

The ChronicleHerald

Celebrating Halloween helps people control their fears, create social bonds, says Halifax psychologist

Nebal Snan

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Allison Stoyles is dressing up her son as a lion on Saturday.

While the seven-week-old won't miss out on wearing a cute costume for his first Halloween, Stoyles said her family's trick-or-treating tradition will be put on hold this year.

"I think because COVID has been going on for a long time now, it's a little disappointing, but it's understandable and it's kind of expected at this point," she said.

Stoyles is still celebrating Halloween with close family.

"We're actually just getting together with his cousin. ... We're going to do a little candy exchange," she said.

"Even though it may not be what we're used to, hopefully everybody still is able to have a good time and kind of get in the spirit and enjoy it in a different way."



Gerry Fex attaches a displaced eye from a witch that's part of the Halloween display in front of his Wallace Heights home in Dartmouth, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. - Tim Krochak

Corinne Dixon is also celebrating it differently this year.

"At my house, I'm going to put treats out in the driveway so they can self-trick-or-treat, with a note to be fair to others," she said.

"But I don't want people knocking at my door. ... COVID has changed my thoughts around that."

Children in Dixon's family won't be trick-or-treating face-to-face.

"Even though the numbers are low here, it's in the back of your mind that you got to be safe."

Simon Sherry, professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University, said celebrating Halloween is especially important this year.

"Halloween is a spooky holiday about scary experiences and scary experiences provide bonding opportunities," he said.



Allison Stoyles and her seven-week-old son at the Halifax Public Gardens on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. - Nebal Snan

People coming together to visit a haunted house or watch a scary movie and connect over confronting those scary experiences together.

"When you get terrified by a deranged clown in a movie theatre, there's a dump of norepinephrine and adrenaline and other hormones and neurochemicals that make these events really stand out in our memory," he said.

Those memories become something to enjoy and celebrate with others, he added.

According to Sherry, the social cohesion that comes from Halloween is particularly important during the pandemic where we have had more isolation.

Halloween is also the perfect opportunity for people to master controlling their fears.

"Cautiously follow all public health guidance and then model to your children to be brave," he said.

“Show those children that it’s possible to go forward in the world while taking appropriate risks in a pandemic.”

Sherry said parents who overprotect their children might put them at higher risk of developing serious problems with anxiety later in life.



Dr. Simon Sherry, psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, said people react differently to fear depending on their personality. He's pictured at his clinic in Halifax on Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. - Nebal Snan

Why some people enjoy scary experiences

A person’s response to fear depends on the type of personality they have.

“Some people for a very good reason don’t enjoy the hormonal and neurochemical dump that occurs during a frightening experience,” Sherry said.

People who experience things in life intensely or negatively might find scary movies or haunted houses overwhelming psychologically and physically.

“If you’re a thrill avoider, you’re risk averse, you want to stay at home, keep it safe and not take those types of risks,” he said.

On the other hand, a sensation seeker is always looking for the next thrill to raise the level of stimulation in their brain.

For them, watching horror movies or going to haunted houses can be "quite pleasurable," Sherry said.

When it comes to facing scary experiences, Sherry said it's important for people to experiment and identify their boundaries based on that, which Janna Ganesan has managed to do.

"I'm not a big fan of (watching horror movies) because I get spooked really easily, even just talking about scary stuff," she said. "But as long as you don't involve ghosts I'm fine."

Other people, like Dixon, are initially averse to scary experiences, but might themselves enjoying them after trying.

"I have been to haunted houses and loved it, which surprised me," she said. "I do like the adrenaline of it."

People should be careful while experimenting. Sherry said it's possible to develop symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms after watching a "horrendously frightening movie." The symptoms include intrusive memories and disturbed sleep.

"Evidence suggests you can't scar yourself in a life-long way from watching 'the exorcist', but you can create medium-term symptoms that are actually with you for weeks," he said.



Stephen Rose is wearing a Grim Reaper costume to raise awareness about the importance of wearing masks to protect people from COVID-19. He's shown at the Halifax Public Gardens on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. - Nebal Snan

A safe Halloween

The biggest advice for people celebrating Halloween this year is following public health directions to keep everyone safe.

Stephen Rose is taking advantage of the occasion to remind people of that. Wearing a grim reaper costume, Rose walked down Spring Garden Road on Thursday while carrying a sign that urges people to wear a mask.

"Most people feel 'I'm OK with COVID-19,' but there are quite a number of people who are not that fortunate because they're elderly," he said.

He added that young and middle-aged people who don't follow COVID-19 public health directions are putting their elderly parents and grandparents at risk of infection.

"If that happens, they'll forever regret it," he said. "Something has to be done to get people to listen."

Neal Snan is a Local Journalism Initiatives reporter, a position funded by the federal government.