



“You may be a passive-aggressive person and not even know it.”

Andrea Brandt, Ph.D. M.F.T.

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Pop Rocks

The psychology behind the media bombast

by Kasia Galazka

The Psychology of Offensive Halloween Costumes

What were they thinking? Here are some clues.

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Don Scarborough via Wikimedia Commons

On the spectrum of offense, this year had several costumes that ranked highly on the Rage-O-Meter: People have been documented donning costumes like sexy Ebola nurse, ISIS agents, and Ray Rice (battered woman sold separately).

The emotional hangover isn't new: You don't have to poke your imagination too much to picture them, but if you feel like having a reaction, Google a tragedy followed by "costume" and you'll be sure to find something.

If all of this makes you grumble, *What is going through their heads?*, here are several possibilities.

Terror is one thing some tragedies have in common. That is, someone may have wronged someone else, regardless of weapon of choice. But any grim reality can scare us, and when our innate perception of our invincibility is damaged, we fight to uphold our resistance to becoming victims. We may worry about history repeating itself and being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Tragedy is not discerning, and it does not discriminate.

"Today, with the Ebola scare, and the ongoing encroachment of terrorism, ghosts and goblins seem tame," says Dr. Carole Lieberman, a psychiatrist on the clinical faculty of UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. "By dressing up as the things they are most scared of, people try to feel as though they have mastered their fears."

Ridiculing a person or thing — as Justin Moyer encourages you to do in his [Washington Post article](#) — can diminish its significance. Mocking ISIS honors



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those who were slain but doesn't dismiss their deaths. "Evil isn't banal; it's infantile," and we shouldn't let the notion of "too soon" be a barrier, Moyer writes.

But more times than not, costumes are of a fear far removed from your own life. It would be an anomaly for someone directly affected by misfortune to directly mock it in costume. If your parent is battling cancer, dressing up as a tumor seems caustic. If you saw people leaping from the Twin Towers, you won't dress as a sexy version of the buildings.

Author and advice columnist April Masini of AskApril.com says not having experienced specific pain can lead people to make their Halloween choices.

Conversely, the comfort of familiarity can gerrymander your boundaries. "It's like making bad jokes because you're either unfamiliar with the hurt that someone who's the butt of the joke may feel, or else because you come from a background that is abusive, where you're used to being hurt, so you pass it forward because it's normal."

Nipping evil in the heels with ridicule should be, in a way, the best revenge, because to do so, you are living well.

But why doesn't it uniformly feel that way?



Londberg21 via Wikimedia Commons

It's postmodernism gone wild, says Dr. Lou Manza, department chairperson of psychology at Lebanon Valley College. The people dressing in these costumes fall into the category of not thinking logically, "either because they don't know *how* to do so or they think they don't *have* to engage in such an analysis."

"Since these people think this is funny, they either don't care what others think, or believe that everyone will see the world through the same lens they use," he says.

And the outskirts of comedy are riskier than the middle: That's why

you typically see the costumes at adults-only parties as an attempt to leverage the edge of what's acceptable, says Masini.

Stifling their exposure with ignorance, Manza says, would be the best response to those seeking their famed quarter hour. "But I doubt that everyone will ignore this, again, because of the lack of critical analysis."

"To paraphrase Jeff Goldblum's character in *Jurassic Park*, just because

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