TYBI E7:Scare the F(ear) out of you!: a Halloween Experiment

[00:00:00] **Rebecca Cia:** Episode seven : Scare the beep right out of you! Can scary movies help you recover from trauma.? With the leaves changing and the crisp fall breeze whipping in. I have had the urge to curl up on the couch with a blanket and some caramel popcorn and watch a scary movie. I was never a total horror fan. I could get into a psychological thriller, like [00:00:30] Silence of the Lambs every once in a while, or watch some old episodes of the Twilight Zone with my dad, maybe a good ghost story, like Paranormal Activity, but I'll admit it's been a while since I've enjoyed a good scare.

[00:00:44] I think I may have unconsciously avoided scary movies and crime dramas after my brush with near death three years ago. After surviving *"almost murder",* I guess I thought scary movies might trigger me or at the very least I wouldn't find it [00:01:00] entertaining after living through it firsthand.

[00:01:02] During the four days that I was held captive, I actually missed a birthday. And after I was released from the hospital, my sister wanted to celebrate that birthday. I missed, she asked me what I wanted to do, and I was only half joking when I said I wanted to go to an escape room. The good news is she didn't take me seriously.

[00:01:20] So she planned something else instead. I think she was treating me with kid gloves and probably thought that so soon after surviving trauma, that I would probably be [00:01:30] triggered and re-traumatized. And maybe she was right, but it has been three years. And I'm back in new England, which seems to be the quintessential Halloween destination.

[00:01:41] The fall leaves, the whistling winds at night and theplethera of haunted houses and hayrides has put me into the spirit. So I thought maybe it was time to suck it up, buttercup and watch a scary movie.

[00:01:54] Being the over-thinker that I am. I began to wonder if I was going to be triggered or [00:02:00] how my brain, my body, or my mind would react. Would a trigger anxiety, would I have nightmares or would I be completely unfazed? So being the human Getty pink that I am, I decided I was going to find out. So all I could tell you all about it.

[00:02:18] So being the human Guinea pig that I am, I decided I was going to find out. And that I was going to tell you all about it.

[00:02:25] Welcome back survivors to a special Halloween episode of tuck your [00:02:30] boobs in the podcast that prepares you for the battle of overcoming your trauma and helps you get your shit together after crisis. On this week's episode, you guessed it. We're going to talk about scary movies and are they helping us or hurting us after trauma?

[00:02:48] We have all heard the term face. Your fears, cognitive behavioral therapists have been helping people do this for about a century now with exposure therapy, which is a form of therapy that gradually exposes a [00:03:00] patient to the object of their fears within a safe environment, until the fear is unconditioned.

[00:03:06] Exposure therapy is typically used to address phobias like arachnophobia, the fear of spiders, claustrophobia, the fear of enclosed spaces and even triskaidekaphobia, which is fear of the number 13 and my own personal hell Cephalophobia, which is the fear of cephalopods, AKA octopus, and squid. [00:03:30] Okay, I'll admit it.

[00:03:31] I have a bit of an unhealthy infatuation with Johnny Depp. I mean, who doesn't right. However, I do hide and squeal like a pig when I watch any of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies and that ungodly creature of the Krackin appears, or even that weird guy with the octopus stuck to his face. I know it's not real.

[00:03:49] And it's a totally irrational fear,

[00:03:51] but it's not just in movies... I can't even sit at the sushi bar because inevitably I will end up in front of an octopus tentacle, and [00:04:00] then it's all cold sweats and a lump in my throat and the constant urge to pee. It's not fun. So I wondered if watching a scary movie would have the same effect and undo all the work I had done to eliminate my post-traumatic stress.

[00:04:15] So naturally I channeled my inner nerd and went to work, researching the neuroscience of scary movies and how it might affect survivors of trauma.

[00:04:24] Like, is this an epically bad idea? Am I going to undo all the emotional healing I had done over the last three [00:04:30] years? Am I going to wet myself? Here's what I learned. First of all phobias are not the same as fear. According to the website, TheRecoveryVillage.com quote "Fear is a natural emotion that protects people from harm when they face real and imminent danger, a phobia is an excessive fear or anxiety related to a specific object or situations that are out of proportion to the actual danger present."[00:05:00]

[00:05:00] Last week. I talked about the two main types of fear, conscious fear and unconscious fear, and a quick recap in case you missed it, or you're like me and you have the memory span of a goldfish conscious fear is based on expectations and perceptions.

[00:05:15] This can either be because of uncertainty of an outcome or because there is a belief that there will be a specific unwanted outcome and unconscious fear is the trigger response that happens in the amygdala. It's the source [00:05:30] of most of the anxiety that survivors struggle with. It comes out of nowhere. It takes control of our bodies and it leaves us feel like we're going crazy. These sensations then lead to conscious fears because we start to cycle through the thoughts of all of the possible negative outcomes and we start catastrophizing, but isn't this exactly what makes a scary movie? Well, scary. The suspense, fear of the unknown, the unpredictable and loud noises that make you [00:06:00] jump out of your seat that makes your heart race. It makes you hold your breath and tense every muscle in your body and the racing thoughts about what could happen next. Now if you're a survivor living with unconscious fear all the time, being easily triggered and feeling the unwanted and debilitating physical symptoms without warning.

[00:06:19] And on top of that, you are constantly worried that you're going to have a panic attack. Of course, the idea of being scared on purpose just sounds stupid. Right?

[00:06:29] I wanted to [00:06:30] know if we can experience fear without being afraid. Exposure therapy is a gradual process that allows us to stop being unconsciously afraid of the conscious fear, can watching scary movies, help you face your fears and could it lessen the effects of post-traumatic stress? ,

[00:06:47] Spoiler alert. The answer is well both Yes, and technically, No. Let's start with NO. Dr. Osama Khalaf from the Laboratory of [00:07:00] Neuroepigenetics in Switzerland, conducted a study to determine if fear could be attenuated within the brain with exposure therapy. Now, unfortunately, the process involved, drugging and slightly torturing mice, which I am super sad about.

[00:07:15] However, we have come a very long way since psychologists experimented on real human babies, like little baby Albert, and I will put a link in the description if you want to learn more about that, but I'm still shaking my head. Anyway, back to [00:07:30] modern inhumanity... Khalaf conducted that. Yes, exposure therapy is actually very effective in turning down the unconscious fear response in the amygdala, AKA the involuntary physiological response, but only if done correctly. Exposure therapy works best when the memory of the initial fear is most closely recreated.

[00:07:52] It's called the original fear engram This is the original connection of neurons that fired when the scary thing was [00:08:00] happening. When we recall a memory of a scary or traumatic event, our brains have to reconnect all the same neurons to create the complete engram. Most of the time however, if we are not exposed to accurate stimuli, we don't fully recreate the complete engram.. We get bits and pieces of the original memory. This is also why eye-witness testimony can be unreliable sometimes because we don't always get total recall. [00:08:30] Dr. Khalaf's research suggests that in order for us to effectively attenuate or turn down the volume on our specific fears, we actually do have to recall the genuine fear memory. Which is most effectively done by safe exposure, to a recreation of the exact object or scenario.

[00:08:51] Now in psychology and personal development, this is known as facing your fears While horror movies, rarely if ever recreate the exact [00:09:00] thing you were afraid of, they do often mimic, exaggerated, real life conscious fears. A few examples of this are Stephen King's The Shinning. This is really about an exaggeration of alcoholism. And Amityville Horror is actually rhetoric on the real estate crisis at the time.

[00:09:18] And even Buffy the Vampire Slayer is really just about the horror of the clicks and cliches in high school. The horror genre as a whole tends to play up our conscious fears into [00:09:30] the extreme. So technically watching horror movies or in my case, Pirates of the Caribbean, won't help me overcome my phobia of octopus. However it can help with other post-traumatic stress symptoms, including specifically anxiety.

[00:09:47] Which brings me to all the reasons that yes, scary movies can help you with trauma recovery.

[00:09:53] Exposure to experiences that mimic our conscious fears can help relieve some stress of the [00:10:00] feared object or scenario because unlike the brain, the mind really likes metaphors. Metaphors help our subconscious mind make connections and fill in the gaps, when it is trying to understand something that occurred outside of the window of tolerance, or that was traumatic.

[00:10:20] Most fairytales use metaphors as well to convey the moral of the story.

[00:10:25] Turns out that horror movies can help relieve anxiety and [00:10:30] stress because they worked to distract us from the pain and pitfalls of real life. When we watch horrifying things that just don't happen in real life, we are transported away from our troubles, by watching even worse things happen. Now I know this sounds counterintuitive.

[00:10:48] You might think if you're having a bad day, you might be better suited to go watch a romcom with a happily ever after ending. However, when we do this, we're often disappointed when we come back down to earth and have to face our mediocre [00:11:00] lives. But watching someone else have a really, really bad day with a chainsaw makes our lives seem not so bad.

[00:11:08] It's actually a really common practice for people to watch crime drama and thriller movies, if they can't sleep. Many people actually find this soothing. Additionally exposure to scary things, whether it's horror movies or a haunted house or skydiving or racing motors, can actually help us learn something called [00:11:30] Fear Regulation.

[00:11:31] In fact, fear and excitement feel exactly the same in the body.

[00:11:35] Imagine your heart racing, your palms are sweaty and you're holding your breath. This could all happen right before you have to walk on stage and give a speech to 300 people, or it could happen when someone you're in love with walks in the room. We get to decide whether it's fear or excitement we are feeling.

[00:11:58] And this is known as the emotional [00:12:00] theory and it is why some people can associate a horror movie with the thrill of riding a rollercoaster and others find them purely distressing. Learning how to regulate the fear response by feeling the fear, sitting with it and learning to self a sooth actually helps build resilience in the brain. In fact studies have shown that fans of horror movies and thriller books have actually expressed greater resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[00:12:29] One [00:12:30] way this works is that horror movies take us on a journey. We get high off the cortisol and the adrenaline spikes from the suspense and the startling moments.

[00:12:40] A good horror movie will build the suspense right up until the end where typically at least one good guy makes it out alive. And the villain is slain. Good triumphs over evil. And the world is back in balance.

[00:12:53] We come down off of that high and experience a dopamine release. We reward ourselves for [00:13:00] surviving.

[00:13:01] Another way, psychological thrillers and horror movies help us build resilience, is by yelling at the stupid guy that walks off into the woods by himself. Ever notice there's always that one character in the movie that we all know is going to be the first to die. He makes stupid choices or just has an ego, the size of Montana.

[00:13:19] So we aren't really sad to see him go . Well, it turns out that watching other people make bad decisions and yelling at them to do something different, engages our [00:13:30] prefrontal cortex, the thinking part of our brain.

[00:13:32] And I've talked about this in the past. Our brains are doing a million things at once, but our minds can't really multitask. So if you are focusing on thinking up alternative escape routes or how you might save your friends, you aren't focusing on the fear response, which signals to your survival brain that you, your thinking brain and your mind are in control.

[00:13:54] Practicing the feeling of being in control, not only builds resilience, but it can be effective in [00:14:00] reducing anxiety as well.

[00:14:02] Okay. The whole point of all of this was for me to watch a scary movie and see what happened. And I tried to be as scientific as possible. I made a note of my heart rate and my breaths per minute, before watching the movie using my super duper accurate fitness watch, I had my sister choose the movie, something I had never seen before.

[00:14:23] And I had not seen previews for. I put on my PJ's. I grabbed my blanket and some snacks and I turned off the lights [00:14:30] and guess what happened? Actually nothing happened. In fact, I was bored for the first hour and 20 minutes of the movie and then the last 20 minutes or so my heart rate actually went down when all the action was happening,

[00:14:47] We watched "Get Out" Neil DeGrasse Tyson recently claimed that this was his favorite, scary movie. So to be honest, I expected more. I decided to try again a couple nights later, laying in bed [00:15:00] by myself. This time I typed in horror movie to the Netflix search bar and selected the first movie that popped up "Hypnotic" and. Nothing. In fact, the anticipation of being scared was actually much worse than the scary movie itself. So like, am I doing this wrong?

[00:15:21] Well, it turns out that by sheer coincidence, both movies have a central theme around hypnosis and being a certified [00:15:30] hypnotherapist, I easily debunked this suspense aspect of the movies, which in both cases left me bored. Which actually made me realize that there is another important component to scary movies.

[00:15:42] They do need to tap into some form of conscious or unconscious fears, the fear of the unknown, a phobia, or an unmet emotional need. Which is also why some people love scary movies and others hate them.[00:16:00]

[00:16:01] Tony Robbins. The self-help guru talks about the six basic human needs, certainty, uncertainty, or variety, love, or connection, significance, growth, and contribution. We all have our own recipe for how much of each emotional need we require to feel fulfilled. And how much of each we can tolerate. We all get these needs met in different ways. Some people have [00:16:30] a stronger need for certainty and security in their lives and will feel better cuddled up nice and safely with a cup of tea and their cat while others have a greater need for uncertainty and variety and might seek thrills like skydiving and roller coasters.

[00:16:45] Some people need to feel more connected and loved, and they favor activities where they can bond with others. Whereas others feel more fulfilled if they have a sense of significance for their accomplishments. And the same is true for growth and contribution where some people are [00:17:00] super high achievers and others are mother Teresa.

[00:17:04] Scary movies tend to peak the interest of those who have a greater need for uncertainty or variety. And those who seek personal growth.

[00:17:11] The uncertainty and suspense of not knowing what will happen next in a scary movie, combined with the curiosity to explore our own thoughts and emotions for personal growth is appealing to some. And those who favor significance may even give themselves a gold star for figuring out who the bad guy is [00:17:30] before anyone else.

[00:17:32] There's a few other cool side effects to watching scary movies. Scary movies, especially when watched with others creates a bonding effect. We are all social creatures and yes, even those of you who consider yourself anti-social as a species, we rely on each other for survival.

[00:17:49] And this includes the dopamine hit you're getting off of scrolling through social media and getting your dinner delivered by Uber eats. And when we watch a scary movie with a friend or a partner, [00:18:00] we build trust in each other through shared emotional experiences.

[00:18:04] I haven't seen too many horror movies in the theater. However, I do very much remember watching Paranormal Activity in a packed movie theater. I was skeptical at first. I thought that watching a movie about a haunted house was going to feel unreal and cheesy sitting in uncomfortable movie chairs with my feet, sticking to the floor.

[00:18:23] But I was very surprised the whole theater was screeching and gasping almost in unison. [00:18:30] And I remember even making small talk with strangers and people high-fiving on the way out at the end. I always remembered that as one of my favorite movie going experiences, but not until now researching this episode. Did I really understand why.

[00:18:44] Now another cool side effect of scary movies is that watching them actually boosts your immune system. A 2003 study found that after watching thriller or horror movies, participants had a higher white blood cell count.

[00:18:59] And [00:19:00] fun fact, number three, a 90 minute horror movie on average can burn off about 150 calories, which is about as much as a candy bar. And The Shining ranks the highest with 184 calories.

[00:19:15] Even though there isn't a ton of research on this subject. It's looks pretty promising that if you regularly watch horror movies or crime dramas you can build more resilience. You learn better fear regulation and you can actually [00:19:30] reduce your own anxiety.

[00:19:31] So I may give this one more shot and just go for the gold. Apparently The Shinning,, which I've never seen before is like the mother of all horror films. I'm going to test the theory and see if I can be brave enough to watch it on my own. Happy Halloween, everyone. And thanks for listening.