

Halloween: Oh What a Fright

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Zombies, graveyards, haunted houses, witches, goblins. How did it happen that we have this holiday that indulges all things spooking, scary and frightening?



[Photo Credit](#)

Celebrating Halloween over the years, I find myself pondering how it came to be that we celebrate the practice of intentionally scaring ourselves and each other on Halloween? I remember back to my own experience as a kid and have witnessed my children navigate the peculiar traditions of Halloween with a quizzical mixture of fun and horror. How does all this fear fit into our understanding of mental health more broadly?

1. Halloween origins. The roots of this trick-or-treating holiday reach back to ancient festivals and religious rituals. Today's [Halloween](#) evolved from the Celtic festival of [Samhain](#), the day when the ghosts of the dead were believed to return to earth. These spirits were the link between earth and the spirit world. Troublemakers of a sort, but better understood as mediums who would help the Druids make predictions for the future. In the eighth century, Pope Gregory III figured that the day after the ghosts departed would be ideal for honoring all saints. Samhain became known as All Hallows Eve and the next day became All Saints Day. The poetic

choreography of these complementary holidays - first clearing the world from trouble and then welcoming saintly visits - was set.

2. When did fear become part of the story? Perhaps it is the case that fear of a certain sort was a central feature of Samhain from the beginning. The Celts had hundreds of Irish mythical deities. They had their fear-worthy [demons](#) in the spirit world as well. Some historians think that over time, people feared being recognized by the returning ghosts and thus began the tradition of masks and costumes. To avoid being recognized by the visiting spirits, people would disguise themselves when they left their homes after dark so that the ghosts would mistake them for fellow spirits. I am still not sure how this gets us to haunted houses and jack o'lanterns, but it seems that across generations and cultures, various ideas have expanded and diversified this playful - and fearful - exchange with the spirits of Halloween to get us where we are today.

3. Oh, what a fright! Regardless of when it took center stage, one of the benefits of Halloween's spooky and scary traditions is that they invite us to play with fear. They offer opportunities for practice. We are invited to use our imagination to express our fears and to be frightened in a context that is explicitly designed to be just for fun. Halloween provides a stage for simulated fearful situations that allow us to experience what fear feels like and learn how to self-regulate fear and related emotions. According to [Prof. Tamar Kushnir](#), Halloween "is a way of playing with emotion without real cost."

4. Why would we want to get familiar with fear? Fear is a natural human emotion that is a core part of human experience. We all experience fear. It is unavoidable and healthy to know what fear feels like because it is an essential component of our body's alarm system. When we feel cold, we know we need to don another layer of clothing or put a log on the fire. Like being cold, fear may feel unpleasant, but it also serves as a cue to protect us and keep us safe. It is our brain's attempt to warn us of danger and compel us to make choices that attend to perceived danger and preserve our safety.

5. When is fear a problem for our mental health? In its place, fear is constructive, even lifesaving. There are, however, a few ways things can go south: 1) when fear lingers too long and we hang in that alarm state, it can diminish our mental health and our capacity to cope; 2) when we are fearful due to thinking that exaggerates or fabricates risk due to internal psychological issues, misperceptions, or emotional conflicts, we need to shift from changing our circumstances to reevaluating our thought process; 3) when we are not able to effectively manage our fears, we are at [higher risk](#) for developing longer-lasting states of anxiety; and 4) when fears run unchecked, they can lead to the development of phobias that adversely impact our mental health and well-being.

This Halloween, my daughter-in-law and I, along with our pups, will be dressed up as honeybees as we pass out candy to all the trick-or-treaters who knock on our door. So many people I know are afraid of bees, but could it "bee" that we will provide some playful (and safe) exposure to help extinguish this fear? Wouldn't that be sweet?!