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[Wellness](#)

Large events can be cesspools of germs. Here's why we ache for them, anyway.



Hundreds of people with the name Josh recently duked it out — with pool noodles — in a Lincoln, Neb., park to determine the rightful owner of the moniker. (Kenneth Ferriera/Lincoln Journal Star/AP)

By Galadriel Watson
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I recently read about the “[Josh Fight](#),” in which hundreds of people named Josh came together in Lincoln, Neb., to battle it out with pool noodles over who should “own” the name Josh — until only [one very tiny Josh](#) was left standing. Just the thought made me smile, and the blue-sky, green-grassed photos of people massing in one location triggered memories of large events I myself have enjoyed, from music festivals to medieval-life recreations. It made me itch to attend such events again, as soon as health regulations in my area allow.

Large gatherings can be a [hotbed of germs](#), can pose dangers such as [stampedes](#) and [heat stroke](#), and can encourage risky behaviors such as excessive alcohol consumption and unprotected sex. Still, a good number of people loved and attended them anyway, pre-pandemic, and many of those people, like me, many can't wait for them to restart. But why? What do we get out of them that's worth exposure to hundreds or thousands of strangers? Three experts give me some clues.

They provide connection

As a human, you have “a very primitive desire to feel like you're a part of a larger collective,” said Shira Gabriel, an associate professor of psychology at SUNY, University at Buffalo. As we evolved as a species, we were greatly outmatched by other animals. To survive, we needed to band together and protect one another. Today, we still have this internal mechanism that propels us toward other people.

Singing at a concert with other fans, chanting prayers surrounded by pilgrims or doing the “wave” during a ballgame — these are all ways of making personal connections. While you think you may be attending the concert because you love the musician, “It's way more than that,” Gabriel said. “There's something special about being there with other people and being in the moment in a collective that is really important for our well-being.” She mentions that such experiences may reduce depression, anxiety and loneliness, provide meaning, and promote happiness and peace. In short, attending a large event “can make us feel good.”

It doesn't even seem to matter if you're an extrovert or introvert. Tegan Cruwys is an associate professor of psychology at the Australian National University and a clinical psychologist. She said, “Personality might affect the kinds of events and social groups that appeal to you — for example, music festivals versus gaming conventions — but there is no evidence that these social phenomena only apply to extroverts. Introverts are not asocial.”

And the effects of such gatherings can linger. Nick Hopkins, a professor of social psychology at the University of Dundee in Scotland, did a [study](#) that looked at a Hindu festival in northern India. Even a month after the event, participants reported feeling more content than similar people who hadn't attended the festival.

Gabriel notes such benefits, too. “You can see the positive psychological effects lasting for literally months,” she said. These events “really do affect our mood and our well-being overall in life.”

They bolster our identity

Large events also reinforce our sense of identity, Hopkins said. “There is something about being with other people, having that sense of connection with like-minded others, that, I think, is incredibly rewarding.”

Although waiting for a train in a horde of sweaty people can be “deeply offensive and you want to escape,” he said, being among a horde of sweaty people at a concert can be thrilling. Not only

are you able to express your own identity — *This music rocks!* — but you're surrounded by others expressing similar values.

“That transforms our experience of a crowd,” he said. “It’s no longer just an aggregate of individuals — it is something more than that.” Instead of thinking about yourself as “me” and the rest of the people as “them,” you come to think of “us.”

This idea of “us” also provides a sense of security. “I’d be more inclined to look out for you,” Hopkins said, “and I’d also have an expectation that you would be more likely to look out for me.”

Teenagers in Australia have demonstrated how this perception of shared identity matters. Cruwys co-wrote a [paper](#) on “Schoolies,” which is a week-long beachside festival that celebrates the end of high school. The study looked at 812 students graduating in 2015 and 2016.

“We found that people experienced improved mental health across the course of the festival when they strongly identified with other festival attendees,” she said. For example, they rated themselves as being less likely to be nervous, hopeless, restless or depressed. “However, these same benefits were not seen for attendees who had a weaker sense of social identification.”

By joining in a gathering, “People who see themselves in terms of that social identity are able to ‘live out’ a valued part of themselves,” she said. “Generally speaking, this is a very affirming and uplifting experience.”

They supply novelty

Large events also offer novelty. Even without the limitations of a pandemic, “We can go from day to day doing the same thing and life begins to feel boring,” Gabriel said. “And these large group gatherings tend to make us feel like something special has happened.”

In 1912, French sociologist Émile Durkheim coined a term for this combo of connection and specialness: “collective effervescence.” Just as you can add bubbles to water to make it more exciting, large events add pizzazz to normal life. “You’re feeling that there’s something really cool going on,” Gabriel said.

They aren't the only way to get these benefits

If you aren’t comfortable with going to events right now, can’t find one you think is worth the risk or can’t attend at all because of health regulations, you probably can gain a sense of shared identity and connection by spending time with a romantic partner, close friends or family members. Even watching your favorite TV show can work: “You get drawn into the narrative of the show,” Gabriel said, “and our primitive minds don’t distinguish between the people in the show and the people in our real life.” If you’re into it, following celebrities on social media can also work as a bonding experience.

“All of these means of filling the need to belong are good,” Gabriel said. “And the people who tend to be happiest tend to use many of them and to be able to move back and forth.”

During pandemic restrictions, reliving memories of past events could give you a “warm glow,” Hopkins said. However, he also warned that such memories “could also lead you to a tremendous sense of loss, that these things are not possible now.”

As for looking toward the future, all three experts agree that people will flock back to events when regulations allow — maybe in even greater numbers than before. While they may initially be anxious about their health and want to know about safety measures such as the availability of hand sanitizer and proper ventilation, Gabriel said, people will revert to pre-pandemic behaviors soon enough. “We tend to go back to what we’re used to pretty quickly.”

Attending large events, “is a really basic, fundamental human need that we have not been filling as much as we want to,” she said. Once events ramp up again, “People are going to feel really amazing.”

Watson is a freelance writer and author of children’s books, including “[Running Wild](#)” and “[Extreme Abilities](#).”