



Chapter 1

Risk Taking: Life on the Edge

I'm only 18 and I been through shit that grown men haven't even seen. I've been locked up, I've been shot at-I done some crazy-ass shit. I'm lucky to still be alive, breathin' and eatin'.

Donald, 18 years old

I remember the first time I was arrested. I was drivin' around in a stolen car with my girls. We was just chillin' and smokin' some weed. One of the girls decided to drive to New Hampshire and I didn't give a shit because I was just like, "whatever." But once we got onto the highway, we got lost and scared because we were high and didn't know what to do. Then a cop pulled us over and arrested us 'cause he found out that the car was stolen.

When they locked us up they took off my clothes to see if I had any drugs, and then they took our fingerprints and count our tattoos and I didn't like them touchin' me and doin' all that stuff to my body. It was no fun at all. And when my brother and father came to get me, I was cryin' and ashamed. They didn't even speak to me, they was so mad. While we was high and crusin' it seemed good, but I ain't never want to be locked up like that again.

Jennifer, 17 years old

High-Risk Behavior

Chances are that if you are reading this book, you have already been involved in some high-risk behaviors. Just so that we are all speaking the same language, let us lay out what we mean by high-risk behaviors.

Negative High-Risk Behaviors are activities that will probably mess you up at some point. Maybe the harm won't come the first time you try it, but over time, watch out. The danger could be *physical harm*, like hurting yourself with a weapon or drugs, getting sick from unprotected sex, getting hit by a car or getting into a fight and winding up in the hospital, getting killed or killing someone else. The harm could also be *suffering consequences* for your actions, like losing your freedom by going to jail, getting an arrest record, being suspended from school, or feeling like your life is going nowhere.

Other High-Risk Behaviors

There are other types of risky behavior that could possibly be dangerous, but they are meant for sport or recreation. They give you a *rush*, a *thrill* or a *high*, but they are not considered illegal, criminal, or antisocial (things that violate the rights of others). Think about skateboarding, motorcycle riding, skydiving, and rock climbing. These things are not what we are talking about when we say high-risk behavior.

You might be doing some pretty high-risk behaviors that seem totally ordinary and normal to you. Take a minute and look at this list. If you disagree about some of the things we put down, check it out with someone else. See what they think. Think about what the consequences of these activities might be. *Remember, it is the possible consequences that make these things high risk.*

High-Risk Activities	Consequences to You
Stealing →	
Drinking or Drugging →	
Unprotected Sex →	
Carrying a Weapon →	
Driving with no License →	
Ignoring Curfew →	
Dealing Drugs →	
Fighting →	
Hitchhiking →	
Driving While Drunk or High →	
Messing Around with Someone Else's Boyfriend/Girlfriend →	
Resisting Arrest →	
Having Sex as Part of a Gang Initiation →	
Gang Banging →	

What's in It for Me When I Take a Risk?

Why do people choose to live risky lives? Well, let's be honest. You take a risk because you *get something out of it*. High-risk behavior can feel like a drug. You get a rush or a thrill, you come down, and you look for the feeling again.

What kinds of feelings does risk-taking give you? We have heard kids say that risk-taking gives them **a feeling of being alive, a sense of power and control, feelings of being on top of the world**. Other kids say that it is a way **to express yourself, a way to belong to a group, to feel large, an opportunity to be heard and to not be ignored, a chance to not be a loser**. Ask yourself if any of these things are true for you.

Sometimes life can beat us down. We know we are young, but we feel old, tired, and hopeless. Things get so bad at home and school that we try to cut off from the negative feelings those places bring on. It's like a part of us dies. We become walking zombies. When we take a risk, it feels like a spark is lit inside of us. We feel alive again, even if it's only for a little while. We *think* we get in touch with our real selves. We might feel like we're ruling the world. Then when we get the negative consequences for the actions, we go back into the dead zone. We cut off again. We go back to being zombies. So, we start to crave more and more risk so that we feel alive and connected. The problem is that we get sucked into the cycle of risky behavior.

The Cycle of Risk Taking— What Goes Up Must Come Down



Risk taking can cause us to experience many emotions depending on the type of risk we are taking and where in the risk-taking cycle we are.

Robert started stealing when he was about 12 years old. Mostly it was clothing, sneakers, and CDs. But then he got into stealing cars—for a bigger rush. He and his friends would scope out cars in the neighborhood that were easy to hot-wire. Late at night they would break in and cruise around. They would pick up friends who were impressed that they "had the balls" to steal cars. While they were driving around they felt pumped up. A couple of times Robert got caught. Then he didn't feel so high or large. His mother would get really upset because he broke the law again. She was sick of bailing him out and having to go to family court. Then Robert would feel like he let himself down and hurt his mother. He felt bad about himself. He'd wonder what was wrong with him. Then he'd feel himself shutting down and tuning out so he didn't have to listen to his mother make him feel guilty and stupid. Pretty soon, he wanted to take another risk to escape again.



Once you are aware of these triggers, you stop being a high-risk robot. You are . . . **FREE TO CHOOSE.**

Notice how the feelings at the beginning of the cycle and at the end are a lot alike: mostly negative. This is what keeps the cycle going.

Your Risk-Taking History

I been into so-called "high-risk" behavior since I can remember. When I was real little I started sneakin' money outta my mom's purse for candy and shit like that. After a while I would steal from stores if I didn't have the cash for what I

wanted. By the time I was 13, I was back wild and I'd be holdin' people up for their cash or jewelry. Now I'm serving a sentence for being an accomplice in an armed robbery. Sometimes at night when I'm sittin' in my cell, I think, "How did I get here?" But when I look back to all the shit I done and startin' so young and all, I get my answer.

Doug, 18 years old

Some of you might have been involved in high-risk behaviors for a long time. Maybe you started by taking small risks like jumping subway turnstiles or sneaking into the movies. However, as time went on and these things stopped giving you the same kind of high, maybe you moved on to more serious things. Maybe you got slicker and better at pulling things off and the stakes got higher.



Stop and Think: When you look at where you are now, do you see a pattern of high-risk behavior? If you're in trouble with the law now, is this the first time that you have been arrested? Were there other crimes that you didn't get caught for? Is your risk taking getting bigger as time goes on?

High-Risk Sex: Are You Having It?

High-risk sexual behaviors are sexual acts that put you or others in danger. They can include a lot of things such as "forgetting" to use condoms, using drugs to make the sex feel more intense, having many partners, or having

sex for money. High-risk sex can also include forcing a person to have sex against their will or coming on to them when they are too drunk or high to make a real decision.



Stop and Think: When you look at your own sexual behavior, do you see more healthy or high-risk sex? How well do you get to know a person before you get involved sexually? Are you more willing to become sexually intimate than emotionally intimate? Do you have a habit of using sex to avoid painful or negative feelings?



Invincibility—Playing with a Loaded Gun

Part of the thrill or high you get from risk comes from the possibility that you might get caught. But another part says that there's no way you'll get busted. Maybe you think you're too smart or good at talking your way out of things. A small voice says, "It'll never happen to me." When you feel like your high-risk choices, decisions, and actions can't hurt you, it's called feeling **invincible**.

Believing you're invincible can make you feel powerful, tough, slick, large, and free from the rules that apply to other people. It can also limit your ability to see things for how they really are. When you're in the rush of a risk, you feel invincible and untouchable. You feel a false power. But that rush goes away fast. All of a sudden, you find yourself left with the consequences of your actions, whether or not you actually get caught. And if you do get caught, you begin to lose many of your choices, your power, and your control.

Feeling invincible does not mean that you actually are invincible. It is an illusion. It's not the way things really are. Feeling invincible tricks you into doing things that bring on more trouble. Invincibility doesn't last long. When the smoke clears, the high of invincibility vanishes, too. Ask yourself, Did I feel invincible after I got caught?

Getting the **Screw-It** Attitude

If you go around the high-risk circle enough times, you might develop a Screw-It attitude. It goes like this. "I'm so screwed now, it doesn't matter what I do. Since I'm in so much trouble anyway, I'm gonna do whatever I want to do. It can't get any worse or they can't give me anymore punishment than I already have...so screw it."

We've all been there. But here's the problem. *This kind of thinking gives away more of your power, self-respect, and dignity. No matter how deep you're in trouble, you always have the choice to change your behavior.* You will still probably have to serve the consequences for past high-risk behavior, but losing the "screw-it" attitude can get you out of the high-risk-taking cycle.

Take a deep breath and remind yourself:

***No matter how many times I've messed up,
I have the power to make better choices.***