of them.

Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs

If you have used alcohol, tobacco, or illegal drugs, chances are that you did not simply wake up one morning and think to yourself, "I'd like a shot of tequila" or "I wonder where I could find a cigarette?" or "I think

"I'll smoke my first joint today." Most people do not have their first experience with cigarettes, alcohol, or other drugs by themselves but rather in a social setting that involves one or more other people. We sometimes hear about people, particularly teenagers, succumbing to "peer pressure," but explicit pressure from others is typically not involved. Instead, people go along with other people who are smoking, drinking, or using drugs because doing so has clear social benefits and they are concerned that refusing to join in the action might have social liabilities. You certainly would not have drank, smoked, or taken the drug if you thought that every other person present would have hated and rejected you for doing so!

Most people have their first experiences with cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs quite willingly, but underlying their behavior is the desire to be seen as someone who goes along, who fits in. In our research, many respondents indicated that they had used these substances because they wanted to look laid-back, easygoing, or fun-loving. Others said that they did it just to show that they did not object to cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs (presumably not to appear prudish or a goody-goody), or to look mature. Overall, just over half of both male and female respondents indicated that they sometimes drank alcohol for no other reason than to make an impression on others. Similarly, about 25% said that they had smoked cigarettes just to make an impression, and about 10% indicated that they had used drugs for self-presentational reasons (women more than men).¹⁸ Keep in mind that these figures do not reflect the number of college students who said that they had used alcohol, cigarettes, or other drugs but, rather, the percent who explicitly reported that they had done so simply to make an impression on other people.

Not only can a concern with others' impressions lead people to start smoking, but it can also interfere with smokers' willingness to break the habit. Stopping smoking is, of course, quite difficult, and people fail for many reasons. However, some people do not even try to quit smoking because they are afraid of gaining weight.¹⁹ Their concern is not entirely misplaced. Research shows that smokers tend to gain between 4.5 and 8 pounds when they stop smoking, although most of them eventually lose most of the weight that they gain.²⁰ Even so, the fact that potential weight gain deters many people from breaking the habit shows us how they weigh the pros and cons in their minds. Essentially, people decide that they are willing to risk heart disease, emphysema, and lung cancer in order to avoid gaining a few extra pounds and perhaps making a less desirable social impression. Of course, people don't think through the consequences of smoking this explicitly, yet this is the choice they make.

■ Enhancing Physical Appearance

Most people think a lot about how other people see them and try to make themselves physically attractive, or at least not unattractive, to others. We devote time and effort each day to making ourselves presentable to other people, and we spend a good deal of money on products, services, and procedures intended to improve our appearance. We may bemoan the emphasis that people place on attractiveness—beauty is only skin deep, right?—yet we cannot escape the fact that our physical appearance influences how other people perceive and react to us and, thus, our social, romantic, and occupational outcomes in life. In light of this, it is not surprising that people think about their appearance and try to make themselves as attractive as they can (however attractiveness is defined within their social groups). What is surprising, however, is the fact that people sometimes risk their health and well-being in order to be attractive.²¹

In Search of the Perfect Tan

The incidence of skin cancer among whites in the United States has at least tripled since 1960; some experts say that it has quadrupled. The increase is due to many things. Compared to the middle of the 20th century, more people now live and vacation in southern latitudes, tanning salons have become more common, clothing styles reveal more skin, and the depletion of the ozone layer has compromised the earth's natural protection from ultraviolet (UV) radiation.²² Although these reasons are all true, the predominant reason that more people get skin cancer is that they purposefully expose themselves to UV radiation in order to get a tan without protecting their skin adequately.

During the 19th century, fair skin was prized because the aristocrats and professionals who worked indoors had pale skin, whereas farmers and other manual laborers were deeply tanned from spending long days working in the sun. However, when the industrial revolution moved much of the working class into factories and only professional people had the money and leisure time to vacation in sunny places, suntans became associated with wealth and status.²³ For many years, no one recognized the health risks of excessive exposure to the sun, but with mounting evidence, the word got out that tanning can give you cancer. Unfortunately, the warnings did relatively little to deter many people from seeking the perfect tan.

Like the other unhealthy behaviors discussed in this chapter, tanning stems from our ability to imagine ourselves through other people's eyes. If people could not imagine how others saw them, they would not go out of their way to be tanned. Indeed, my own research shows that the strongest predictors of how much people work on being tan involves the degree to which they are motivated to be attractive and believe that having a tan enhances their attractiveness to other people. Despite warnings against getting too much sun, the desire to be attractive may override rational concerns with health. Skin cancer is a disease that many people give themselves.

Given that tanning is linked to the desire to be attractive, we wondered whether people might be dissuaded from excessive tanning if they were warned about the negative effects of tanning on their appearance. To answer this question, Jody Jones and I asked university students to read one of three essays about tanning.²⁴ One essay stressed the health risks associated with excessive exposure to the sun (particularly skin cancer), a second essay stressed the negative effects of the sun on physical appearance (such as wrinkling, premature aging, and scarring), and the third essay simply described the process by which tanning occurs without mentioning any hazards. After reading one of these essays, the participants completed a questionnaire about their attitudes toward tanning and their tanning plans for the coming summer.

Overall, the essay that described the negative effects of tanning on appearance led to the most unfavorable attitudes toward tanning and to the strongest intentions to use sunscreen in the future. Essentially, participants seemed more concerned that the sun might make them look bad than that it might give them cancer! Surprisingly, however, the essay that dealt with the effects of tanning on appearance was least effective for participants who were most concerned about their appearance. Participants who were invested in being attractive appeared to dismiss the notion that tanning might ultimately make them look worse.

Some people seem to be obsessed by tanning. These tan-insatiable individuals are as brown as they are ever going to get, yet they keep working on their tans. To study these tan-insatiable people, researchers approached individuals who were sitting in the sun at parks and swimming pools and gave them a short survey.²⁵ The survey included questions about their tanning attitudes and behavior, sunscreen use, and the importance they placed on looking good, as well as a brief measure of obsessive tendencies. Results showed that the belief that being tanned improves one's appearance, paired with a tendency toward being obses-

sive-compulsive, is associated with tan insatiability. Apparently, people who believe that tanning helps them make a better impression on others and who cannot stop thinking (i.e., obsessing) about how they are being perceived are most likely to overtan. Again, this pattern implicates the self because obsessive people have difficulty not talking to themselves about the object of their obsession, in this case a tan.

The Quest to Be Thin

Given that the American prototype of an attractive person tends to be one who is reasonably fit and trim, people understandably think that they will make a better impression on others by working on their weight and physique. In many ways, this interest in watching one's weight is beneficial. I suspect that Americans would quickly become more even more overweight than they already are if everyone suddenly became unconcerned about what he or she looked like. Here, then, is a case in which the ability to self-reflect promotes our health and well-being. Even so, it can also lead to behaviors that are decidedly unhealthy.

Although some people need to lose weight for medical reasons, research suggests that over half of the people who are on a diet at any given time have no health-related reason to watch their weight, but rather are dieting solely in an effort to look better. In other words, most dieting is driven by efforts to look good rather than to be healthy.²⁶ In fact, dieting may lead to overly unhealthy behaviors. At minimum, unnecessary dieting may lead to mild malnourishment. People who diet unnecessarily don't eat quite enough to keep their bodies functioning optimally, and they end up with less energy and lower resistance to disease than they otherwise would have.

But the problems can be more serious. Many people resort to dangerous diet regimens, diet aids, and yo-yo dieting. They try diets that, that despite helping them lose weight, do not provide adequate nutrition and may upset critical balances in the body. They may also use untested dietary supplements and diet suppressors, or go on and off diets as their weight goes up and down in a dangerous yo-yo pattern.²⁷

Even more seriously, excessive weight loss can be life-threatening, as in the case of eating disorders. Although many causes of anorexia and bulimia do not involve self-generated concerns with making good impressions on other people, research suggests that a very high percentage of women with eating disorders are excessively—or, more accurately, obsessively—concerned with their appearance and others' impressions

of them.²⁸ Women with eating disorders have great difficulty stopping their internal self-talk about weight, appearance, and food. We do not see other animals starving themselves to make an impression because they do not self-reflect about their weight and others' impressions of them.

Overexercise and Underexercise

People also think they can improve their appearance through physical exercise. Like maintaining a healthy weight, physical exercise is obviously healthful as long as it isn't taken too far. Unfortunately, the self-motivated effort to maintain a positive social image leads some people to exercise too often, too long, or too hard. In our own research, 10% of the men and 30% of the women admitted that they had overexercised because they wanted to make a good impression. Some people overexercise to reap the benefits of appearing trim, fit, or strong.²⁹ Other people overexercise because of the positive social benefits of being seen exercising.

Runners, for example, will run faster and longer than they feel comfortable to them when they run with other people. Thus, they may push themselves too hard because they do not want to appear unable to keep up with the others. One study showed that runners who were jogging in a park ran faster when people along the running path were watching them than when they thought they were alone.³⁰ Similarly, male weight-lifters often lift more weight than they should when other people are watching. In one of our studies, 27% of the men admitted that they had lifted too much weight explicitly to make an impression.³¹ As one male respondent told me, "I was lifting free weights with my friends, and I purposefully tried to lift more weight than I usually do, and I also did more repetitions to prove that I was stronger than my friends. I paid for it the next day, though." Another man reported lifting too much weight to impress the women's aerobics class when it walked through the weight room. It's not clear whether the women even noticed him struggling with the weights, but he certainly noticed his strained back when he tried to get out of bed the next morning. Such efforts to wow other people with one's strength can result in pulled muscles, strained backs, neck problems, and even stress fractures. Only about 3% of the women in our sample reported overlifting to make an impression, presumably because they do not believe that lifting excessively heavy things will improve other people's perceptions of them.

Many people need to exercise and even want to exercise, yet they do not do so because of how they think they look to other people while

exercising. People who think they look fat, scrawny, misproportioned, or unfit may worry about others seeing them exercise or even being seen in certain kinds of exercise clothing. As a result, they are reluctant to be seen bouncing around an aerobics class, swimming at the local pool, jogging in a public place, or lifting weights among the jocks.³² Their self-created concerns may deter them from healthful and enjoyable activities.

■ Fleeing the Curse of the Self

We have seen that people create a great deal of their own distress by ruminating over the past and worrying about the future (chapter 4). Most of the emotions that we create for ourselves are unpleasant, and people understandably want to get rid of them as quickly as possible. People usually prefer to change the situation that is causing their distress, but when they can't change the situation, they may simply try to escape the bad feeling itself. Given that self-talk maintains these unpleasant emotions, one solution is to quiet the self. No self-thought, no emotion, no problem.

Psychologist Roy Baumeister has conducted a fascinating investigation into the ways that people escape the burden of selfhood, which he describes in his book *Escaping the Self*.³³ Some of these strategies are used by nearly everyone. People who want to escape the aversiveness of self-reflection may watch mindless television, listen to music, read, exercise, shop, sleep, meditate, or have sex. Assuming that the person is not so self-absorbed that escaping the self is impossible (for example, when one is grieving), these diversions can decrease self-thought by focusing one's attention on other things. Some of the pleasure of these sorts of activities comes from their ability to quiet the self.

Sometimes, though, people take more extreme steps to quiet or escape the self. Part of the appeal of thrill-seeking experiences is to escape the self's reprimandations. When people are bungee-jumping, riding on a roller coaster, skydiving, or rock-climbing, so much of their attention is usurped by the immediate situation that no cognitive resources are available to allow them to think about the past or the future. Of course, some people find such experiences so terrifying that the self is locked in obsession about the present ("I'm terrified to jump out of this plane"), but even that kind of temporary gut-wrenching fear is sometimes preferable to distressing, chronic self-talk about one's personal shortcomings, failures, occupational stresses, relational problems, and otherwise miserable life.

Most mundane efforts to escape the self, even those that entail a certain amount of calculated risk, are often beneficial. Given that human beings are saddled with a mind that talks to them more than necessary and inflicts upon them a great deal of unnecessary unhappiness, they need a way to shut it off from time to time. Unremitting self-reflection is unpleasant, stressful, and exhausting. If the self had an on-off switch that allowed people to turn their self-reflection off when it became unruly and back on again when it was needed, they would not need to seek behavioral ways to escape the self. But, given that no one has yet discovered such a switch, it is probably good that people have figured out ways to diminish their self-reflection from time to time. Without these self-escapes, many people would be even more unhappy, stressed out, and desperate than they already are. Even so, some self-escaping tactics can create as many problems as they solve.

Losing the Self in Alcohol

People often drink alcohol in order to relax, such as at the end of a stressful day at work or at a party where they feel awkward and uncomfortable. The relaxing effects of alcohol derive from at least two processes. First, alcohol has a direct depressive effect on the central nervous system, lowering physiological arousal and relaxing the muscles. These direct effects do not require mediation by a self; even rats will become relaxed, if not intoxicated, after ingesting alcohol.

More important for our purposes, alcohol also interferes with the cognitive processes that are involved in self-reflection. This should not be surprising given all of the obvious ways in which alcohol impairs thinking, judgment, and memory. Even so, the self-muting effects of alcohol help to account for why people try to "drown their problems" in alcohol. Clearly, the problems have not really gone away (much less "drowned"), yet they don't often seem as imposing because alcohol renders the person less capable of thinking about them.

In two experiments, Jay Hull and his colleagues demonstrated that alcohol consumption can lower self-awareness.³⁴ In these studies, participants consumed either alcohol or tonic water, all of them believing that they were drinking a mixture of vodka and tonic. (A squirt of lime juice in each drink made it impossible for participants to distinguish the alcoholic from the nonalcoholic drinks.) After allowing time for the alcohol to be absorbed into the bloodstream, participants gave a three-minute speech in "What I like and dislike about my body and physical appearance."

Although participants in both conditions spoke **approximately** the same number of words, analysis of their speeches revealed **that** participants who had consumed alcohol used a lower proportion of **sentences** that referred specifically to themselves, as well as a smaller **number of first-person pronouns** (*I, me, mine*) than participants who drank **only** tonic water. The researchers interpreted the effect of alcohol on first-person pronouns as indicating that the alcohol had diminished participants' **self-awareness**. Importantly, this effect was not due to participants' **expectancies** regarding which beverage they had consumed, thus **eliminating the possibility** that it was due to a placebo effect.

In another study, male social drinkers were given bogus feedback indicating that they had performed either very well or very poorly on an intelligence test; in reality, the scores they received were unrelated to their actual intelligence. Then, under the guise of a **second study**, the participants were allowed to drink as much of **several varieties of wine** as they desired as they rated the taste of each one. **Men who were generally high** in their tendency to think about themselves (those who scored high on a measure of dispositional self-consciousness) **drank significantly more wine** when they had received failure feedback than when they had received success feedback on the intelligence test. Presumably, they drank more wine to quiet their recriminating self-thoughts after failure. In contrast, men who generally did not think much about themselves to begin with (those who scored low in dispositional self-consciousness) did not drink more wine after failure than they did after success. Given that they were not prone to self-ruminate anyway, they did not need to lower their self-awareness through alcohol after doing poorly on the test.³⁵

So, we know that alcohol can lower self-awareness and that people sometimes use alcohol to mute their self. Could this process account for some cases of alcoholism? Might some alcoholics become addicted to alcohol because it helps them turn down the volume of their inner self-talk? To find out, researchers studied men who had recently completed an alcohol detoxification program.³⁶ The researchers reasoned that, if people drink alcohol to reduce self-awareness after stressful events (such as failure), recovering alcoholics who experienced stressful life events should relapse at a higher rate than those with fewer stressful events. Furthermore, this effect should be particularly pronounced for alcoholics who are prone to self-reflect a great deal because they are the ones who should most wish to escape self-related thinking after stress or failure.

Three months after completing the detoxification program, 70% of the highly self-conscious men who had experienced predominantly neg-

ative life events had relapsed, compared to only 14% of those who had experienced primarily positive events. Thus, among men who were high in the dispositional tendency to be self-conscious, negative events were associated with relapse. Furthermore, men who scored low in self-consciousness did not relapse at different rates depending on whether they had experienced positive or negative events. About 40% of these men started drinking again regardless of whether their lives following treatment for alcoholism were positive or negative. These studies suggest that alcohol treatment programs should include a component that helps alcoholics learn to control their self-chatter. People may learn to substitute other, less destructive ways of quieting the self for the bottle, or could be taught practices such as meditation that help to reduce self-reflection.

Although studies have shown that people may not think about themselves as much or as deeply after they have ingested alcohol, sometimes the opposite effect occurs. Rather than allowing them to escape the self, alcohol may bring the curse of the self upon them with full force. Drinking alcohol sometimes locks people into an unpleasant state of self-focus, magnifying their problems in their minds and leading them to wallow in self-pity. In these instances, alcohol can increase depression, self-recrimination, and feelings of despair.

How can we explain the fact that alcohol can have both of these effects, sometimes turning the self down (if not completely off) and sometimes turning it up full blast? Current thinking suggests that alcohol produces a cognitive narrowing of attention in which people's awareness becomes focused primarily on whatever is most salient to them, and other things are more or less ignored. When intoxicated, people cannot spread their attention around as easily as when they are sober and instead focus on only a small number of things. This effect, which is called *alcohol myopia*, can produce quite different effects depending on the person's psychological state.³⁷ If the inebriated person is focused on an interesting conversation, lively party, or loud concert, for example, troubling self-thoughts may be reduced. But if the person is drinking alone after a recent romantic breakup or other personal setback, alcohol myopia may lead to excessive self-focus. When people who are depressed or dejected drink alone, they often dwell excessively on their difficulties and end up "crying in their beer." My guess is that when people drink to escape the self, they generally expect that drinking will make them feel better. Sometimes, though, they are already so focused on themselves that alcohol myopia takes them more deeply inward, turns up the self-chatter, and makes them feel worse.

Beat Me, Hurt Me, Help Me Lose My Self

Masochism has been a puzzle to psychologists and lay people alike because it goes so strongly against the general tendency for people to avoid pain. Most of us cannot easily understand why anyone would want other people to hurt or humiliate them.

Roy Baumeister, who conducted one of the few scientific studies of masochists, concluded that masochism is, at its heart, a way of escaping the self.³⁸ Pain is perhaps the most effective way to eliminate abstract thoughts about oneself. When people are in physical pain, their attention is rooted to the physical sensations and, perhaps, to thoughts of how to make the discomfort end. But people in pain are not likely to ponder their shortcomings, failures, worries, regrets, or self-worth. As pain increases, people find it increasingly difficult to engage in abstract self-thought, focusing them instead on the concrete here and now.

Masochists are not the gluttons for punishment that many people imagine. Rather, they generally seek mild pain, accompanied by humiliation and control at the hands of another person, but they are typically very careful to avoid severe pain and injury. They select their partners carefully and typically have agreed-upon signals by which to indicate if the pain becomes too severe. Masochists don't want to experience excruciating pain, just enough discomfort to keep their attention on the pain and off abstract thoughts about themselves.

Rather than being psychologically maladjusted, masochists tend to be surprisingly normal people. In fact, Baumeister reported that masochism appears to occur most frequently among those who are successful and well-to-do.³⁹ This fact makes sense if masochism reflects an effort to escape the stress and aversiveness of self-reflection. People with the highest status and power often need to escape the burdens of the self because they are chronically overwhelmed by their authority and responsibility.

The Ultimate Escape

Like masochism, suicide is a puzzle to many people. Given the exceptionally strong motive to survive that we observe in all animals, why would a person try to take his or her own life? And, why are human beings the only animals that purposefully kill themselves? Other animals may sacrifice themselves to protect their young, and lemmings are known to follow one another into the sea, but these behaviors do not resemble the

desperate actions of a suicidal person. Only human beings purposefully kill themselves for no other reason than to end their life.

Baumeister suggests that people who attempt suicide are not trying to kill themselves as much as they are trying to escape painful thoughts and feelings about themselves and their lives.⁴⁰ A person in the throes of despair who is contemplating suicide would presumably settle happily for a pill that eliminated self-awareness over the final act of killing him- or herself. Other animals do not kill themselves because they are not pestered by the distressing self-thoughts and feelings of existential hopelessness that plague many human beings.

Attempting suicide can provide a means of escaping the curse of the self in two ways. Most obviously, a person who successfully kills him- or herself has effectively solved the problem of a rampaging self that is inflicting intolerable misery. However, even when a suicide attempt is unsuccessful (as they usually are), the simple act of trying to kill oneself may help the person to escape the self for a while. As Baumeister observed, "An unsuccessful attempt at suicide may be a successful attempt at escape."⁴¹ Simply thinking about and planning a suicide may reduce aversive self-awareness even if the person is not ultimately successful at killing him- or herself.

Thinking about killing oneself produces a state of concrete thinking that minimizes the sort of abstract self-thoughts that create despair. When people are thinking about suicide, they think in rigid, narrow, and concrete ways. As they plan their death, they focus intently on mundane details of the act. Because concentrating on plans for the suicide mutes higher level thoughts about the past and the future, people often achieve a feeling of emptiness, numbness, or even peace. People who have attempted suicide often report experiencing a sense of detachment or release as they made their plans, which was a vast improvement over the despair that prompted them to consider suicide in the first place.⁴²

The Paradox of the Self

As we discussed earlier, human beings' capacity for self-reflection presumably evolved because it conferred a distinct advantage in the struggle to survive and reproduce. Paradoxically, the same mental process that enhanced our prehistoric ancestors' reproductive success is also responsible for many of the most dangerous and destructive behaviors in which people engage. The same self-mechanism that allows people to see

into the future in order to anticipate the negative consequences of their behavior ("Perhaps I shouldn't eat the rotten food with the slimy green mold growing on it") also prompts them to do potentially disastrous and self-destructive things in spite of those consequences ("but my friends will think I'm cool if I eat it").

How can the self be so reasonable and helpful yet so foolish and dangerous at the same time? As we have seen, the human self evolved under conditions that were far different than those in which people live today.⁴³ It is quite plausible that the environmental and social conditions of prehistoric Africa did not offer many opportunities for people to use their ability to self-reflect in ways that were harmful to themselves. For example, people who lived their entire lives within a single clan may have had little reason to impress other clan members in dangerous and arbitrary ways. In contrast, people in modern societies regularly change social groups and must reestablish their social identity each time. Furthermore, as we mentioned in chapter 4, prehistoric people living in an immediate-return environment were probably less troubled by self-reflection than are people today. With little reason to look more than a couple of days ahead, our prehistoric ancestors did not worry much about their distal futures.⁴⁴ As a result, they would have had less of a need to escape aversive self-thought through dangerous activities. Perhaps the selves of prehistoric people were more of an unmitigated blessing and less of a curse than the selves of people today.