

Five *on* Friday

Musings on Mental Health

Boo!

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD
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Yesterday, the streets and halls were filled with ghosts and superheroes, princesses and fantastical dragons. Between an all-day meeting and a work dinner, I was able to sneak away for a couple of hours to celebrate Halloween with my in-laws. Evidence that this spooky day is for everyone who is young at heart, their older adult community was filled with costumed characters celebrating with pumpkins, witch's brew, candy corns and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups (my personal favorite). Where did Halloween get its start and what does mental health have to do with this holiday of black cats and candy?



With my father-in-law as Einstein

1. In the beginning. The origins of Halloween date back to the Celtic holiday of Samhain, which was celebrated about halfway between the fall equinox and the winter solstice. For the northern hemisphere where the Celts lived, it marked the beginning of the darkest time of year. Bonfires and feasts were prepared to welcome ancestral souls who were thought to come back to earth at this time. Samhain's two days of celebration included walking door-to-door in costumes and reciting verses in exchange for food. With the rise of Christianity, many pagan celebrations morphed into religious holidays, and so it was that, in the 9th century, Samhain gave way to All Saints' and then All Souls' Day. Today's Halloween takes us back to the Celtic roots of Samhain and invites us all to play with fantasy and fear.

2. Costumes, fantasy and pretend. Halloween invites us to let go of everyday reality and play. And we are not playing enough these days. Over the past 50 years, [time for children's free play has declined dramatically](#). Over this same period, we have witnessed increases in reported rates of anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, and suicide among our youth. These are correlations and the relationships are complex, but there is little doubt that making time for play is good for us. [Play, and particularly pretend play](#), is serious business with substantial benefits - improved brain health, greater resilience, enhanced learning, increased social skills, and greater empathy. Quite simply, it makes us happy. Expert Peter Gray speaks passionately about these issues in his TEDx talk, which you can find [here](#).

3. Spooking ourselves may actually be good for our brains. Why do we enter haunted houses knowing we are going to be "scared to death"!? Understanding [the circuitry of the brain and human psychology sheds some light on this seemingly paradoxical behavior](#). The great gift of Halloween is that we know it is pretend and fantasy thanks to the work of our hippocampus and frontal cortex. These parts of our brains help us interpret the world around us. Once we understand that we are safe, inhibitory pathways are activated, which dampen the amygdala fear response and its downstream result. This communication between these different parts of our brain actually makes fear fun. In addition to enjoying the arousal, we also experience increased calm and clarity following intensely frightening experiences. And there is some thought that experiencing fear in safe places is essential to child development and developing confidence and courage in moments of fear.

4. Razorblades in Apples? The mythology of malevolent strangers hiding poisons or sharp objects such as razor blades or needles in candy gets air time around Halloween every year. Stories of wicked strangers harming innocent children perpetuate this particular type of urban legend. Of course, we do not want to willy-

nilly send our children out into danger. We do not want innocent children put in harm's way as they trick or treat. [Have no fear! Not a single one of these cautionary tales has ever proven true.](#) According to Professor [Joel Best](#), expert who has examined these alleged nefarious Halloween acts annually since the 1980's, not a single case of strangers killing or permanently injuring children this way on Halloween has ever been proven.

5. Samhainophobia. That's what someone has if they are afraid of Halloween. This phobia takes us back to Samhain, the Celtic roots of Halloween. But all fun aside, mental disorders that are characterized by abnormal levels of fear and anxiety are common. [Anxiety and fear-related disorders](#) include phobias, generalized anxiety disorder, separation anxiety, PTSD and obsessive compulsive disorder. Most of these conditions usually begin at a young age but can emerge across the lifespan. Left untreated, these disorders can be a burden on a person's relationships and interfere with achieving meaningful and successful lives. The good news is that we have effective psychotherapies and medications that work with a relatively short course of treatment.

Today's the morning after. Costumes are put away. But what do we do with all the leftover candy? Let's admit it. After we say goodnight to our last Wonder Woman and Spiderman, we have all found ourselves rummaging through the leftover candy bowl, unwrapping one snack size treat after another. Check out this [fun-loving piece from VTHR](#) featuring a variety of homegrown behavioral strategies that work to curb unwanted candy consumption! Take your pick.