



# Impact of practicing extreme sports on family relationships

## Uprawianie sportów ekstremalnych a relacje rodzinne<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The first attempt to define extreme sports took place in 1955 in the United States of America. Since then, the number of extreme sport athletes has increased year by year. Understanding the phenomenon and the motives for practicing extreme sports is complex. The aim of this study is to analyze the relationship between extreme sports practitioners and their families. Extreme sports are defined as disciplines that involve a particular level of risk and require above-average mental and physical skills. Athletes who choose to engage in high-risk activities are motivated by a variety of internal and external factors. The athletes in question are subjected to natural, physical or mental challenges. Mistakes made while practicing the disciplines can cause injury or death to the participant more often than in the case of traditional sports. Few researchers focus on the family life of athletes. In most cases, their family members live in constant fear for their lives and health. Moreover, too frequent training can lead to addiction, which is often difficult to notice and underestimated, but at the same time significantly affects the daily functioning of the family system, whose individual units form an integral structure. It can be concluded that engaging in extreme sports has a significant impact on family relationships. It is important for the athlete to be aware of the reality of taking up extreme sports and to know that it is the athlete and not the spouse who is responsible for reconciling passion and family.

**Keywords:** behavioral addictions, extreme sports, family, family relations

**Abstrakt:** Pierwsza próba zdefiniowania sportów ekstremalnych nastąpiła w 1955 roku w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki. Od tego czasu z roku na rok przybywa sportowców uprawiających dyscypliny o charakterze ekstremalnym. Zrozumienie tego fenomenu, motywów uprawiania sportów ekstremalnych jest złożone. Toteż jako cel pracy obrano analizę relacji pomiędzy uprawiającymi sporty ekstremalne a ich rodziną. Sportem ekstremalnym określono dyscypliny, które wiążą się ze szczególnym ryzykiem oraz wymagają ponadprzeciętnych umiejętności psychicznych i fizycznych. Natomiast motywatorami do uprawiania czynności podwyższonego ryzyka są różne czynniki wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne. Sportowcy ekstremalni poddawani są naturalnym, fizycznym lub psychicznym wyzwaniom, a popełniane przez nich błędy podczas uprawiania danej dyscypliny mogą powodować obrażenia lub śmierć uczestnika częściej niż ma to miejsce w tradycyjnym sporcie. Mało badaczy koncentruje się na życiu rodzinnym sportowców. W większości przypadków życie członków rodzin osób uprawiających sporty ekstremalne nacechowane jest ciągłym lękiem o życie i zdrowie sportowca. Istotnym aspektem jest także prowadzenie zbyt częstych treningów, które mogą prowadzić do uzależnienia behawioralnego, zjawiska trudnego do zauważenia i bagatelizowanego, jednocześnie znacząco przekładającego się na codzienne funkcjonowanie systemu rodzinnego, którego poszczególne jednostki tworzą integralną strukturę. Zatem można stwierdzić, że uprawianie sportów ekstremalnych ma znaczący wpływ na relacje rodzinne. Ważne jest świadome podejście sportowca do uprawiania sportów ekstremalnych i wiedza, że to właśnie na nim, a nie na współmałżonku spoczywa odpowiedzialność godzenia ze sobą wartości trudnych: pasji i rodziny.

**Słowa kluczowe:** relacje rodzinne, rodzina, sport ekstremalny, uzależnienia behawioralne

## Introduction

The first attempt to define extreme sports happened in 1955 in the USA. ESPN television undertook this task by broadcasting Extreme Games (later known as X-Games), an international competition consisting of, “unusual sports” (Zielinski et al., 2020). Since then, more and more people become extreme sports

enthusiasts, and this type of sport has become a worldwide phenomenon. Understanding this occurrence as well as the motives for practicing these disciplines is complex (Brymer et al., 2020). The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between extreme sports practitioners and their families.

<sup>1</sup> Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2022-2Zieli.pdf>

Defining the term *extreme sport* is not an easy task. Mynarski and Veltze (2008) tried to do so, defining extreme sports as disciplines whose common denominator is the risk of loss of health or life, the intense nature of physical exertion, and the adventurous nature of the activities undertaken (Mynarski & Veltze, 2008). On the other hand, Muszkieta and Gembiak (2004) describe participation in extreme sports as overcoming extreme external difficulties, psychological limitations, and related emotions. They point out the desire to overcome difficulties, to feel strong, new sensations, to push oneself to the limit, and to experience something unusual (ibidem). Furthermore, according to Sahaj (2005), it is the craving for extraordinary sensations, emotions and pleasure, as well as the development of skills, often leading to perfection, that induce extreme activity (ibidem).

International literature so far lacks a clear definition of extreme sports (Cohen et al., 2018; Zieliński et al., 2020). Cohen et al. state that the sports in question are those in which the participant is subjected to natural, physical or mental challenges. These include speed, altitude, depth, or natural forces. Mistakes made while participating in the disciplines discussed may result in injury or death of the participant more often than in the case of traditional sports. The authors suggest that accident rates may be factors that differentiate extreme sports from other sports (Cohen, 2016; Cohen et al., 2018). Laver et al. (2017) define extreme sports as those that typically take place in remote locations with little access to medical care, where the athlete competes against themselves or the forces of nature. While executing such disciplines, the participants are exposed to speed, altitude, and real or perceived danger. Athletes are subjected to high levels of physical exertion and often perform spectacular stunts (Laver et al., 2017). Laver et al. (2017) in line with Cohen et al. note that extreme sports are characterized by an increased risk of injury or death (ibidem).

By analyzing the above definitions, it can be concluded that in order to practice extreme sports, both high physical and mental fitness, and a great knowledge, essential to apply the acquired skills, are necessary (Olszewska, 2018). It should be emphasized

that practicing extreme sports is mainly an individualistic desire to overcome extreme difficulties, to experience unusual and powerful sensations, to gain records, and to push oneself to the limit (Musumeci, 2021; Divide, 2014).

Extreme sports can be classified according to the place of practice as well as by the discipline from which the sport originated. In agreement with the classification of place of practice, extreme sports can be divided into three categories: land-based (e.g., parkour, free running, freestyle motocross, mountain climbing), air-based (e.g., B.A.S.E Jumping, skydiving), and water-based (e.g., hydrospeed, canoeing, rafting). Due to the multitude of disciplines emerging in the United States, English-language names without Polish equivalents are used (Olszewska, 2018; Podzielnny, 2014).

The aforementioned sports, regardless of where they are practiced, have many characteristics in common. They all involve balancing on the edge of human endurance or even life or death. The reason for the increase in interest in these sports may be due to the reduction of manual labor and difficult tasks, execution of which humans have entrusted to the machines. Thus, in order to balance the level of daily physical exertion, people began to look for disciplines in which they could release their accumulated energy, need for competition and risk (Podzielnny, 2014).

## 1. Extreme athlete—characteristics

Woodman, Hardy, Barlow, and Le Scanniff (2010) noted that individuals who engage in extreme sports for long periods of time have difficulty naming and controlling emotions in everyday life, especially feelings of agency regarding intimate relationships. They regain this control only when performing high-risk activities, thus engaging in risky activities becomes their main focus. This tendency is particularly evident among mountain climbers who seek emotion regulation and a sense of agency in extreme activities (Woodman et al., 2010). Additionally, research by Martha, Laurendeau, and Griffet (2010) demonstrates that extreme athletes tend to make unsafe maneuvers as drivers and exhibit higher levels of

optimism about their own abilities and chances of avoiding the negative consequences of an accident (Martha et al., 2010).

The importance of human motives for taking up extreme sports is emphasized by Brymer and Oades (2009), who claim that people who are in real danger of death, communing with the forces of nature find increased amounts of humility and courage that have nothing to do with bravado (Brymer & Oades, 2009). Lester (2004), on the other hand, sees mountaineering as an attitude of romanticism towards the world (Lester, 2004). This shows that knowing the specifics of each discipline can help to create a model to explain the reasons for voluntary engagement in extreme sports (Krokosz & Lipowski, 2014).

External factors that promote extreme sports are not insignificant. These are primarily the mass media. Information and advertising, and above all the Internet, are developing at a very fast pace. The possibility of using them anywhere and at any time contributes to the popularization of extreme behavior (Olszewska, 2018). Suitable geographical and environmental conditions, as well as social and economic factors, are also necessary elements for extreme sports (Immonen et al., 2018; Olszewska, 2018; Vande Vliet & Inglés, 2021). Based on research, variables such as age, education, income, and seniority have been found to directly influence the preference for climbing, one of the sports classified as extreme (Koprowiak et al., 2014).

Demographic processes, i.e. the increase in the number of potential extreme athletes (Eidenmueller, 2018; Olszewska, 2018), and society's wealth, are also factors influencing the development of extreme sports. Along with it, the possibility of taking up a given sport increases. A good example here is the practice of Himalayanism, which, through popularization, is attracting attention and, consequently, the number of daredevils is growing.

It should also be noted that the scientific and technological development, which prompts the emergence of better and faster means of transport, as well as improvement of sports equipment (Łobożewicz & Bieńczyk, 2001), which in climbing makes it

possible to overcome greater and greater difficulties on higher and higher walls (Drózd, 2007; Zieliński, Zięba, Wilkowicz, et al., 2021), being significant for extreme sports.

With society becoming wealthier, a new style of behavior has formed and has begun to define the diverse nature of the demands of different population groups (Immonen et al., 2018; Łobożewicz & Bieńczyk, 2001). Having a higher income makes it possible to achieve goals that were previously unattainable due to financial circumstances. Increased wealth enables the investment in equipment or the use of modern technologies, among other things.

In addition to the above factors, which can be categorized as external factors, there are internal motivations for doing extreme sports (Olszewska, 2018). One example is climbing, which is a source of developing self-actualization needs (Asakawa & Sakamoto, 2019; Koprowiak et al, 2014; Saul et al, 2019; Seifert et al, 2018). Improving one's mental state is considered the main intrinsic motivation. Often, people with low self-esteem perform extreme sports in order to boost their ego, gain courage and confidence, and feel superior. To accomplish this, they begin to perform activities that seem unrealistic (de la Torre-Cruz et al, 2021; Olszewska, 2018; Ouyang et al, 2020; Šagát et al, 2021).

However, not every athlete wanting to participate in extreme sports necessarily suffers from low self-esteem. Desires and dreams are also common reasons, and extreme athletes, individuals with a lifelong passion, are well aware of the risks that accompany their hobby (Olszewska, 2018). For example, climbing is rather associated with emotional and pleasurable values, not with the opportunity to test oneself in extreme conditions connected with risk (Koprowiak et al., 2014).

In many situations, people feel anxious, which is a negative emotional state. An extreme athlete attempts to overcome this instinctual fear by mastering his emotions (Monasterio et al, 2016; Divide, 2014; Tofler et al, 2018; Zielinski et al, 2020). While engaging in his passion, he produces adrenaline that mobilizes him to fight against danger while exposing his body and mind to pleasant and exciting euphoria

(Jaskólski & Jaskólska, 2006). Participants of BASE jumping<sup>2</sup> specifically name the feeling of an adrenaline rush and a sense of control and mastery over fear as one of the motives for practicing the sport, as well as experiencing a positive transformation (Bouchat et al, 2022; Monasterio et al, 2016; Monasterio & Cloninger, 2019).

Health is of instrumental value for extreme athletes, and it is important for them to define the meaning of their lives by pushing existing limits (Krokosz & Lipowski, 2014). According to Koziński (1997), this is a need for transgression (Koziński, 1997), though the pursuit of happiness is not necessarily a hedonistic attitude, but may involve a eudaimonistic approach (Krokosz & Lipowski, 2014).

Another reason for engaging in extreme sports is the desire to escape from boredom and routine, as well as from the constant pursuit of material values (Olszewska, 2018). This is a type of relaxation-cathartic motivation. Also, Rédei (2009) argues that escaping from routine, monotony, and alienation is the reason for undertaking extreme sports (ibidem).

It is worth noting that adequate physical fitness is a key feature in extreme sports. It relates to the adaptation of the body to the natural environment. Proper mental fitness is also essential. Among the sports that require extraordinary physical fitness is high-altitude climbing (Olszewska, 2018).

Physical activity is a determinant of human health and is an essential element at every stage of life, regardless of a person's age or gender (Gęga et al., 2016). However, humans desire to experience much more than what everyday life has to offer. Hence, the popularity of extreme sports is likely to increase. Moreover, this type of sport provides a "shot of excitement", which can be addictive (Podzielnny, 2014).

The above reports may be explained by Zuckerman's (1994) sensation-seeking theory (Zuckerman, 1994), which concerns an individual's tendency to

engage in new, intense, complex, or risky behaviors that have stimulation value<sup>3</sup>. This requires balancing on the edge of accepted social, moral, and often legal norms (e.g., urban climbing)<sup>4</sup> (Krokosz & Lipowski, 2014).

## 2. Extreme sports and family relationships

The literature on the impact of extreme sports on family relationships is scarce. Despite the popularity of extreme sports, there is still a lack of reports that would focus on the relationship between athletes and their families. However, based on the literature, it is possible to consider the impact of extreme sports on family relationships when it comes to addiction or lack of it.

### 2.1. Extreme sport as a behavioral addiction

Behavioral addiction is defined as a behavioral disorder of an addictive nature that does not involve the ingestion of psychoactive substances. This form of behavior includes doing sports, which becomes compulsive, difficult to control, and leads to negative consequences for the individual and the environment. The aim of such behavior is no longer pleasure but alleviating negative emotions (Rowicka, 2015).

Many researchers have tried to define non-substance addictions, but the multitude of different models in this area shows that this phenomenon is quite challenging to explain. It is problematic to develop one, coherent theory because many predominant views are mutually exclusive. According to J. Orford's theory, finding one precise way to explain behavioral addictions is doomed to failure, and many authors, including Polish ones, agree with this standpoint (Lelonek-Kuleta, 2014). However, a category of non-substance use disorders that can

2 BASE jumping (from the English words building, antenna, span, and Earth) is a sport involving parachute jumps from skyscrapers, bridges, masts, mountain cliffs, and similar structures (Bouchat et al., 2022; Forrester et al., 2019).

3 Zuckerman (1994) distinguished four factors that are part of sensation seeking. The first is the search for adventure and terror, or the desire to engage in risky activities such as extreme sports. The second factor is the pursuit of new experiences, the main goal being to seek new stimuli, which can include spontaneous traveling, or making new friends. Another factor is "disinhibition", which includes all behaviors that are not accepted in a given culture, e.g. casual sex, alcoholism, or gambling. The last characteristic described by Zuckerman is susceptibility to boredom, which is an aversion to routine and tedious activities (Zuckerman, 1994).

4 Urban climbing is a type of climbing on urban structures, bridges, monuments, ruins, etc. (Zieliński et al., 2020).

be identified with behavioral addictions was created in the DSM-5 classification and published in 2013 (Rowicka, 2015).

Extreme sports addiction is a type of behavioral addiction because both dependence and compulsion are characteristic of it (Buckley, 2016; Heirene et al., 2016). Chemical substances do not play a role in it, which is why this addiction is sometimes difficult to spot and downplayed (Gęga et al., 2016).

In behavioral addiction, the sports emotions are extremely important and are associated with maintaining good health and well-being, developing sports skills, making new friends, having the opportunity to compete, and earning rewards for performance. All of those factors result in an improved self-perception and addiction to the activity that provides positive feelings (Terry et al., 2004).

Addiction is a process in which a person tries a substance or activity and begins to perceive themselves as better and more attractive than before (Guerreschi, 2006). Relating this to extreme sports, what is important are the different stages of the process during which a person starts to become accustomed to a threatening situation and starts to consider it familiar, and thus stops reacting to external stimuli that indicate danger. Over time, the body becomes accustomed to a given level of adrenaline. In consequence, the athlete needs a higher level of this substance, and thus needs stronger emotions, often resorting to even riskier activities. Providing more and more adrenaline becomes an end in itself, which results in the emergence of a mechanism typical of individuals addicted to psychoactive substances. (Podzielnny, 2014).

Sports addiction has been divided into positive, with beneficial effects on the psyche and physical form, and negative, understood as a compulsive need to practice physical activity regardless of external circumstances, and regardless of its impact on health (Lejoyeux et al., 2008). If one attempts to stop or reduce the amount of training, a withdrawal effect occurs, manifested by mood swings, guilt, remorse, anxiety, or aggression (Heirene et al., 2016; MacIntyre et al., 2019).

## **2.2. Impact of practicing extreme sports on family relationships**

Addiction will always have a negative impact on family relationships. It is quite common to talk about addictions to substances like alcohol or drugs. However, far too rarely is the topic of addiction to activities that cause similar effects discussed. In the aforementioned sources, there is evidence that athletes with sports addiction experience withdrawal symptoms when they try to reduce the amount of training. Not only does it affect the addict, but also their family members who may experience mood swings, anxiety, or even aggression. The effects of withdrawal can be many and varied, but most of them, at least initially, are characterized by negative emotions that affect the mental and often physical state of the entire family system.

No person in the world lives separated from society, but they are surrounded by other people to whom they are important. Therefore all the choices made by an individual have an impact both on the person and their family, which is more and more often treated as a system with a certain set of norms, rules, and measures supporting its integrity. The family system has certain goals, and ways of satisfying the needs of individual family members and fulfilling basic social tasks (Ryś, 2001). The family system is an integral structure, which requires looking at the functioning of the family as a whole, rather than its individual elements because every system is the result of interactions between its members. Every person functioning in the family system co-creates a network of mutual relations (Ryś, 2001) that play an important role in the life of each person. Thanks to them self-esteem is formed, needs are satisfied, personality develops, and the socialization process takes place (Ryś, 2011).

From early childhood, repeated situations, comments, especially of significant ones, or traumatic experiences play an important role in the further development of a child. Healthy relations, especially in the family system, provide a sense of security, build trust, form positive self-esteem, assurance of being loved, etc. (Ryś, 2011). The fundamental factor forming a person's emotional maturity is the

ability to establish lasting, deep, and positive relationships with others based on sincerity, openness, and straightforwardness, which include respect for one's dignity and that of the other person, as well as tolerance for their different attitudes, values, and views (Ryś, 2011).

An individual's relationships with others develop over the entire course of life. The environment and family can facilitate, hinder, or even prevent the development of mutual relationships. Individuals who form a family system exist as separate parties, simultaneously creating the structure of the whole system. Different feedbacks between individuals lead to a change in one element that influences the functioning of the family system as a whole. (Ryś, 2001).

The results of Olszewska's (2018) study showed that people who take up extreme sports are economically active, come from large cities, have higher education, are not married, and their age does not exceed 35 years. The main reasons why people decide to practice extreme sports are the pursuit of new experiences and adrenaline, the desire to overcome their weaknesses, as well as to get rid of everyday stress. Such a form of spending time was mainly suggested to them by their friends, or it was an individual decision of the respondents (Olszewska, 2018).

Relating these data to the family situation, it can be noted that extreme sports are practiced by young people who have not yet started a family and have the financial, temporal, and environmental opportunities to engage in risky activities. Consequently, they focus on themselves, without considering those closest to them. For example, in climbing, the preference for perceived values is significantly affected by the length of seniority in the sport (Koprowiak et al., 2014). Thus, problems and doubts arise when the decision to start a family is made. Then, the athlete practicing a particular sport is responsible not only for themselves, but also for their family members (Bilik, 2015).

A problem in relationships may arise when an athlete is self-centered. Their egocentricity is exposed in a particular way in relations with the environment and their loved ones (Bilik, 2015). The hierarchy of values

results in focusing on oneself, satisfying one's own needs and preferences, and disregarding the feelings and views of those closest to one (Podzielny, 2014).

Taking into account the fact that everyone has developed some relationships, it is worth asking the question: how and, if at all, is it possible to combine family life with extreme sports? Research shows that the life of partners of people who practice extreme sports is tough. Those who share their partner's passion do better, but this happens relatively rarely. In most cases, the life of family members of extreme athletes is characterized by constant fear for their life and health. The partners are aware of the needs of their loved one and know how important their passion is to them. They also see that it occupies a lot of their time, does not concern their life together, and is indispensable for their happiness. (Bilik, 2015). In such a situation, the problem of responsibility arises. It is the sports aficionado's role to reconcile the two values: passion and family (Bilik, 2015).

Public opinion focuses primarily on the athlete's achievement, on pointing out the people who contribute to the success, or on analyzing the reasons behind the failure, especially in the fatal cases. Public opinion often overlooks the fact that the consequences of an athlete's adventure are felt most by their family (Bilik, 2015).

However, practicing extreme sports does not only have negative consequences. The possible positive aspects of training risky sports are also worth noting. Research suggests that practicing extreme sports can develop valuable personal qualities such as courage and humility. Because of the stressful situations in extreme sports, athletes are better at handling similar situations in everyday life (MacIntyre et al., 2019). There are also reports in the literature that practicing bouldering may have an effect on reducing depressive symptoms (Kleinstäuber et al, 2017; Kratzer et al, 2021; Schwarzkopf et al, 2021; Stelzer et al, 2018; Zielinski, Zieba, & Byś, 2021). Moreover, stability in stressful situations and psychological well-being will positively influence family relationships. Knowledge about the family and relationships within it is important for the psychosocial functioning of the human being (Krok, 2010).

The length of time spent in the family environment and the amount of interaction between family members also undoubtedly influence relationships within a family. Relationships based on emotional closeness, strong personal bonds and feelings shape the psychological well-being of family members (Step, 2010; Marsh et al, 2020; Thomas et al, 2017). Extreme sports athletes often sacrifice family time for their hobby.

Family is a unique system that is distinguished by the intimacy of relationships and the permanence of emotional connections. The development of its integrity involves the formation of bonds, feelings and taking actions that shape and transform personal aspirations of family members, as well as satisfying basic needs (Ryś, 2011). A person who engages in extreme sports may prioritize their own needs over those of family members.

Meanwhile, the balance and stability of parents' relationship, based on the sense of responsibility and emotional bond between all family members, is the basis of proper relationships in the family. It gives a sense of family unity, at the same time respecting independence and self-determination of individuals, which helps to develop interests and maintain contact with people outside the family (Ryś, 2011).

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## Summary

In conclusion, practicing extreme sports has a significant impact on family relationships. The opportunities offered by the modern world make people want to achieve more and be someone who means something both in the local environment and in the wider society. However, the risks involved in extreme sports, where the line between life and death is extremely thin, prompt many questions, including those relating to the meaning and value of life. Deciding to become an extreme sportsman, a person takes responsibility not only for their own life but also for the lives of their family members.

Research shows that preferences for extreme sports are formed at an early stage of life. Parents' relationship influences children's sense of security, their perception of stressful situations, and ways to cope with them.

Extreme sports athletes should be aware of the reality of engaging in extreme sports and remember that it is them, not their spouse, who are responsible for the challenging task of reconciling passion and family.

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