

How morbid curiosity can lead people to conspiracy theories

October 12 2023, by Joe Stubbersfield and Coltan Scrivner



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Do you like scary movies, true crime podcasts, or violent sports? Research has shown that a major part of the attraction is their appeal to morbid curiosity.

Engaging with frightening media and the emotions it creates in a safe

setting can help people [alleviate anxiety and build psychological resilience](#). However, our recent research, [published in the British Journal of Psychology](#), shows that a heightened interest in learning about threats can also lead people to be interested in less constructive types of stories: [conspiracy theories](#).

From [blood-harvesting Satanists](#) who stealthily run the world to [shapeshifting alien lizards](#) invading the world, conspiracy theories often offer alternative explanations of unsettling events. They all center on a proposal that a [malicious group of people](#) is behind strange or political happenings. [Conspiracy theories](#) have another thing in common—they go against mainstream explanations and lack concrete evidence.

If the drive to seek out conspiracy theories is motivated by a desire to identify and understand potential threats, then we should expect interest in conspiracy theories to be linked with higher morbid curiosity.

Testing the link

To investigate this link [we ran three studies](#). Each study had different groups of participants, with a close to even split in genders. The first study tested the question: is morbid curiosity linked with higher belief in conspiracy theories? Using the [morbid curiosity scale](#) and the [generic conspiracist beliefs scale](#), we found that the more morbidly curious people were, the higher their general belief in conspiracy theories.

In psychology, morbid curiosity describes a heightened interest in learning about threatening or dangerous situations. It can be measured using the [morbid curiosity scale](#), which gives a rating for general morbid curiosity, and curiosity in four domains: minds of dangerous people, violence, paranormal danger and body violation. Violence is when you're curious about the action itself (such as a boxing match). Bodily injury is curiosity about the aftermath of violence (like going to a surgical

museum).

[Younger people](#) tend to be [more morbidly curious](#), but there doesn't tend to be a big gender divide, if at all.

For the second study, we tested if the link between morbid curiosity and interest in conspiracy theories was driven by people's perception of threats. We had people rate how threatening they felt several explanations of events were. The events included both mainstream and conspiratorial explanations of the same thing, such as whether [airplane contrails](#) are water vapor, or harmful "chemtrails." We found that the higher people's morbid curiosity, the higher they perceived the [threat](#) in conspiratorial explanations.

For the final study, we investigated whether morbid curiosity makes people more likely to seek out conspiracy theories as explanations for events. We had people make a choice between a series of paired descriptions, choosing which of the pair they would like to learn more about.

Some were morbid and non-morbid pairs, such as seeing either a photo of a man who killed his girlfriend and ate her, or a photo of a man who saved his friend from drowning. Others were pairs of conspiratorial and mainstream explanations of the same event, such as [the Titanic sinking](#)—because it struck an iceberg, versus being deliberately sank in an insurance scam.

We found that the more morbidly curious people were in their choices (such as choosing to view the photo of the man who killed his girlfriend), the more likely they were to be interested in conspiratorial explanations.

Across these three studies, morbidly curious people were more likely to

have general conspiracist beliefs, perceive conspiracy theories to be more threatening, and display a stronger interest in learning more about conspiratorial explanations. In all three, the domain of morbid curiosity which was most strongly linked to interest in conspiracy theories was "minds of dangerous people."

Minds of dangerous people

Why minds of dangerous people? Previous research has suggested that, in general, people are particularly attracted to stories about social relationships and threats. But the hostile groups associated with conspiracy theories may have a particularly strong attraction to humans.

Hostile groups of other people have long [been a threat to humans](#). Group think emerged early in Homo sapiens evolution. While most primate aggression is reactive, the evolution of language in humans around 300,000 years ago allowed our aggression to be more [premeditated and coordinated](#), as well as [deceptive and conspiratorial](#). This meant humans needed to be curious about the intentions of potentially dangerous people. Although curiosity can be useful, [sensitivity to explanations of threats](#), for example conspiracy theories, can lead people to assume others have dangerous motives when there are none.

Understanding events in our complex, [modern world](#) can be challenging, and may lead us to be alert to potential threats, tapping into our ancient morbid curiosity. Morbid [curiosity](#) is not inherently bad, but an increased interest in learning about the dangers presented in [conspiracy theories can reinforce beliefs](#) that the world is a dangerous place. This can create a [feedback loop](#) which only increases anxiety, driving people further down the rabbit hole of [conspiracy](#) theories.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How morbid curiosity can lead people to conspiracy theories (2023, October 12)
retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-morbid-curiosity-people-conspiracy-theories.html>

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