

How healthy is horror?

October 28 2022, by Cara Murez



That intense feeling of [fear](#) as you watch Jason Voorhees chase his next victim while wearing a hockey mask in "Friday the 13th" might actually be good for you. It also might not be.

Researchers report that horror's impact is really in the eye of the beholder, a little different for everyone but not all bad.

"It's called 'the paradox of horror,'" explained researcher Dr. Ramnarine Boodoo, a child psychiatrist at Penn State Health's Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, "because people generally try to avoid things that make them uncomfortable. So why do people enjoy things like really grotesque horror movies?"

Boodoo says one theory is it helps with coping. Humans are equipped with deeply ingrained, unconscious mechanisms that help them respond to stress, wired in from the times when danger might be right outside.

For someone watching "The Exorcist," "you have an activation of what's called the [sympathetic nervous system](#), which can cause things like an increased heart rate and breathing rate," Boodoo said in a center news release. "Sometimes it can cause pretty bad feelings of nausea. Sweating. It can often be sort of like a [panic attack](#)."

That might be good because for some people it's pleasurable to have those [fight-or-flight](#) mechanisms fire up without any actual danger, similar to riding a roller coaster.

It may even help with a person's ability to cope with real-life stressful situations.

These experiences may also provide a type of [exposure therapy](#), diminishing fear over time, said researcher Hannah Nam, a third-year [medical student](#) at Penn State College of Medicine.

"You can apply these tactics to real-life scenarios," Nam said in the release. "I also found that it can be a form of stress relief for some people."

For some, it may help relieve stress, such as during the height of the pandemic, when scary movie viewership increased.

For others, it can be just too much.

"Many studies have shown that consistent direct exposure—especially among [young people](#)—to graphic material, decreases empathy and increases aggression," Boodoo noted. "So, we really have to be careful with how much exposure we have to this kind of stimulus."

Many people have lower trauma thresholds, either because that's just how they are or because of past trauma experiences. This might include people who have [anxiety disorders](#) or impulse-control issues, as well as cardiac or respiratory disorders.

Boodoo and Nam suggested being empathetic to fellow movie watchers, making sure everyone is comfortable and nobody has to prove their bravery. And likewise, don't judge those who do like a horror movie.

"Horror allows us to exorcize our worst fears, sure," said Blayne Waterloo, a web content and design specialist for Penn State Health, who hosts a podcast on [horror movies](#).

"There's a lot about the genre that explores the [human condition](#) in a way that can help viewers feel seen just as they are," she said in the release. "Horror embraces the flaws of being human in a way the world doesn't give us room to explore, and that's beautiful."

More information: The American Psychological Association has more on [stress effects on the body](#).

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