

Fear Factors

Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear?

READ THINK WRITE DISCUSS



Due to copyright law, I am unable to offer a full-text version of the Allegra Ringo article here. You have purchased my lesson materials to use with the article, not the article itself. If you enter "Allegra Ringo Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear" into any search engine, you will find numerous copies of the article available for you to print and use in class. During my last product update, these websites were hosting full-text versions of the article. Just copy-and-paste the addresses below to access copies of the story to print and use in class:

Original version that students can read online:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/why-do-some-brains-enjoy-fear/280938/>

(If you print from *The Atlantic* site, be sure to reduce the size to 80% and print in "landscape" rather than "portrait" mode to save quite a bit of paper.)

Or here's the full article typeset by a fellow teacher onto just three pages for much easier printing:

http://mrsturgeonfjh.weebly.com/uploads/3/1/2/4/31246719/why_do_some_brains_enjoy_fear.pdf

BONUS VIDEO CLIP - After reading the article, answering the questions, and reviewing the answers with a full-class discussion, you might want to share this 6-minute video with your classes. It closely reinforces the article and is hosted by Dr. Margee Kerr, the sociologist featured in *The Atlantic* piece. Plus, it's just creepy fun.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mx52qvdrG6M>

Fear Factors

Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear?

By Allegra Ringo

On a separate sheet of paper, answer every part of the following questions. You must write complete, thoughtful sentences.

1. Describe a time when you were really, really scared. Be sure to include descriptive details.
2. Who is Dr. Margee Kerr, the person interviewed for this article? Why, do you suppose, *The Atlantic* chose to publish her interview on Oct. 31?
3. According to David Zald, a professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University, why do some people enjoy the feeling of being scared more than others?
4. What are "flashbulb memories" and why are they important?
5. In order for a person to enjoy a scary event, such as a horror film or haunted house, what's a necessary component? Why is this critical to the person's enjoyment?



6. Kerr mentions four "superhero monsters," ones whose existence defies the general laws of nature. First, list the four monsters. Have you previously heard of any of these? Then, add another monster you've heard of that would fit this list.

7. Kerr says that people have traditionally scared themselves and each other for several reasons, including controlling behavior. What type of behavior, do you suppose, leaders of a community would want to control and how might they use fear to do so? Give a concrete example.

8. According to Dr. Kerr's theories, which event would do more to strengthen the relationships within a family, a trip to a haunted house or a pumpkin patch? Explain.



A female
aphonopelma atomicum.
Does knowing her name
make her less scary?

Fear Factors article – Level 1

KEY

1. Describe a time when you were really, really scared. Be sure to include descriptive details. *Students' answers will vary, but this question should make for a fun opener when you review the answers with your class. Be sure to share your own answer to this question with your class.*
2. Who is Dr. Margee Kerr, the person interviewed for this article? Why, do you suppose, *The Atlantic* chose to publish her interview on Oct. 31? *Dr. Kerr is a sociologist and professor at Robert Morris University and Chatham University. She also works as the staff sociologist at ScareHouse, a haunted house entertainment venue in Pittsburgh. The article ran on Halloween because the interview held a fun, timely hook to the spooky holiday.*
3. According to David Zald, a professor of psychology at Vanderbilt University, why do some people enjoy the feeling of being scared more than others? *His research shows that some people "get more of a kick" from the release of dopamine, a hormone that's released in our brains when we're in a scary or thrilling situation, than other people do.*
4. What are "flashbulb memories" and why are they important? *A "flashbulb" memory is an incredibly strong memory that sticks in a person's mind. The "flashbulb" word is taken from old camera flashes, which helped to burn an image onto film. In a similar way, an intense moment can be burned onto a person's memory. This is important because we wouldn't want a scary moment to traumatize a child for his/her entire life.*
5. In order for a person to enjoy a scary event, such as a horror film or haunted house, what's a necessary component? Why is this critical to the person's enjoyment? *It's necessary that we know we're actually in a safe environment. Without that knowledge, we wouldn't feel any pleasure in the moment because our brains wouldn't relax; they'd be stuck in the high stress fight-or-flight mode.*
6. Kerr mentions four "superhero monsters," ones whose existence defies the general laws of nature. First, list the four monsters. Have you previously heard of any of these? Then, add another monster you've heard of that would fit this list. *The four monsters are the Chupacabra, the Loch Ness Monster, the Yokai, and the Alps. Students' answers on the last question will vary, but they will likely also mention the Abominable Snowman/Yeti or Bigfoot.*
7. Kerr says that people have traditionally scared themselves and each other for several reasons, including controlling behavior. What type of behavior, do you suppose, leaders of a community would want to control and how might they use fear to do so? Give a concrete example. *Students' answers will vary, but I imagine the Puritans settling in New England and warning their community members not to head out into the woods because that is where Satan likes to hang out. Students' answers to this question should make for a lively conversation as you review the answers with your class.*
8. According to Dr. Kerr's theories, which event would do more to strengthen the relationships within a family, a trip to a haunted house or a pumpkin patch? Explain. *Dr. Kerr would likely argue that the haunted house has more of the elements needed to help people feel closer to each other because they'll be scared and the dopamine released will make everyone feel good and more closely bonded to each other.*

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On a separate sheet of paper, answer every part of the following questions. You must write complete, thoughtful sentences.

1. What's the scariest book or movie you've ever read/seen? Explain what made that work particularly effective.

2. Dr. Margee Kerr is described as a "scare specialist" and an "expert in the field of fear." What credentials does she hold? Do you think she's qualified to be interviewed on this topic? Why or why not?

3. What's happening in a person's brain that causes the "natural high" from a fight-or-flight response?

4. Dr. Kerr says there are two types of fears, "learned fears versus those fears that appear to be more innate." Innate fears are things like a fear of falling or a fear of loud noises. What, though, might be a learned fear? Explain and give an example.

5. In the Baby Albert experiment, researchers rang a loud, jarring alarm each time the infant reached for a soft item, such as a white rabbit or a pile of cotton balls. Soon, the infant no longer reached for fuzzy objects and even showed distress when such an item was placed anywhere near him. Explain how this experiment is unethical.



A female
aphonopelma atomicum.
Does knowing her name
make her less scary?

6. Mid-way through the article, Kerr says, "And really anything that doesn't make sense or causes us some sort of dissonance, whether it is cognitive or aesthetic, is going to be scary." Using a dictionary, look up and write the definitions for "dissonance," "cognitive," and "aesthetic." Then, rewrite the sentence in language that a student two years younger than you could understand.

7. Explain why, according to Kerr, a story about a person trying to live forever is actually terrifying.

8. Explain why taking your new crush on a date to a horror film or haunted house is a good idea.

Fear Factors article – Level 2

KEY

1. What's the scariest book or movie you've ever read/seen? Explain what made that work particularly effective. *Students' answers will vary, but this question should make for a fun opener when you review the answers with your class. Be sure to share your own answer to this question with your class.*
2. Dr. Margee Kerr is described as a "scare specialist" and an "expert in the field of fear." What credentials does she hold? Do you think she's qualified to be interviewed on this topic? Why or why not? *Dr. Kerr is a professor at Robert Morris University and Chatham University. She also works as the ScareHouse attraction's staff sociologist. Students' answers about the quality of her credentials will vary and some will argue that she'd be more credible if she taught at a more famous school, such as Yale or Harvard. I would counter that she's earned a doctorate of sociology and is able to speak with authority on this topic. Yes, she is qualified to be interviewed for this Halloween article.*
3. What's happening in a person's brain that causes the "natural high" from a fight-or-flight response? *In those stressful moments, some people's brains release an enjoyable amount of dopamine, a feel-good hormone that creates a happy buzz.*
4. Dr. Kerr says there are two types of fears, "learned fears versus those fears that appear to be more innate." Innate fears are things like a fear of falling or a fear of loud noises. What, though, might be a learned fear? Explain and give an example. *Students' answers will vary, but learned fears develop within us based on previous experiences or modeling by those around us. For instance, a child who is afraid of spiders has probably seen her mother freak out whenever a spider is in the house. We're not innately afraid of spiders, but media images and other people's reactions teach young children to be fearful around arachnids. That's a learned fear.*
5. In the Baby Albert experiment, researchers rang a loud, jarring alarm each time the infant reached for a soft item, such as a white rabbit or a pile of cotton balls. Soon, the infant no longer reached for fuzzy objects and even showed distress when such an item was placed anywhere near him. Explain how this experiment is unethical. *The researchers basically scarred this child for life, creating an irrational fear of soft, fuzzy things. Thankfully, practices have changed and scientists are no longer permitted to run tests like these on human subjects.*
6. Mid-way through the article, Kerr says, "And really anything that doesn't make sense or causes us some sort of dissonance, whether it is cognitive or aesthetic, is going to be scary." Using a dictionary, look up and write the definitions for "dissonance," "cognitive," and "aesthetic." Then, rewrite the sentence in language that a student two years younger than you could understand. *"Dissonance" means a lack of agreement. "Cognitive" means of, relating to, or involving conscious mental activities. "Aesthetic" means of or relating to art or beauty. Students' rewritten sentences will vary, but here's one that works: "And really anything that doesn't make sense or causes us to feel some sort of discomfort, either in our minds or in our appreciation of the way it looks, is going to seem scary to us."*
7. Explain why, according to Kerr, a story about a person trying to live forever is actually terrifying. *An attempt to live forever is against the laws of nature. It's not natural to attempt such a monstrous thing and the idea should frighten us.*
8. Explain why taking your new crush on a date to a horror film or haunted house is a good idea. *Dr. Kerr explains that we "build a special closeness" to people who are nearby when we're experiencing a scary event together. As humans, we need a pack and know that there is safety in numbers. Because of this, we are comforted by having people nearby in times of fear and stress. And if that nearby cutie wants to huddle close to you, all the better, right?*