

Professor says Halloween offers safe disgust

October 24 2016, by Howard Hewitt

Halloween is often a time to seek out not just the spooky things that go bump in the night, but also the gross and horrifying things, too. What seems common to both is that people like the emotional rush free of any actual danger, according to a Purdue University disgust expert.

"If you're watching horror shows on YouTube, television or at a movie there is sort of a barrier there," said Daniel Kelly, associate professor of philosophy. "You're still able to get your emotions tickled; it's bizarrely hard to look away from the gross stuff, but you can if you need to. You're not really in any danger; you can turn it off."

Kelly is the author of "Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust." He argues disgust plays a role in our health so we avoid rotten food, trash, or things that could make us sick.

"Roller coasters and [horror movies](#) are probably based on a similar principle," he said. "You get to have your fear and disgust buttons pushed but you're not actually in danger. You're not falling off a cliff. The guy with the axe isn't actually going to kill you. You're not actually going to contract the infectious zombifying disease."

Kelly said Halloween is fun for all ages because everyone knows it's just people dressing up. "We might go to a movie to get the vicarious thrill of being stalked by Mike Myers or bitten by a vampire, but it's really just a movie."

Kelly said flirting with danger or seeking a rush spills over into many

facets of life, even if the emotional voltage has a slightly negative valence. "There are some feelings that are manifestly unpleasant when they come in large doses, but that many people actively seek out and enjoy in smaller, more controlled spurts. Why do people eat spicy foods when it's really a chemical burn? The gentle feeling of soreness and muscles burning after a jog or trip the gym can become enjoyable in a similar way. This can happen with the feelings associated with disgust, too – in the popularity of those pimple-popping videos, and in people's attraction to horror movies, haunted houses and other Halloween traditions."

Halloween disgust can give people a good scare without any risk of something bad happening, he said.

Kelly's research also focuses on moral judgment, social norms, racial cognition and cross-cultural diversity.

More information: *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*. mitpress.mit.edu/books/yuck

Provided by Purdue University

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