

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Am I Afraid Of The Dark?

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[Jane] This is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids* from Vermont Public Radio. I'm the host of the show, Jane Lindholm. On this podcast we take your questions about anything, really anything, and we find interesting people to help offer you some answers.

Sometimes your questions are easily answered by someone with just the right knowledge. They are questions with fact-based answers, like why are some eggs brown and some white or green or blue? We've tackled that question and the answer is really interesting. But sometimes your questions don't have precise answers. Sometimes there are many answers or none, even. Sometimes we need to find people who can offer you advice or their opinion or maybe just a new perspective. That's the kind of question and topic we're tackling today. A lot of you have been sending us questions about something that makes you scared.

[Scout] My name is Scout. I am eight years old. I live in Ayer, Massachusetts. My question is, why do things seem more scary in the dark, even though they are the same things you see when it's light? Bye.

[Logan] My name is Logan from Jericho, Vermont. I'm five years old. And my question is, why do people have fear of the dark?

[Libby] Hi. My name is Libby and I'm two years old and I live in Saratoga, California. Why am I so scared of the dark?

[Jane] See what I mean? That's a tricky thing to answer. So we're going to tackle this in two ways today. Later in the episode, we'll go for a hike in the dark with a wildlife biologist to get a sense of the things you can learn from going out into the darkness and to answer non-scary questions about how animals see at night. But first we thought we'd talk to someone who not only shared the fear of the dark that some of you have when he was a child, but who has embraced fear and made writing scary books his job.

[Daniel] I am Daniel Handler. I am best known for books that I write under the name Lemony Snicket, specifically the 13 volumes in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

[Jane] You also wrote a book, a really lovely picture book about a fear of the dark.

[Daniel] I did. Yes. I think it's fun to write picture books about things we might otherwise be afraid of. So I've written a picture book about words. My most recent picture book is about a swarm of bees. And then there is *The Dark Witches* about being afraid of the dark.

[Jane] So let's tackle some of the questions that our listeners have for you here and about their own existential fear of the dark.

[Daniel] Certainly.

[Truman] Hello. My name is Truman and I live in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

[Dominique] My name is Dominique. I live in St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

[Izzy] My name is Izzy. I live in Skokie.

And I wanna know why people are scared of the dark.

Why are some people afraid of the dark?

Why are some people afraid of the dark?

[Jane] The question that everybody has is why? Why are we afraid of the dark?

[Daniel] And I think the short answer is because the dark is terrifying.

[Jane] Oh, good. Thanks for putting us at ease.

[Daniel] Yes.

For most of us, our visual sense is very important to us. And when that visual sense is taken away, it can be extremely disorienting. And so if we're used to seeing something and measuring our way through the world physically and emotionally with the blessing of sight, which most of us are lucky enough to have in one form or another, it being taken away is very terrifying.

And also it allows the brain to wander and then your brain wanders to things that might not otherwise occur to you. So if you're walking through your house in the daytime, you don't think to yourself, "I wonder if someone has somehow let an alligator in and it is underneath the sofa and it's waiting there to get me?" You would never think that at high noon, but in the middle of the night, if you wake up, you need a glass of water or the opposite, the first thing

that will occur to you is, "I wonder what horrible beast has somehow very silently gotten its way into my otherwise harmless home?".

[Jane] That example sprang to mind awfully quickly. Maybe you have had similar fears yourself?

[Daniel] Of course! Yes. I have a creaky wooden floor near where I sleep, and when I walk on it in the middle of the night, I can assume that the creaks are covering up the talons or the smacking of lips or something else that some terrible creature is - is grateful for the camouflage.

[Jane] Well so, if that's where our minds go, or some of us find that our minds go there in the darkness, how do we deal with that? Because we can't eliminate the dark. In fact, we don't want to. The dark is really important, but so how do we address or deal with or come to live with our fear?

[Daniel] Well, I think the thing with living with fear is like living with anyone you know, which is that you have to resign yourself to the fact that it lives there. You have to spend some time with it. You have to avoid getting into arguments with it and see how that works. That's how I feel about fear. So there's no conquering of fear. There is no banishing of it. There's only kind of letting it live where it lives and then leaving it alone when it's frightening you.

[Jane] How do you leave it alone when it's frightening you? That's the hardest part for me.

[Daniel] Well, it really depends on what kind of fear we're talking about and what the circumstances are. I mean, if you wanted to give me a more specific example, I could probably give you a specific prescription. But in general, I find when I'm afraid, rather than telling myself not to be afraid, I think to myself, "OK, I'm afraid; this is the time when I'm experiencing fear. Let me live in this fearsome state for a little bit and see if it passes". And then it usually does. Or as I tell myself, if it doesn't, that will be the least of my problems.

[Jane] You know, there - one of the problems, too, is that a lot of adults will tell kids, don't worry. Don't be afraid. There's nothing there. Go back to sleep.

[Daniel] Yup!

[Jane] You're being silly..and that doesn't seem to help because when you're afraid, somebody's telling you, "don't be stupid", just doesn't make you feel any better.

[Daniel] Right. And it's very shameful for adults because young children haven't experienced that much culture. But almost every adult has seen some

version of a fearful story. They've read it or they've watched it on a screen, in which something terrible is happening and other people don't believe that something terrible is happening.

I mean, that's pretty standard for the genre. Right? "Oh, you kids, I'm not going down to the cemetery. I know very well there are no werewolves". That's in a werewolf movie. I heard a mysterious noise outside and I think I'll go out in my nightgown with this lantern and see what it is because it's probably nothing. And so when adults say, "there's absolutely nothing under the bed, I won't even check for you", that's just very offensive to me.

[Jane] So what should kids do, though, if that's what the adults are telling them? You know, you can't say, "No, mom, get on your hands and knees and get under the bed and check".

[Daniel] Well, on the contrary, I think you can say, calmly,

"I absolutely insist that you do this basic parental chore for me". And if you have trouble articulating it that way in the middle of the night, because you're afraid, when you wake up in the daytime, let your mind wander as everyone's minds wanders to your terrible parents and all of the things that they've done wrong.

And then you can write a note if you're able to write or otherwise convey to your parents, this is a very basic duty. "When I'm afraid in the middle of the night, it is your job to help me".

[Jane] How did you deal with what you were afraid of as a kid when you were not afraid of the darkness itself necessarily, but as you've told some other interviews, afraid of the things that might be in the dark?

[Daniel] Right! Things that are in the dark. I mean, I think that's a more common association of the dark. Very few people look into the inside of their shoes and become frightened by the darkness that's there.

[Jane] Well, I don't know. You've just given us all an idea now.

[Daniel] Exactly. But what would you be afraid of most of the darkness of your shoe? Everybody knows this: a scorpion.

[Jane] Right.

[Daniel] Scorpions love to live in your shoe. There's probably at least four in a pair of shoes that you're not using right now. And someday you will put your foot in there and learn to think that it's there.

[Jane] Oh, great.

[Daniel] I mean, again, it should be emphasized that by then you will not be worrying about your fear. You won't be afraid of a scorpion anymore. You'll be afraid of death, which far supersedes the fear of a scorpion.

[Jane] Wait a minute. Now we're getting sidetracked. I asked you how you dealt with your fear of the things in the dark.

[Daniel] I would say that I dealt with my fear by thinking about it all of the time and letting it consume me and really give me a whole lot of trouble. And then every so often it would pass. So I - I wholeheartedly recommend that method. I wrote a lot of stories about terrible things that happened to people based on my own fears. I came up with plans that I would never be able to enact in real life, probably, about what I might do in various fearsome situations. And I told everybody how afraid I was of things. I do think that often saying out loud what you are afraid of tends to lessen the fear, because sometimes what you're afraid of is ridiculous. Not very often, but sometimes it is. And so if you say it out loud, suddenly you have said a ridiculous sentence out loud and it makes you laugh and become less afraid.

[Jane] And if it doesn't feel ridiculous, is it still a good exercise to say it out loud, maybe to somebody you trust?

[Daniel] I think so, yes. I think when you keep it inside you, it bounces around and has nowhere else to go. So if you can't bring yourself to say it to someone, you can write it down. You can hum it to yourself. You can draw a picture of it. I think letting it outside of your brain is always good.

[Jane] Now, you know, sometimes, as you and I know and as a lot of people know, a lot of kids know, being afraid can be kind of delicious. It can be appealing. It can make the hairs on the back of your neck rise up in a fun way. But there's a difference between a fear that's kind of fun and a fear that's not fun, a fear that's not based on an active imagination, but based on something that actually might be really dangerous to you or something going on in your life that is not good for you. So how should you talk to people when you think you have a fear that is not a delicious, fun, scary fear, but an actual problem for you?

[Daniel] Well, I think the two kinds of fear that you're talking about are often hard to tell apart. Oftentimes, when you really ought to be afraid of something, you're telling yourself that you ought not to be. Which is the same thing you're telling yourself when you're afraid of something that you want not to be. So I think it can actually be very confusing along those lines. What I

would recommend is talking about it the same way, whether you're afraid of something that seems unlikely or whether you're afraid of something that seems likely. The worst thing that you can do for your fear is nothing. The best thing that you could do is live through it in some way and to express it, let it live outside of your brain. And I think oftentimes if you talk about your fears, you - if it's a delicious fear, it's like something else delicious. That if you share it with other people, everybody's having a good time. And if it's not a delicious fear, like anything else that is not delicious, if you give it to other people, then there's less for yourself.

[Jane] So while we're talking about the dark, is there anything else that you think we should know and we should be thinking about? Because some of the people who've sent us these questions are liking this fear and some are not.

[Daniel] Yeah, well, it's very hard. I mean, I think it's difficult to figure out whether you're really liking being afraid or not. I think that's a difficult category to discern. But what I think with the dark is that it is always dark someplace. And so a nice thing to think after you've had a terrifying night and then it is daytime and you're feeling a little better, is you know that the dark has moved on to bother somebody else. And there's something about the idea that all of these fears and all of these negative experiences, as well as all of the positive experiences, whether these are specific experiences like a swarm of bees or fear, or whether they are positive experiences like a banana split or joy, that everyone is taking turns having them. So it's just your turn to be afraid sometimes when something has occurred to you. And if you talk about it, if you let it out of your brain in some way, other people get a little bit of it and you're beginning to share it. And then it will go away and it will move on to someone else.

[Jane] Well, I appreciate that perspective because it's not telling us just to forget about it, that we're being silly.

[Daniel] No!

[Jane] But it's telling us there's a way you can live through this.

[Daniel] I mean, fear is something that absolutely everybody has felt from time to time. You know, sometimes when you're walking and you see someone who is crying deeply, who is just having a terrible time, and your heart goes out to them because you remember when you've had a terrible time like that and it isn't your time to have a terrible time right then when you're watching it. And fear is like that. Everyone has been afraid out of their minds at one time or another.

[Jane] That was Daniel Handler. He's the author known as Lemony Snicket.

Older kids might know his *Series of Unfortunate Events* chapter books and younger kids might know his picture book, *The Dark*, illustrated by Jon Klassen. And he has a new picture book that deals with anger called *Swarm of Bees*. Thanks to Daniel for being willing to answer some questions for us in today's show.

Coming up: how do you see in the dark? We'll take a walk in the woods at night and see if any glowing eyes stare back at us. This is "But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids." I'm Jane Lindholm. And today, we're talking all about the dark and why some of us are afraid of it. But, you know, the darkness doesn't have to be scary. It's also magical and really important. The darkness lets us sleep peacefully. For other animals, it's when they wake up. Canada geese and other migratory birds fly long distances at night when the air is cooler and often a little bit more still, and it's less stressful for them to fly. Many plants, too, are hard at work at night so that during the day they can conserve moisture.

[Charlie] Hi. This is Charlie. I live in Hockessin, Delaware, and my question is why does it get so dark at night?

[Hayden] Hi, my name is Hayden and I'm eight years old and I live in Amherst, New Hampshire. And my question is, why does it turn dark at night?

[Jane] It gets dark because the sun is on the other side of the earth. You know how the earth rotates around the sun? It takes a year for that to happen. But the earth is also spinning right around on its own axis and it makes a complete turn every 24 hours. So when it's nighttime in Delaware, where Charlie is, that's because your part of the world, Delaware is facing away from the sun. The sun's light can't get to where you are. And as the world spins, it spins back toward the face of the sun. And you experience that as sunrise. Since the sun is our main source of light, when we aren't in the path of it, we experience darkness and we typically call darkness night. Now, when the moon is out, you can also get light from the moon. That's the sunlight reflecting off the surface of the moon and back down onto the earth. And sometimes moonlight gives you a lot of light, even at night. But I digress. Some of you want to know about those animals that are active at night and how they can see so well in the darkness. So to answer your questions, I thought it might be fun to actually go out on a nighttime walk with someone who can help us understand.

[Steve] My name's Steve Parren. I work for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department as a rare species biologist, and we're in Hinesburg on some wooded trails near Lewis Creek.

[Jane] Not quite dark, dark yet, but overcast night. So getting pretty dark.

[Steve] Yeah. I wouldn't want to be in unfamiliar territory right now.

[Stella] Hi, my name is Stella, and I'm four years old, I live in Maryland, and my question is, how do you see in the dark?

[Jane] Can you describe how we see in the dark and how well or not well we see in the dark compared to other animals?

[Steve] Sure. It's really the same process for people as it is for animals. Our pupils, the dark center of our eyes, is where the light enters, and at night our pupils dilate. They get wider, they allow more light to come in. And you know, if you walk outside at night initially, you don't really see very much. But if you wait a few minutes, your eyes dilate and you start to notice some features - not like daytime, but you certainly start to see more.

[Jane] One thing Steve does to try to help his eyes and his brain adjust to darkness is to make sure he doesn't turn on a flashlight unless he absolutely has to. That way, his pupils, the little black center of your eye, stay as wide as possible to take in as much light as they can.

[Steve] So animals, they do the same thing, except they're better at it.

[Jane] And they're better at it because their eyes are better for this?

[Steve] Some animals are actually adapted so they can see better at night.

[Harlan] My name's Harlan. I live in Aspen, Colorado, and I am four. And my question is, how do cats see in the dark?

[Jane] Steve says cat's eyes are a little different than ours. Their pupil, that's the little black dot in the center of your eyeball, is different in cats than it is in humans. In humans, it's round. In cats, it's not.

[Steve] They have a vertical split pupil. That split pupil actually adjusts more quickly to changes in light. In a cat's eye they can actually open up the pupil so it covers the entire surface.

[Jane] Really?

[Steve] Yes. So if you see a cat at night, shine a light at him, you'll just see a black eye looking back at you.

[Jane] So does that go for all cats? They all have that vertical sort of slit pupil and they can all open their pupil up to see really well at night?

[Steve] Yes. You know, there's other adaptations like, happened to have had a bobcat in the yard the other day and got a really good look at the back of the ears. Nice white spot on the back of each ear. And that's thought to help family groups stay together at night.

[Jane] Oh, because they can see that white spot.

[Steve] They can see mom's white spot behind her ears.

[Jane] That's pretty cool.

[Steve] Yeah.

[Jane] That enlarged pupil lets the cat's eye bring in more light so the cat can see more. Not exactly like a flashlight where you can only see what's right in front of the beam of light. More like how you can see a lot more of the world around you on that moonlit night than on a cloudy night or when the moon isn't out. But you know, when you think about animals in the darkness, you might be picturing the glowing eyes staring back at you. And Abigail wants to know how that works.

[Abigail] I'm six years old. I'm from Chicago, Illinois. And my question is, why do raccoon's and cats' eyes glow in the dark?

[Steve] That's because of a structure in the eye that actually reflects the light that enters. And so it allows the image to be seen twice, which enhances the night vision. But that same structure reflects light back out. So that's the eye shine that you see at night.

[Jane] So we've stopped now and we're here in the darkness and we can listen for a minute. If we were to see an animal coming, could we tell what it is? By looking at the way its eyes look at night or the way they glow?

[Steve] It would help.

But I wouldn't bet the farm because some of the animal's eyes are the same color. They're yellowish. So there's a few different animals. But, you know, there's other clues you would look for. Look how far apart are the eyes? How is the animal moving? Is it staring right at you or is it looking aside? You know, animals have different behaviors and sizes and stuff, so you kinda need to put it all together, and your brain tells you that, oh, that's a so-and-so. It may or may not be true.

[Jane] Yeah. You did tell me, though, that if you see red eyes, that you need to be worried about.

[Steve] There's - there's different animals that have red eyes.

But one of the animals is a bear. The one you really want to know is that if you're at a lake and you see red eyes in the water, it's most likely an alligator. And that's a good one to know.

[Jane] Get out.

[Steve] Yeah. Don't go swimming.

[Jane] So one of the other things about being out at night that is so hard to get over is, because you can't see, it's hard to know what's out there. And so, I mean, you've probably had the experience that I have of being out in the middle of darkness and hearing a sound and thinking. I think that's a deer, or I think that's a bear. And then it gets light and gets light. And you realize that was a squirrel. And it's making all this noise. But your mind goes

[Steve] Absolutely!

[Jane] to this sort of big, scary place because you can't see it.

[Steve] Right, well if...we're here in Vermont. And there's really nothing big and scary out there that's really worrisome to an adult.

[Jane] Even a bear?

[Steve] Even a bear. Most bears are pretty well behaved in Vermont. For the most part, there's nothing that really makes me feel like a prey animal. But that could be part of our fear of darkness, could have been built into our evolution where we were prey at one point.

[Jane] Yeah. It's not silly to be afraid of the dark.

[Steve] I don't think so. There's more risks and there's been studies done that it's better to make the mistake of being overly cautious than to not be cautious and come to a bad end.

[Jane] One of the things that you can do is learn more about what might be out around you and what might be out at night, because then if you understand how an animal moves, for example, you might be able to say, oh, that's probably my house cat.

[Steve] Sure. And, you know, animals make noises at night, you know, and some of them are surprising. It took me a long time to kinda get a sense of what a fox sounds like. And I mean, they're unfamiliar noises. You know, I'm not used to talking to foxes. You know, it takes a lot sometimes a long time to have that experience and to know that it actually came from a fox.

[Jane] Well, a fox in particular. That sound is terrifying.

[Steve] It can be if you don't know what it is. I mean, it's just like everything else. If you don't know what it is, then you start getting worried and stuff.

[Jane] What might know that we're here right now that we don't know is listening to us?

[Steve] Well, deer, you know, they could be in the woods right here with us. Flying squirrels could be up in the trees. There could be some napping red squirrels or gray squirrels that are kind of wondering why we're disturbing their slumber. There's birds have come back now on migrations. There's probably some birds around, probably redback voles in the woods and white footed mice, you know, could be weasels around on their nightly forays. So there could be a lot of stuff out there.

[Jane] I've heard coyotes around here sometimes.

[Steve] Yeah, we've got a bunch of coyotes and they're kind of a social animal and at night you'll hear them yipping sometimes and that's how they keep in contact and it can be over long distances. And then sometimes when you hear what's sometimes referred to as a chorus, it's like they've met up. There's a group of them, you know, and they can be making quite a ruckus. And, you know, on a few occasions I've gone to the site where I thought I had heard them during the night and, yeah, the ground's all torn up and they were having a party.

[Jane] What about owls? I was hoping we might hear some barred owls here tonight.

[Steve] Owls are nighttime creatures. They're really good at it. They have eyes that are really adapted for seeing at night. They're actually a different shaped eye than everybody else. Our eyes are round, but owls are more tubular. And it helps them gather light.

[Jane] I think it's amazing that they can fly through all of these great big pines following the prey and not hit a tree and, you know, know exactly where they're going.

[Steve] So animals make mistakes. You know, unfortunately, they hit power lines and they do, if the wind changes, they can get blown into stuff. But, you know, with th experience, and probably they know their woods, they know that individual trees and the pathways and stuff. So that's all part of it.

[Jane] You think they have their own trail through the sky?

[Steve] I suspect so. I suspect so. And that as a young animal, it's like learning to ride a bicycle, you fall once in a while.

[Jane] Huh! Want to walk up to the peeper pond and then we can turn around?

[Steve] Sure! So this is really nice because you have a kind of an open skylight. You kind can kind of have a - there's a gradient of light that you can follow.

[Jane] Yeah. It's easy to see.

[Steve] And what I learned to do when I lived in the woods was I didn't focus straight ahead of me. I let my peripheral vision see a larger area and that would kind of tell me where the path was.

[Jane] Mm-hmm. Did that take practice?

[Steve] It did.

[sound of peepers]

[Jane] Can you identify more than one kind of frog here that we're listening to? Because at the - those loud familiar ones are the peepers.

[Steve] Right. I'm hearing mostly peepers. I was wondering if I might be hearing a different trill, but I can't be sure. Peepers are hard because they drowned out other noises.

So some of the frogs make snoring noises, and that's what I thought I might hear. Pickerel frog was a possibility here. Might hear leopard frogs. They make a nice snoring sound.

[sound of peepers]

[Jane] Do you want to go back?

[Steve] Sure.

[Jane] So do you have any advice for kids who do find themselves afraid of the dark? And a lot of the dark fears are not necessarily being out in the wilderness in the dark. But, you know, just ways to think about darkness that might help us at least appreciate it.

[Steve] I can only talk about my own experiences, but I started going out in the dark and learning to trust my senses. Build up a little confidence. Nothing bad happened.

[Jane] No alligators?

[Steve] Right. And I just became more comfortable over time.

I don't know if it's a game that I play with myself, but I try to navigate in the dark in my own house. I don't turn on lights often. You know, I'm pretty familiar with the house and the rooms and you can touch walls and things. And you just - I just find it interesting that, you know, you don't have to rely on your eyes all the time. And even when you are using your eyes, you have these other senses that are kind of giving you feedback too.

[Jane] Including putting your hands out.

[Steve] Yeah.

[Jane] This is what I'm tempted to do now.

Steve and I walked back to the start of the trail. The trailhead where I had parked my car in the darkness. We did have to turn on my flashlight at one point because we realized we were going off the trail and we didn't know where we were. So we wanted to make sure we could get back on the trail. And another time we ran into a tree that had fallen down on the trail. But we kind of put our hands out first like I was just talking about, so we didn't get hurt. It was neat to walk in the darkness and to trust my other senses a little more than I otherwise might - to pay attention to the feel of the ground underneath my feet. It was really packed down where the trail was and a kind of smooshier, softer off the trail. Once you start paying attention to that, you can kind of walk the trail by feel without even having to see it. I could focus on the smell of the forest around me. I could tell when there were patches of cold air and patches of warm air because I was paying more attention to other things. And I got to listen to the noises of the frogs and the rustling leaves. You might want to try what Steve suggested.

See if you can navigate around your bedroom or your house in the darkness sometime. Now, make sure you're in a safe place, not near the stairs or anything that could make you fall and hurt yourself. You should probably tell the adult in your life you're going to do that first just so they know what you're doing in that darkness. Or if you live in a place where there aren't street lights, you could go outside and see what it's like to let your eyes get used to the dark. See what you can hear and smell and feel in your own backyard when it's really dark. And if you're afraid of the darkness, don't forget what Lemony Snicket - I mean, Daniel Handler - told us: It's okay to ask your adults to help you feel less afraid. Silence isn't going to make it better. So you should talk to someone you trust about the things that scare you. And it's okay to be afraid. You aren't weak or silly, but you might just have to accept that fear and learn to live uneasily with it. Remember, Daniel told us everybody's afraid of something at some point. But also remember that the darkness is essential for life, and that the morning will always come, and that learning more about the things in the darkness around you, whether it's a creaky floorboard in your house or the pitter patter of small animals in the forest, might help you feel less afraid if you know more about them. And I'm sending you a big hug or a fist bump because I'm proud of you for being brave and for sharing the things that scare you. It helps all of us, even adults, be more brave about sharing the things that scare us.

That's it for this episode. If you have a question about anything scary or silly or otherwise, let us know. Have an adult record you asking your question and tell them to send the file to questions@butwhykids.org. We can't answer every question that you send us, but we do love to hear your voices and what's on your mind. It helps us determine how to shape the show. *But Why* is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio.

Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all-new episode. Until then, stay curious.