

A MILLION THINGS TO ASK A NEUROSCIENTIST

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EXCERPT

Have you ever been standing at the top of a tall building or cliff edge and had a sudden but brief urge to jump? You have no real thought of actually doing it, and you are not depressed, suicidal, or otherwise distressed, but that urge appears nonetheless. As it turns out, neuroscience has a name for such an occurrence, high places phenomenon, sometimes termed the call to the void, and it is actually very normal and common. There are also reports of impulses to jump in front of a train, stick a hand in a fire, or turn a steering wheel into traffic. Thankfully, the person generally doesn't follow through, and although most accounts of this phenomenon are anecdotal, there is one team of scientists in Florida, USA, who decided to take another look. The research team asked 431 students about such episodes in their personal lives, and a surprising 55% acknowledged that they have experienced them at some stage in their lives.

Science has revealed to us that high place phenomenon is possibly the result of a split-second delay between two opposing brain signals. One signal is based on our survival instinct that notices danger and tells us that we should avoid it, such as falling from a great height, or a train hitting us in the face. Another signal coming from our more logical brain tells us that we are relatively safe where we are, and there is no real threat to our survival. The resulting signals are interpreted by our brain - now somewhat confused, for it to relay this rather bizarre message and we experience the high place phenomenon. So, if you ever have a sudden impulse to jump off the top of Mount Everest, just remember that it is normal, but please don't do it anyway.