Risk Factor: The Truth about Dares

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By Rosalind Wiseman

“I dare you…”

Who doesn’t remember that from adolescence? At Cultures of Dignity, we’ve been thinking a lot about what it means to take a risk because taking one can be a great learning experience. And then a mom asked us these really good questions: I dare you to hold your breath, which can lead to the choking game. I dare you to chug this, take this pill, drink these shots, jump off this cliff, and the list goes on. How to
do you prepare your kid to know what's a healthy or reasonable challenge and when it crosses the line into scary and dangerous territory?

Here's a quote from a high school student that makes it all too real:

*One kid lit his hand on fire with hand sanitizer. Then the next kid lit his whole back on fire and got second degree burns.*

We accept dares and bets for many reasons—to show our loyalty and connection to a group, prove our courage or because it's easier than facing people's mockery or name-calling if we refuse. But what this always comes down to is risk taking—questions about when is it worth taking a “risk” and how to define risk in the first place.

So let's take a step back and list some “risks:”

- Changing your music playlist while driving
- Climbing onto the roof of a building with friends
- Playing a drinking game
- Getting into a car with too many people
- Rubbing hand sanitizer on your skin and lighting it on fire (as above)
- Voicing a minority opinion in a discussion
- Sending a nude picture to a person you have a crush on

Before we lecture young people about their lack of impulse control, making a mistake that could ruin their lives forever or bowing to peer pressure, it is important to appreciate the different types of risk and people's motivations.

Most of us can talk ourselves into doing things we have no business doing. Why?

1. **We hope for the best** and we don't want to think that the worst outcome is a possibility. It's what most of us do when we drive and look at our phones. It's why teens send nude pictures to people they like. We convince ourselves
that we won’t get into an accident because we haven’t yet and people won’t share or use nude photos against us.

2. **We believe we have a larger problem.** It’s about to be curfew and a 15 year old needs a ride home but the only ride available is to get into a car with eight people that fits five. It’s only a ten minute drive so he’ll take the risk that there’s no seat belts.

3. **We need to demonstrate some kind of power that will impress our peers.** For some young people, having a high tolerance in high school is impressive. But an 110-pound girl who is willing to go shot for shot against a 200-pound guy, even if that means she passes out on the couch fifteen minutes later, is now more vulnerable to a spectrum of bad things happening to her like people taking pictures of her and posting them online or sexual assault.

4. **We want to embrace our inner stupid with other people.** That seems self-explanatory but here’s a good example.

If you’re speaking to young people about this, avoid the cliché. As in, “Don’t let those people make decisions for you. If they jumped off a cliff, would you?”

Instead, here are a few suggestions:

1. When you’re hanging out with a group, you should have at least one person there you really trust.

2. And speaking of trust...trust yourself. You’re smart. If that little voice is going off in your head, listen to it. Certainly trust that voice more than someone who is telling you not to listen to it.

3. If you are in a situation where people’s safety is at stake or the people are motivated to humiliate another person, I want you to have the courage to ask yourself: What risk feels greater? Standing up to the people or going along with what’s happening? Why? Imagine yourself 24 hours in the future...what would your future self have wanted you to do in that moment?
If you’re talking to someone after the fact, stay away from “WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?” Instead, ask them four questions and try your hardest not to come across as super judgey.

Are you ok?

Was it worth it?

Was there any point when you felt this wasn’t a good decision? Can you describe that moment or how you were feeling?

Is there anything you need to do or say to anyone because of what happened?

But there are risks worth taking.

Speaking out respectfully to voice a different opinion is essential to real dialogue and intellectual diversity. So is speaking out where someone’s physical or psychological safety is threatened. Ironically, these kinds of risks can feel most scary, even though the reality is that not speaking out can have the most negative and long lasting consequences on both individuals and our communities.

And that’s what adults are supposed to do for young people. Ask compelling questions that encourage self-reflection and the ability to understand what is motivating one’s actions. Imagine what happens when we empower a young person with that kind of knowledge.

That’s a risk worth taking.