

# Why Do We Enjoy Being Scared?

Being frightened is not just a natural reaction for some people, it is a quest!

Watching horror films; going into 'haunted' houses; enjoying the ghost, ghouls and gore of Halloween; these scenarios are all designed to create fear for the participant. But why is this a sought-after experience? After all, shouldn't we be avoiding things that make us feel scared?

Fear is a fundamental reaction when you are faced with a situation of danger. Beginning in a part of the brain called the 'amygdala', complex chemistry creates the 'fight or flight' response – the survival mechanism that decides whether to battle for your life or to run away when faced with danger. This triggers bodily changes, including increased heart rate and redirection of blood from the intestines to the muscles, which prepare the body to be efficient, either in physical defence or for running. It also directs all energy to the moment, overriding conscious thought to make sure that all of your instincts are focused purely on survival. When the situation is assessed and the danger either removed or assessed for its actual risk, the body releases hormones that slow the heart rate and breathing and a feeling of euphoria is created within the body as it relaxes. This leaves you feeling satisfied, reassured of safety and confident that you are in control.

Basically, this natural high is what thrill seekers are looking for.

The reason that people expose themselves to 'scary'



situations is because they are not actually scary once the mind has assessed the danger, but the sense of risk is still there. For example, riding on a rollercoaster suggests that there is a threat to life: you travel at high speeds; you are thrown around loops and twists; and you are seemingly strapped in perilously, only one mistake from a fatal drop from the skies. However, this type of dangerous situation is highly controlled. We know that the actual safety mechanisms of such a ride mean that we are not in real danger. Similarly, if we go into a haunted house, we may be facing the dark and the idea of the supernatural, but we know that we are a mere door away from the safety of the outside world again. Fear releases some of the same chemicals, such as dopamine, which are also present in happiness and excitement; because we know that

ultimately, we are not facing a real threat, we can safely feel fear and the subsequent feelings of excitement and elation.

In addition, experiencing scenarios that create such a strong reaction as this also create a stronger and more detailed imprint on our long-term memory. This would be because as humans we would need to remember to avoid such a dangerous situation again if this was for our personal survival. Coupled with this, a scenario of danger experienced with others can be a significant bonding experience – how many times have you seen people leaving a haunted house and hugging or congratulating each other? Facing danger releases a burst of emotion and hormones, including oxytocin, which makes you feel a strong social connection to someone who you have faced a challenge with.

But why do some people find situations frightening that other people don't? This is all to do with the context of the danger. Someone who has not experienced a frightening situation before may not be able to assess the situation as being without actual danger, meaning that they cannot enjoy the experience as they are still feeling the 'fight or flight' hormones. For example, a child is not able to identify the difference between an imaginary threat such as a monster under the bed and a real-world threat. Conversely, if someone is fully aware that there is no danger whatsoever, they may not be able to experience the feelings of fear then euphoria e.g. a biologist may not be able to enjoy a zombie movie if they are focused on the realities of the body rather than the cinematic presentation of the zombie.

Next time you are seeking the thrill of danger, take a moment to fully process the stages of the experiences that your body takes you through as it falls into an age-old human process that our ancestors used for survival and we use for excitement. Pretty incredible, isn't it?

## Glossary

**fundamental** – necessary, essential, automatic

**hormone** – a bodily substance that influences mood and behaviour

**euphoria** – a feeling or state of intense excitement and happiness