

We all feel disgust but why do some of us turn it on ourselves?

March 30 2015, by Jane Simpson And Philip Powell



Yuck! Credit: Russell Neches, CC BY

Disgust is a universal emotion – we all get disgusted by things, just as we all experience other "basic" emotions, such as happiness and sadness. Disgust has many functions. It protects us from products that might cause us harm (food that has gone off), it can give us a moral compass (when we see someone being treated unfairly) and it keeps us away from things that remind us of our animal nature (dead bodies).

While there can be some subtle differences in what triggers a [disgust](#)

reaction for the same person in different contexts or in people who differ across gender and nationality, everyone across the globe shows the same characteristic facial response to something they find disgusting.

In fact the closed mouth, wrinkled nose and narrowing of the eyes associated with disgust is the perfect way to symbolise its core message: that revolts me, keep it away from me.

The 'revolting self'

Disgust is one of a number of discrete (core) emotions that include joy, rage, surprise, fear, and shame. And like other emotions, disgust can be focused inwards – on the physical and psychological aspects of the self. But self-disgust is a relatively new area for psychological research and is being seen as increasingly relevant in helping us better understand a whole range of health behaviours, societal responses and our own emotional reactions to events and other people.

The consequences of "self-disgust" usually serve less of a function than disgust for outside stimuli. So what makes self-disgust different from other negative emotions and feeling states such as shame, guilt or self-loathing? And what is the benefit of considering self-disgust directly?



You're probably disgusted before you know what it is: kitten sick. Credit: mahalie stackpole, CC BY-SA

Self-disgust differs from other negative feelings that people have about themselves in a number of ways. While self-disgust is [likely to happen alongside](#) other self-directed issues such as shame, unique features include feelings of revulsion, for example when looking in the mirror, contamination [and magical](#) rather than reasoned thinking. These, taken with other characteristics, such as its particular cognitive-affective content, suggest an emotional experience that is different to shame ([related to](#) hierarchical submission and diminished social rank).

Disgust is not about just "not liking" aspects of yourself – the depth of the emotion can mean you can't even look at yourself without being overwhelmed with revulsion. The feeling that you are disgusting also means that you are potentially toxic to others – so people can become isolated as they do not wish to "infect" and "contaminate" others with their own perceived "disgustingness".

Often, the aspects of themselves that people are disgusted with (whether physical or psychological) are connected to a perceived violation of the physical body or its purity, such as inappropriate sexual contact or issues with appearance, which reflects the evolutionary origins of disgust.

Self-disgust needs tailored therapy

As with many [negative feelings](#) that people can experience, the origins of self-disgust are likely to lie in childhood, when people are learning what things are repulsive in their environment and are vulnerable to disgust reactions and disgust-based criticism from others. However, self-disgust can emerge at any time, and particularly in response to sudden, dramatic changes in the self, for example following trauma such as a [sexual assault](#).



More than a dislike. Credit: San Sharma, CC BY-SA

Understanding self-disgust also has practical and clinical implications. For example, self-disgust has been shown to be a [predictive factor for many people with depression](#) and if it is not addressed in therapy then therapeutic outcomes are unlikely to be positive or sustainable.

It has also been shown to be a factor in other [mental health problems](#), such as [eating and personality disorders](#), and in making people avoid

certain behaviours that would be of benefit – such as having [cervical smear tests](#).

In a collection of essays in a book we've published on the subject, [researchers argue](#) that unless the potency of this emotional state is acknowledged then either therapeutic attempts to help people with serious mental health problems or health interventions aimed at preventing serious illnesses are not going to be successful.

One of the things we have noticed when delivering more cognitive behavioural-based therapies is that, although there is an interest in feelings and emotions, for some clients the strength of their feelings of self-disgust means this needs to be the initial focus for the therapy, rather than cognitions or behaviours, otherwise the therapy doesn't work.

So while most disgust research has assumed the offending stimuli to be external in origin, from clinical and empirical observation we know that this just isn't the case. The "[revolting self](#)" has massive implications for individuals' psychological well-being and social lives.

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