

Melissa Whitfield 00:10

Welcome back to Texas Tech Health Check from Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center. I'm your host, Melissa Whitfield. We want you to get healthy and stay healthy with help from evidence based advice from our physicians, health care providers and researchers. Do you like to be frightened? Are you a fan of horror movies and games, scary stories, true crime, or thrilling adventures? You're not alone. And here to explain why we're attracted to scary stuff is Dr. Natalie Scanlon, assistant professor and clinical psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry. She explains how it's healthy when it's entertaining. But warns us about using it to escape our everyday lives. She also reminds us to keep in mind that just because something isn't scary to us, it might be triggering or scary to others.

Melissa Whitfield 01:09

Dr. Scanlon, welcome to our podcast.

Natalie Scanlon 01:12

Thanks for having me.

Melissa Whitfield 01:13

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, your expertise and what you do at the Health Sciences Center?

Natalie Scanlon 01:18

Yes, so I am an assistant professor and clinical psychologist with our Department of Psychiatry here at TTUHSC. A lot of my training is with kids, adolescents and families. But I see all age ranges in psychotherapy. So I treat children all the way through adults. And a lot of the work I do here at TTUHSC is with kids and adolescents through our CATR/TCHAT program. But I also have an adult outpatient clinic and teaching responsibilities. And so I get to do a little bit of everything here, which I like.

Melissa Whitfield 01:52

Well, again, Dr. Scanlon, welcome to our podcast. It's that time of year; it's Halloween; it's fall, and we see a lot of scary images. But a lot of people's intake of scary stuff is year round. What is it about horror movies, scary books and video games, and even true crime, which tends to be gorey, that keeps audiences and listeners coming back for more?

Natalie Scanlon 02:16

Yes, it's an interesting question. I was actually watching news clip today with Jamie Lee Curtis, who of course, is in the Halloween movie series. And she was saying that part of the reason she's in those is because she believes that in scary movies, you confront what you can't control. So I think a lot of us feel anxiety about various things in the world, of course. And when we voluntarily subject ourselves to scary things, we feel like we have the control while still experiencing some of those anxiety provoking things. She also said something interesting, which is that those are a chance to exercise our anxiety. So not exercise in the physical sense. But just to kind of exorcise it and get rid of it. So if we feel that excess anxiety, it's a way to just kind of get that out in a cathartic way. You know, and as as a

psychologist, I'm a big believer that humans are made to be emotional. We're made to feel the full range of human emotions. And so for some of us who might live in kind of our safe, mundane worlds, at times, we don't tap into those emotions of fear and anxiety as much. And so we might be drawn to true crime podcasts, or scary books, or scary movies, to just kind of feel those feelings that we're meant to feel all along. And then I think a final thing is there is a system of our body. It's the sympathetic nervous system that is programmed to feel fear and to deal with fear. And it's a it's an excitatory process. It's a process in which we feel endorphins and adrenaline, and all kinds of things happen in our body. And so that can just feel very exhilarating for people, and it can be kind of a ride. So I think for all sorts of reasons were drawn to it.

Melissa Whitfield 04:02

You mentioned that it gives us a sense of control. And that might be true for something like a horror movie. But other people are into risks that are like skydiving or fast driving or those kinds of risks, do they feel the same thrill?

Natalie Scanlon 04:21

I think people can get an adrenaline rush either way. So I think those types of activities tap into similar systems and brain structures such as that sympathetic nervous system or the amygdala which is the part of our brains that determines possible threats and decodes emotions while storing fear memories. You know, no two people are exactly the same. So I think when it comes to brain structure, neuro chemistry life experiences, it's it's hard to say if the thrill is the same. Anecdotally, I've watched some some documentaries on on rock climbers and people who you know "Free Solo" and things like that. And there have been some interesting neuro imaging studies that actually show structural differences in parts of the brain, like the amygdala, where those people don't feel fear as much as the average human does, if you will, or it takes a lot more for them to feel fear. And so I think different people are drawn to different things. And different people get different thrills from things just kind of based on how they're wired.

Melissa Whitfield 05:26

Is it healthy to seek these thrills?

Natalie Scanlon 05:29

I think it can be some argue that from an evolutionary or survival standpoint, we're drawn to things in our environment that are threatening, so that we can assess and protect ourselves. And so that actually might explain why people gawk at car accidents. As much as we don't want to admit that we do. It feels like an automatic thing for a lot of people. So it may not be that we like seeing those things that we derive pleasure from it. But it may be that our evolutionary parts of our brain go to those things just to assess for the threat and to assess for danger. In terms of is it healthy, you know, I think with most things in life, everything in moderation. So if a patient were to ask me that I would probably say, you know, ascertain how you feel before, during and after. If it's serving kind of a short term, need and fix for some of those endorphins, I think it's fine. I think for other people, it tends to be an escape, though, it tends to be an escape from their normal lives. And it tends to be an avoidance pattern. And that's where I would say, you know, maybe scale back on how much time you're spending, watching those things or doing those things. I also think there's an important difference between the emotions of fear

and anxiety. So fear is meant to be short term. It's what we feel when there's an actual threat or a danger in our environment. Anxiety is longer term. So anxiety is still fear based, but it's the emotion that lingers on and on after a danger is gone. And so I think for some people, if watching those things, or experiencing those things, long term turns into anxiety, that might be a time to scale back as well.

Melissa Whitfield 07:11

As an adult, I can tell the difference between real life and a horror movie or books. True Crime, as I can tell by its name is true. Can it be unhealthy to be quote unquote, obsessed with true crime?

Natalie Scanlon 07:24

I think it can be unhealthy to be obsessed with to crime. I will say as a psychologist, I'm particular about the word obsessed. So to me, the word obsessed is a diagnostic term like an OCD, meaning that it's recurrent, uncontrollable and unwanted thoughts or impulses. So, you know, I think more to the point, I think it goes back to functionally assessing why one is drawn to true crime. And just making sure it's a moderate entertaining part of life. That's really the question I would ask is, am I going to this because it's entertaining, or am I going to this because I want to escape my life, there's something about my life that I'm unhappy with, or I'm unfulfilled by. And so I'm kind of living vicariously through other people's true crime stories. I would also begin to be concerned if you know watching or listening to true crime is taking up many hours of the day. If it's impeding with other activities, you know, or it's essentially allowing the person to escape their own life for a significant amount of time. You also, I think, can be around those people who all they talk about is true crime. And that's just kind of annoying. And so, you know, find some other interests, find some other activities, broaden your horizons, right?

Melissa Whitfield 08:37

Good advice. What's the difference between conquering your fear like public speaking, or taking the plunge into something that might seem like an irrational fear to the rest of us, like fear of clowns, fear of heights, or other triggering situations?

Natalie Scanlon 08:53

Yeah, this is a great question. I really like this question. One of the things that I do in my practice is exposure based therapy for different types of anxiety disorders, whether it's obsessive compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder. We can even do exposure based treatments for eating disorders, PTSD. So this question really reminds me of that, because I think exposure based therapy and healthily exposing ourselves to things that are scary, is really important for things that we need to do to live a healthy functional life. So when it comes to, you know, public speaking, and even heights, you know, heights when we fly in an airplane or have to meet somebody in an office on the 20th floor of a building. Those are things that if we're so fearful of them, that we avoid them and feel like we can't do them that's going to get in the way of our activities. So I think conquering those those fears is a really important thing. I think in terms of the taking the plunge part of the question, like choosing to jump out of an airplane, that's going to be more for that thrill. And that excitatory process So, I've, I've had some family members who have decided to do that to commemorate a special event. And that's really special because you'll form very salient memories with people by doing something like that those are going to be memories that gets stored with emotions and lasts a long time. And so, again, in moderation, I think

for that thrill of that excitement, it can be healthy just serves a very different purpose than kind of exposing yourself in an exposure therapy way to some other things.

Melissa Whitfield 10:31

Earlier, you mentioned rock climbers and how it takes them a lot more to feel fear. Are there people who don't feel any fear?

Natalie Scanlon 10:40

I think so. I think we have at least anecdotal studies by history of people who, due to various things that could be damage to certain brain structures, like the amygdala, it could be people who, biochemically they they enjoy higher levels of physiological arousal. So those types of fearful activities are fun, rather than fear based. You know, other people are desensitized to fear. And we see this in the media nowadays, too. If people are chronically exposed to violent video games or other types of violence, they can almost create their own threshold for for the fear that they experience. And so I think, due to structural changes, due to biochemical changes, due to experiential changes, some people feel fear much less often than other people do. The other thing that I think is important to note is that there are some studies that indicate that people who have lower levels of empathy are typically drawn to scary movies and true crime. So if you think about it, if you're an if you're an empathic person, you're going to be watching a scary movie feeling for all of those people who are in danger. And that's not going to be a fun experience for you. Whereas if you're somebody who kind of just sticks with your own experience, you can watch those movies and be entertained. And so everybody's different. Everybody comes with their own, you know, different walks of life. And that's, I think, what makes the difference?

Melissa Whitfield 12:06

Well, then, I guess along those lines, what do you recommend that we say to friends when we don't want to see a scary movie or go to a haunted house or go on the extremely tall ride?

Natalie Scanlon 12:16

Yeah, I'm a big believer in boundaries in general. So whether it's boundaries in this specific situation, or boundaries with other things, I think knowing doing some reflection and knowing where you're at, and then being able to advocate for those boundaries with people, whether it's friends or family members or coworkers is really important. You know, different people have different wiring, different tolerances for distressing emotions and experiences. And so what one person might find to be thrilling, another person finds to be exhausting or traumatic. And it's all about kind of one's own experience and desire. So I think, setting the boundary being clear about your boundary, but also not feeling like you have to explain it in a lot of detail. Hopefully, you're around people who just respect your boundaries for what they are. The other thing I would encourage our listeners to think about is that this, this whole topic does kind of beg the question of trauma histories. And we know a lot of people have trauma histories. And so, again, it might be fun for you to think about going into a scary movie or going into that nightmare on 19th Haunted House, but that could be really reminiscent of trauma for somebody else. And so I think just being cautious about inviting people to those things, and what their responses are is important.

Melissa Whitfield 13:32

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Natalie Scanlon 13:35

I don't think so. I think we covered a lot of ground. I think this is a really fun time of year, but also a time of year to be cognizant of the scary things that we experience other times of the year, too. I mean, a lot of scary things have happened in our state and in our country. And so while this can be a really celebratory time and a really fun time, just be cautious about people's experiences.

Melissa Whitfield 13:57

Well, thanks again for coming on our podcast.

Natalie Scanlon 13:59

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Melissa Whitfield 14:00

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