# How the fear factor makes punishment so much worse

**Naughty pupils not sure if they will be caught and punished are likely to become stressed**

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As generations of schoolboys awaiting the cane learnt, it’s not the punishment that gets you — it’s the not knowing. Will you be caught? If you are caught, how many lashes will there be?

Now scientists have quantified this effect and found that the more uncertain people were about suffering pain, the more stressed they got.

For the experiment, published in the journal *Nature Communications*, participants played a computer game in which they had to turn over a rock. If there was a snake under it, they received an electric shock. Their stress was measured by looking at pupil dilation and sweating, among other things.

Over several rounds, the participants began to learn which rocks were likely to have a snake under them, which didn’t and which had an even chance. When there was complete uncertainty about the location their stress rose.

Archy de Berker, a PhD student from University College London, said: “When your subjective estimate is 50:50, that is the time when you are most stressed. Conversely if you think there is a pretty good chance the snake is there, you aren’t.”

This is interesting because the shock was not mild. It was set at a level that participants rated as 7/10 on a scale where 10 was the most pain they could imagine. The work fits in with several other recent studies, including one from the University of Michigan which found we would rather have a boss who was unpleasant all the time than one who was only horrid some of the time.