

tickling. Tickling is a common, perhaps universal, experience. Depictions of people engaged in some kind of tickling activity, whether it be between siblings, parents and children, or lovers, can be found in the art of many countries and cultures. Tickling someone often causes them to smile and laugh in a way that is indistinguishable from the laughter caused by being highly amused or pleased. However, tickling is a curious, paradoxical phenomenon. A ticklish person will often wriggle and writhe in agony as well as laugh hysterically when being tickled. Francis Bacon in 1677 commented that: '[when tickled] men even in a grieved state of mind . . . cannot sometimes forbear laughing.'

Even animals seem to be ticklish. When you tickle the great apes, they react with what is believed to correspond to laughter—a panting sound. Baby rats squeal with pleasure when tickled, although you need a bat detector to hear the sounds because they are at frequencies too high for human ears to detect. They are interpreted as sounds

sensory results of our own movements are less important for us to notice than sensations that are produced externally. When walking on the ground it is more important to notice bumps and irregularities on the ground (which could be dangerous snakes or insects) than all the sensations that are caused by the movements of our legs and the pressure of our feet on the ground. Natural selection has endowed us with a brain mechanism that cancels the feeling of our own movements and their sensory consequences so that external sensations can be picked out and attended to. Tickling may simply be an accidental consequence of the useful mechanism that heightens our sensitivity to insects and other potentially dangerous elements on our skin.

But why laugh when tickled? Laughing might not be something we necessarily do when happy. Some people have suggested that the components of laughter—convulsion of the abdomen, production of sniggering noises, tears coming out of our eyes—all serve one purpose: they release tension. Nervous laughter often occurs during tense situations, and there are striking similarities between laughing and crying hysterically. Being tickled certainly causes the body to tense. Alternatively, Vilayanur Ramachandran of the University of California, San Diego, claims that we laugh to tell other people that a potentially threatening situation is not serious. 'You approach a child, hand stretched out menacingly. . . . But no, your fingers make light, intermittent contact with her belly,' he writes. As a result of being tickled the child laughs, as if to inform other children, 'He doesn't mean harm. He's only playing.' Some psychologists have suggested that humour evolves from a baby's giggling response to being tickled to an ability to laugh at funny faces and situations and then to jokes, subtle wit, and irony. It all starts, though, with that first tickle. Without tickling, some suggest, there might not be any humour at all. SBI

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