

Gripping someone else when scared maybe not as selfless as it seems

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(Medical Xpress)—A trio of researchers, two from Switzerland and one from France, has found evidence that suggests the tendency of people to grip one another when experiencing fright might not be the selfless act that it seems. In their paper published in in the journal *Royal Society*

Open Science, Guillaume Dezecache and Christoph Dahl with the University of Neuchâtel and Julie Grèzes with PSL Research University describe a study that involved analyzing photographs taken of people at a haunted house and what they found.

Among horror movie audiences, it is very common to see people grabbing one another when something frightening happens. In some instances, such actions might be viewed as one person reaching out to soothe or calm another—to offer a safe haven of sorts, or perhaps a move that suggests we are all in this together. Such actions, the researchers note, happen in real life, too, when people are frightened by something, such as creatures popping out at a haunted house.

To learn more about why people grab one another when frightened, the group visited a website that offers photographs of people being scared at the popular Nightmares Fear Factory—an attraction located in Niagara Falls, Canada. The group studied 460 such pictures, noting in particular the situations that involved one or more people grabbing or gripping another person in response to a fright.

The researchers report that they found that 75 percent of those confronted with a fright resorted to grabbing someone close by and holding on to them—women and children, they noted, were more likely to do so than men. But they also found something else—the percentage of people who grabbed declined as the number of people around them grew. Thus, grabbing and gripping was less likely to occur in a crowd. This, the researchers suggest, indicates that such actions are likely attributable to self-interest, or put more starkly, self-preservation. Spontaneously reaching out to grab hold of another person when frightened helps alleviate fear and perhaps might have reduced the chances of being harmed during less civilized periods. The researchers note that other more pro-social actions tended to occur after the initial shock of a fright had worn off.

More information: Guillaume Dezecache et al. The nature and distribution of affiliative behaviour during exposure to mild threat, *Royal Society Open Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.170265](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.170265)

Abstract

Individual reactions to danger in humans are often characterized as antisocial and self-preservative. Yet, more than 50 years of research have shown that humans often seek social partners and behave prosocially when confronted by danger. This research has relied on post hoc verbal reports, which fall short of capturing the more spontaneous reactions to danger and determine their social nature. Real-world responses to danger are difficult to observe, due to their evanescent nature. Here, we took advantage of a series of photographs freely accessible online and provided by a haunted house attraction, which enabled us to examine the more immediate reactions to mild threat. Regarding the nature and structure of affiliative behaviour and their motivational correlates, we were able to analyse the distribution of gripping, a behaviour that could either be linked to self- or other-oriented protection. We found that gripping, an affiliative behaviour, was common, suggestive of the social nature of human immediate reactions to danger. We also found that, while gripping behaviour is quite stable across group sizes, mutual gripping dropped dramatically as group size increases. The fact that mutual gripping disappears when the number of available partners increases suggests that gripping behaviour most probably reflects a self-preservative motivation. We also found age class differences, with younger individuals showing more gripping but receiving little reciprocation. Also, the most exposed individuals received little mutual gripping. Altogether, these results suggest that primary reactions to threat in humans are driven by affiliative tendencies serving self-preservative motives.

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