

Our fondness for fear: Why we love watching horror movies and the rush of being scared

By [Yvette d'Entremont](#) Star Halifax

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HALIFAX—Whether it's recoiling in terror touring a haunted house or binge-watching horror movies wide-eyed and alone in the dark, many people love the thrill of being creeped out.

That includes Dalhousie University professor and practicing clinical psychologist Simon Sherry, who said our fondness for fear is complicated and Halloween is a great time to reflect on it.

“We get a thrill and a rush from watching a horror movie without being exposed to the actual danger,” he said.

“You’re sitting in a movie theatre watching an axe murderer, whereas I think most people would not at all enjoy the experience of being chased through the woods at midnight by an axe murderer.”

Sherry said whether you enjoy being frightened or despise it depends entirely on your personality and your brain. Those who enjoy fear are often called sensation seekers, and Sherry said it’s thought that their brains are often under stimulated.

“A sensation seeker is always searching out risky, thrilling, stimulating experiences that may also include fear provoking situations like horror movies or a haunted corn maze,” he explained.



“The key part there is that their brain idles in a state of hypoactivation. They’re looking for that next thrill to pick up the pace a bit.”

While sensation seekers enjoy and are entertained by the alarm response that goes off in their brains when frightened in these ways, Sherry said there are obviously others who go far out of their way to avoid any and all fear-provoking situations. They dislike what they think, feel, and how their body reacts when they’re scared. He referred to them as having something called neuroticism or emotional instability.

“You can often see that someone who is high in this personality trait neuroticism has a really exaggerated, really strong startle response. So psychologically and physiologically, they respond differently to fear provoking situations like a haunted house,” he said.

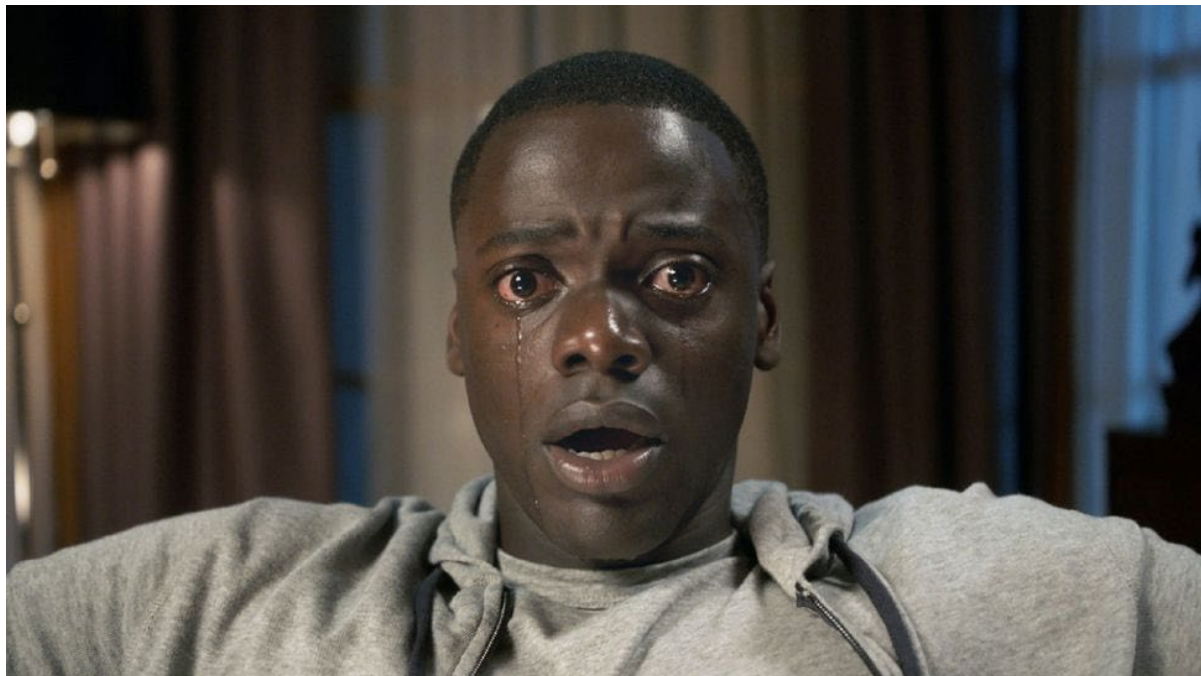
“Their brains and their personalities are just more reactive to a fear provoking event like having to watch *The Exorcist* at midnight.”

But if you love being creeped out, does that mean that it’s always good for you? Sherry points to a [2010 University of Regina study](#) where participants were brought to a lab and shown “an extremely terrifying” horror movie. As many as four weeks later, some were still being negatively impacted by the experience.

“People were still having intrusive thoughts about this horror movie and distressing recollections to the point of having flashbacks and they were having problems with their sleep, all relating back to this movie,” Sherry said.

“So you can absolutely disturb yourself by exposing yourself to these scary types of movies or situations if they’re not a good match for the brain and the personality that you have ... If you watch *Psycho* and then you can’t have a shower comfortably for the next three months, then maybe that suggests you shouldn’t be putting yourself through that.”

Sherry also enjoys a good scare but said even he has pushed his own limits. He described his favourite horror movies as “old school” selections like *The Shining*, *Psycho* and *The Exorcist*. More recently, he said he watched—and was terrified by—the movie *Get Out*.



“Do I like this? No. I really don’t. My all time most terrifying experience certainly as it relates to Halloween was two years ago. I went to a haunted corn maze and they did that

very well,” he recalled, chuckling at the idea that he not only consented to the experience, but paid for it.

“That was above and beyond in terms of anything that I enjoyed. It was 20 minutes of pure horror, and you’d figure a psychologist would have a better capacity to reflect and figure out that I wouldn’t like that sort of thing, but I didn’t know things could be that scary.”

If lines like ‘I see dead people,’ ‘They’re here,’ and ‘Do you like scary movies,’ speak to you as you sit down to watch your favourite fright flick with liver, fava beans and a nice Chianti, just make sure your friends are OK with the experience too.

“I think part of the scares we’re talking about (here) is they’re communal in nature, and sometimes I think we want to go along to fit in, to conform and to belong,” Sherry explained.

“And that’s a pretty strong pull that helps explain why despite disliking being frightened, you still may end up at a slasher movie with your friend at the theatre.”