



# Open to death: A moderating role of openness to experience in terror management



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Openness moderates mortality salience effects.
- Low openness individuals exhibit defensive responses following MS.
- Defensiveness following MS by those low in openness decreases death ideation.
- High openness individuals are insulated from defending following MS.
- Curiosity may insulate those high in openness from responding to MS defensively.

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## ABSTRACT

Research on terror management theory demonstrates that people respond to reminders of mortality with defenses aimed at maintaining their self-esteem and defending cultural worldviews. We posited that being open to experience should allow individuals to process death more receptively (i.e., with curiosity), attenuating the need to bolster self-esteem or defend worldviews, because death is a novel experience. Across three studies, dispositional openness moderated reactions to mortality salience. Individuals low in openness to experience responded to mortality salience with increased self-esteem striving (Study 1) and worldview defense (Study 2), and this functioned to decrease the subsequent availability of death-related thought (Study 2). Individuals high in openness to experience did not exhibit these same defense tendencies. Study 3 examined a possible mechanism for the attenuated effects observed among high openness individuals: increased curiosity in response to mortality salience was found to decrease worldview defense, but only for those high in openness. Together this research depicts openness as a resource facilitating reduced defensiveness following mortality salience.

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“To die, to sleep –To sleep, perchance to dream - ay, there's the rub,  
For in this sleep of death what dreams may come...”

[—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*]

## 1. Introduction

There is an infinite array of possibilities accompanying one's eventual death, ranging from a journey to heaven or the underworld, to reincarnation into a new physical form, to infinite nothingness—and even in the case of nothingness, there may be cognitive and sensory experiences along the way. The only thing certain about death is that no living person

has experienced it (permanently). That in itself may be cause for terror; at the same time, it may, for some individuals, be a source of intrigue. Because the end of life is a novel experience, people high in the personality trait openness to experience (see e.g., Connelly, Ones, & Chernyshenko, 2014) may, on some level, be able to curtail the psychological threat associated with death because it invokes curiosity and interest instead of only fear. Using terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) as a theoretical platform, the novel idea explored within this paper is that individuals highly receptive to new experiences might respond less defensively to thoughts of their own mortality because death is the ultimate new experience.

### 1.1. Terror management theory

Human beings are capable of contemplating their eventual death, and in response to this, and perhaps in part because of the uncertainty associated with this awareness (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer,

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2001), a variety of defensive reactions become engaged (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Based on the writings of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT explains how cultural belief systems and beliefs about one's own standing within a culture can be utilized as symbolic defenses, preventing death thoughts from reaching conscious awareness where they are most stressful (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). An abundance of research supports the TMT position: When people are reminded of their mortality (mortality salience, MS), they defend with efforts to validate their cultural worldviews and boost their worth within their cultural system (i.e., increase self-esteem). For example, when mortality is salient people become more aggressive toward those who challenge their political orientation (McGregor et al., 1998), more punitive toward those who break the law (i.e., prostitutes; Rosenblatt et al., 1989), and increase attempts to validate values relevant to their identity (Halloran & Kashima, 2004). Moreover, these outcomes function to reduce the accessibility of death-related thought (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997), providing further support for the utility of these responses in defending against mortality awareness. The effects of MS have been found to be reliable across genders and age groups, with few exceptions (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010). These effects have also been found operationalizing MS in different ways (e.g., subliminal priming, open-ended response prompts, close-ended true/false questionnaires) and not in response to other aversive comparison conditions (e.g., paralysis, public speaking, dental exam, or other psychologically and physically painful scenarios).

### 1.2. Moderators of terror management effects

From the perspective of TMT, the need to defend in response to the awareness of death is empirically reliable, and psychologically inevitable, but there are moderators of these effects. The extent to which people invest their identities in particular cultural worldviews and contingencies of self-esteem predicts whether they respond to MS with efforts aimed at bolstering their self-esteem within corresponding contingencies. For example, whether or not an individual drives fast or requests sunscreen with higher SPF when mortality is salient is contingent on whether they derive self-esteem from being a fast driver (Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999) or having a fair complexion (Cox et al., 2009). Individuals also differ in the degree to which they prefer coherent and structured views of the world (personal need for structure, PNS; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993), and to the degree that they do, reactions to mortality reminders are associated with the need for structure (e.g., decreased preference for abstract art, Landau, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Martens, 2006). Thus, individuals invest in different sources of meaning and value, and by virtue of this, specific responses to MS can be predicted.

Beyond the specific domains that individuals invest in for their psychological equanimity, the effects of MS can be moderated by variables that function as more generalized "cultural anxiety buffers." For instance, to the extent that self-esteem offers psychological protection from thoughts of death, having a lot of it is predicted by TMT to buffer the effects of mortality awareness across the board. There is evidence that high dispositional or experimentally-boosted self-esteem reduces the need to defend when one's worldview is threatened after MS (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Moreover, individuals with low self-esteem respond to mortality reminders with decreases in life-satisfaction and perceived meaningfulness of life (Routledge et al., 2010), and also with efforts and behaviors aimed at avoiding a focus on the self (Wisman, Heflick, & Goldenberg, 2015). Like self-esteem, other bases of security, such as religious fundamentalism (Friedman & Rholes, 2008), intrinsic religiosity (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Orehek, & Abdollahi, 2012; Jonas & Fischer, 2006), and relationship security (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000) also decrease defensiveness in response to MS.

Whereas self-esteem and other security-conferring variables presumably work as a buffer (Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005), ameliorating defensiveness by providing a layer of psychological protection against

mortality concerns, mindfulness has recently been identified as a variable that affects how MS reminders are processed in the first place (Niemi et al., 2010). Specifically, individuals high in trait mindfulness do not respond to MS with the immediate suppression of death ideation (Study 7), and also spend more time writing about death in response to open-ended prompts, which in turn decreases defensiveness (Study 6). Mindfulness allows individuals to process information experientially and in a non-judgmental manner (Langer, 1989), which likely gives mindful individuals a considerable advantage when contemplating death. Furthermore, there is evidence indicating that the combination of heightened mindfulness and trait level curiosity can decrease defensiveness in response to existential threats; although for those high in mindfulness and low in curiosity, defensiveness is not reduced (Kashdan, Afram, Brown, Birnbeck, & Drvoshanov, 2011). This provides preliminary evidence that curiosity may also be instrumental in processing reminders of death. Relevant to the research at hand, these findings open the door to the possibility that some individuals may be able to approach and process death with openness and receptivity.

### 1.3. Openness to experience

Openness to experience, one of the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992), is typically described as the degree to which individuals are inquisitive and curious, receptive to various experiences and ideas, and value novelty (Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1983). As with other basic personality traits, openness is relatively stable over the lifespan, although it tends to peak in early adulthood and gradually decline (McCrae & Sutin, 2009). High levels of trait openness are associated with a host of positive outcomes such as increased verbal intelligence (DeYoung, Quilty, Peterson, & Gray, 2014), greater artistic interest (Larson, Rottinghaus, & Borgen, 2002), and greater achievement in occupational settings requiring curiosity or creativity (Woo, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Konz, 2014). Openness is also positively associated with trait curiosity (Kashdan et al., 2009) and finding things interesting (e.g., poems, Silvia & Sanders, 2010), both of which are linked to greater psychological well-being (e.g., Kashdan et al., 2009; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Silvia, 2006).

In describing openness to experience, McCrae and Costa (1997) suggest that openness can be understood "in both structural and motivational terms. Openness is seen in the breadth, depth, and permeability of consciousness, and in the recurrent need to enlarge and examine experience" (p. 826). Openness to experience is also associated with particular sensory and cognitive experiences, such as chills in response to sudden beauty (McCrae, 2007), déjà vu (McCrae, 1994), and an increased propensity for awe-like experiences (i.e., while viewing beautiful photos or listening to music, Silvia, Fayn, Nusbaum, & Beaty, 2015). Individuals high in openness seem to derive greater existential benefits from the world, in a sense transcending the self and reaping more reward from experiences (e.g., "I feel that my individual life is a part of a greater whole," Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005).

High trait openness individuals also exhibit reduced levels of prejudice and more tolerance for diversity (Homan et al., 2008; Sibley & Duckitt, 2009). Thus, these individuals may be less likely to defend against MS with rigid adherence to a particular cultural worldview. But beyond this, the psychological profile of individuals high in openness suggests that they should be less threatened in general by the prospect of their own death. That is, the way in which individuals high in openness approach and cognitively process information may allow them to be more receptive to experiences that are novel (e.g., death), because they are curious about and interested in them.

## 2. General overview

To date, consideration of openness to experience in terror management has, for the most part, been limited to controlling for its effects while exploring other related constructs, such as mindfulness

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