

# Why are we so drawn to tragedy? A psychological sciences professor explains

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For nearly a week last month, people around the world eagerly awaited updates on the saga of the missing Titan submersible. Each moment upped the ante, as the theoretical clock of suspected available oxygen

neared zero, until ultimately, the story ended in tragedy with the discovery of debris.

But the story started with tragedy, too. The five passengers aboard the submersible were attempting to descend 13,000 ft to the [ocean floor](#) to visit the site of the RMS Titanic, which sank in 1912—killing approximately 1,500 people.

The Titanic disaster has captivated the interest of generations of people, reignited by James Cameron's 1997 fictional retelling and again more recently by the Titan tragedy. But why are so many drawn to learning about such harrowing situations?

To better understand the phenomenon, we spoke with Julie Exline, professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at the College of Arts and Sciences. Exline and the researchers in her lab seek to understand how people find meaning in [negative events](#), primarily involving spiritual struggles, supernatural beliefs and forgiveness.

"It's understandable that humans pay attention to negative information [like that surrounding the Titanic and Titan tragedies]; it seems important, and it may have survival value. So there's no need to beat yourself up about it," Exline said. "But if you find yourself going after a steady diet of negative information, you might consider how this scary, sad or anger-inducing input might be affecting your mood."

Were you engrossed in reading about the Titan submersible? Find out more about Exline's take on why it's natural to feel drawn to tragedy.

## **1. People often pay extra attention to negative information because it seems important.**

[News involving tragedies] carries more psychological weight than positive information, which makes sense in evolutionary terms: We want to know where the potential dangers and threats are in our environment, and so our attention is drawn to problems and negative information. Humans want to survive and solve problems, and so we naturally look for where the problems are.

## **2. Tragedies can seem exciting because of the life-or-death, risky situations involved—adding more fuel to the attentional fires.**

These high-risk situations raise the existential stakes. When people reflect on these scary situations, they might envision themselves facing the same fate—a disturbing possibility, but also one that will make them feel relieved to be sitting safely at home. They might also compare themselves with the people who have suffered the tragedy and feel grateful that they aren't facing the same problems.

## **3. And here's a really dark side: If someone dislikes or resents the person/people who suffered in the tragedy, some part of them might indulge in Schadenfreude (a German term meaning 'shameful joy').**

With Schadenfreude, people find a sense of pleasure in seeing an enemy or rival punished. They might also enjoy seeing envied persons "brought low," especially if the envied person's advantages seemed undeserved or unfairly acquired. In short, if people think that the person facing this [tragedy](#) actually deserved to suffer, they might take a dark sense of satisfaction in seeing justice meted out.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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