

Why coulrophobia is no laughing matter

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Credit: Shutterstock

As the Halloween season gets into full flow, the English-speaking world is currently experiencing a wave of 'creepy clown' sightings that first began in the United States but has now spread to the UK, Canada and Australia. Most have been confirmed as copycat hoaxes but the distress and anxiety caused to victims is very real indeed – and consequently, there has been increased interest in the scientific and psychological reasons as to why clowns are able to instil such a feeling of terror into so many people.

It all began in South Carolina in August 2016 with reports that a small group of individuals dressed as clowns were chillingly trying to lure children into woods. Since then there have been hundreds of reports of clowns across the United States scaring and intimidating people, some of them brandishing weapons. Clown sightings are also now being reported almost daily in British, Canadian and Australian news outlets.

Coulrophobia – the fear of clowns – is a very common phobia according to psychologists. The symptoms can be mild, where the sight of a clown during everyday life causes mild-to-moderate unease and anxiety (the author of this article would fall under this category) to much more severe, where an individual could, for example, forego all children's birthday parties for the fear of a clown

being present. Coulrophobia is also a phobia that tends to be long-lasting, beginning in childhood and continuing well into adulthood.

A deeper biological root

Is coulrophobia always a conditioned disorder or is there a deeper biological explanation as to why our minds are instinctively suspicious of clowns? Arachnophobia, another common phobia, has been explained as an innate evolutionary throwback to avoid the dangers of threatening, dangerous animals. According to some psychologists and anthropologists, the figure of the clown also triggers some of our universal responses to social stimulus.

'People are typically frightened by things which are wrong in some way, wrong in a disturbingly unfamiliar way,' commented Paul Salkovskis of the Maudsley Hospital Centre for Anxiety Disorders and Trauma in London. In fact, a 2008 study by the University of Sheffield that included 250 children from the ages of four to 16 found that clowns are universally disliked by all age groups. The study was aimed at improving hospital decor for children and subsequently discovered that ward walls decorated with images of clowns were likely to instil uneasiness and anxiety in patients. After examining the results further, they concluded that the sense of fear and uneasiness stemmed from an 'unsettled familiarity'.

What does this mean in practice? In essence, there is wide scientific agreement that coulrophobia stems from the fact that it is not possible to know exactly what lies behind a clown's colourful makeup and enlarged facial features. This essentially gives the wearer a new identity and allows them to escape from conforming to certain social conventions that would otherwise not be possible in 'normal' life.

What lies beneath the mask

In 1961, anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss wrote about the 'freedoms' that masking oneself allows.

He wrote: 'The facial disguise temporarily eliminates from social intercourse that part of the body which... the individual's personal feelings and attitudes are revealed or can be deliberately communicated to others.' Sigmund Freud also wrote about an idea called the 'uncanny valley' effect, where the idea of something being very familiar but simultaneously oddly unfamiliar causes a response of revulsion, causing the contradictory and unsettling feeling of [cognitive dissonance](#).

This can easily be applied to the clown. Steven Schlozman, a Harvard Medical School psychiatrist commented that a creepy, never-changing grin has the capacity to cause this feeling of cognitive dissonance in our brains: 'You recognise a smile, your brain registers that smiles are largely good things – and yet you can't smile all the time, because if you're smiling all the time, something's not right... we take cues from the way people behave, but if there's no change in the way they look or the way they act, that makes them very scary.'

But even if the very look and appearance of clowns can cause a natural sense of suspicion and anxiety, one must also not overlook the power of external societal stimuli to exacerbate fears such as coulrophobia. For many, one prominent example would be Tim Curry's brilliant yet horrific portrayal of Pennywise the Clown in the 1990 TV dramatisation of Stephen King's 'It'.

But as the 2016 Creepy Clown Craze shows no signs of abetting, and with a new version of 'It' due to arrive in cinemas in 2017, it seems likely that an entirely new generation of coulrophobics is about to arise.

Provided by CORDIS

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