The science behind disgust

From dead bodies to pickles, the things that gross us out reveal a great deal about us. An expert explains

MANDY VAN DEVEN

We all have things that disgust us irrationally, whether it be cockroaches or chitterlings or cotton balls. For me, it’s fruit soda. It started when I was 3; my mom offered me a can of Sunkist after inner ear surgery. Still woozy from the anesthesia, I gulped it down, and by the time we made it to the cashier, all of it managed to come back up. Although it is nearly 30 years later, just the smell of this “fun, sun and the beach” drink is enough to turn my stomach.

But what, exactly, happens when we feel disgust? As Daniel Kelly, an assistant professor of philosophy at Purdue University, explains in his new book, “Yuck!: The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust,” it’s not just a physical sensation, it’s a powerful emotional warning sign. Although disgust initially helped keep us away from rotting food and
contagious disease, the defense mechanism changed over time to effect the distance we keep from one another. When allowed to play a role in the creation of social policy, Kelly argues, disgust might actually cause more harm than good.

Salon spoke with Kelly about hiding the science behind disgust, why we’re captivated by things we find revolting, and how it can be a very dangerous thing.

What exactly is disgust?

Simply speaking, disgust is the response we have to things we find repulsive. Some of the things that trigger disgust are innate, like the smell of sewage on a hot summer day. No one has to teach you to feel disgusted by garbage, you just are. Other things that are automatically disgusting are rotting food and visible cues of infection or illness. We have this base layer of core disgusting things, and a lot of them don’t seem like they’re learned.

But there’s also a whole set of things that have a lot of cultural and individual variation about whether it’s considered disgusting. For example, I like bloody steaks and my girlfriend, who is a vegetarian, finds them repulsive. The core base of what causes disgust has expanded to the point where certain kinds of moral violations, social transgressions, and even value systems of groups one is not a member of can come to be disgusting as well.

And that depends on where and how we grew up?

You might also like

**Millennials Are Ditching Delivery for This Dinner Hack**
Eater for Plated

**Warning: 4 Fish to NEVER Eat (avoid these like the plague)**
Inflammation Solution

FROM AROUND THE WEB

Presented by Zergnet

http://www.salon.com/2011/07/24/disgust_interview/
Burger King Japan
2014'S FAST FOOD ATROCITIES

Burger King's black cheeseburger: Made with squid ink and bamboo charcoal, arguably a symbol of meat's destructive effect on the planet. Only available in Japan.