

Witnessing ritual pain exhausting for loved ones

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Witnessing the ritualistic suffering of loved ones may be more exhausting than actually experiencing extreme pain, according to a study involving Victoria University of Wellington researchers.

Associate Professor in Psychology Dr Ron Fischer and religion expert Dr Joseph Bulbulia visited the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius last year to observe rituals celebrated during the annual Hindu festival, Thimithi.

The festival involves 10 days of fasting and prayers, and culminates in a long procession and fire-walking ritual. "We were interested in understanding the effects of active and passive participation in the fire-walk," says Dr Fischer.

The team examined fire-walkers ('high-ordeal' [participants](#)); people participating in the ritual without engaging in the high-intensity activities ('low-ordeal' participants); and spectators. The fire-walkers and 'low-ordeal' participants were members of the same family.

With colleagues from Denmark, Czech Republic, United States and Hungary, the researchers carried out the first ever investigation into how participants and spectators felt during extreme collective rituals.

Participants walked barefoot in the midday sun without eating or drinking while carrying pots of sacrificial offerings. The fire-walkers were pierced with needles or skewers and finished the procession by walking over knives and burning coals.

At the end of the event, the researchers compared the levels of happiness, fatigue and heart rate of low- and high-ordeal participants, and found that fire-walkers had experienced the highest increase in [heart rate](#) and reported greater happiness and less fatigue post-ritual.

Dr Fischer says the role of 'low-ordeal' participants is interesting because

of their relationship to the fire-walkers. "Fire-walkers experience the emotional 'high' upon finishing the ritual, whereas 'low-ordeal' participants do not, while simultaneously worrying about the wellbeing of their friends and family."

The study, recently published online in the international scientific journal *PLOS ONE*, supports the longstanding theory that taking part in extreme, painful rituals increases pro-social behaviours and attitudes.

Although the study was confined to the small island of Mauritius, Dr Fischer says the results have wider implications. For example, the results may help understand why media coverage of traumatic events can have more adverse effects on distant spectators than the people present at the incident.

More information: "The Fire-Walker's High: Affect and Physiological Responses in an Extreme Collective Ritual." Ronald Fischer, Dimitris Xygalatas, Panagiotis Mitkidis, Paul Reddish, Penny Tok, Ivana Konvalinka, Joseph Bulbulia Research Article | published 20 Feb 2014 | *PLOS ONE*, 10.1371/journal.pone.0088355

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