

Choosing the negative: The psychology of morbid curiosity

Prof. Suzanne Oosterwijk
(University of Amsterdam)

LECTURE SERIES

**Tuesday,
7th May
2019**

12:15 - 13:15

Campus Biotech
Room H8.01.D
9, chemin des Mines
Geneva

The deliberate exploration of negative information is an ubiquitous phenomenon; people regularly seek out negative content in the news, online or in books or films. Yet, although progress is made in studying curiosity for positive or neutral information, relatively little is known about “morbid curiosity” (i.e., curiosity for information involving death, violence or harm). In this talk I present a series of studies that operationalized morbid curiosity as a deliberate choice to approach and explore negative images. With a behavioral paradigm, I show that participants are particularly inclined to explore social scenes that involve death, violence or harm (e.g., fights, attacks, people helping victims). This exploratory behavior is enhanced when participants learn that other people found the images fascinating or disgusting. When participants perform the behavioral paradigm in the scanner, we find that choosing negative information involves neural systems associated with reward processing and salience detection (e.g., striatum, inferior frontal gyrus, anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex). Together, these results show that people are curious about death, violence or harm - that they act on this curiosity - and that there are similarities between morbid curiosity and regular curiosity. In my conclusion, I will propose new hypotheses about the functionality of morbid curiosity and the possible motives that underlie this phenomenon. ■

Swiss Doctoral School in Affective Sciences
swissuniversities