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## Curiosity enhances the role of mindfulness in reducing defensive responses to existential threat

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### ABSTRACT

Using a terror management theory paradigm, the present research assessed whether people characterized by both an attitude of curiosity, as well as mindful attention, would exhibit non-defensive reactions to targets that threaten their worldview. Participants ( $N = 118$ ) were randomly assigned to an existential threat (mortality salience) condition or a control condition then asked to read an essay describing humans as just another animal or an essay describing the uniqueness of humans. Participants higher in both curiosity and mindful attention responded non-defensively, rating the humans as animals essay writer as likeable and intelligent, with a valid opinion. Participants who were high in mindfulness but low in curiosity responded defensively, with negative judgments of the essay writer. Mindlessness (endorsing low curiosity and mindful attention) also mitigated defensive responding. Although mindful and mindless people both showed non-defensive reactions, we theorize about distinct causal paths. Results suggest that curiosity plays an important, understudied role in the benefits linked to mindfulness.

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### 1. Introduction

Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness is defined as a receptive attention to what is happening in the present moment that, in practice, can be facilitated by an attitude of interest or curiosity (Bishop et al., 2004; Williams, 2008). Phenomenologically, a person practicing mindfulness observes events and experience with an orientation of curiosity, regardless of the valence of the stimuli observed. This quality of attention is non-evaluative; even when experiences are painful or difficult, a person is receptive and curious instead of seeking to avoid or alter thoughts or feelings (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006).

Curiosity may be particularly important to the exercise of mindfulness in challenging or threatening experiential contexts, as this attitude can make experiences more openly accessible to mindful attention (Bishop et al., 2004). Because curiosity concerns an embrace of novelty and openness to new experiences (Kashdan et al., 2009), it may operate to counter attempts to avoid or alter difficult thoughts, feelings, or situations. Curiosity focuses a person's attention and motivates them to explore their environment with an appreciation of novelty, challenge, and uncertainty (Harmon-Jones & Gable, 2009; Silvia & Kashdan, 2009).

People who are predisposed to mindful attention, or trained to be mindful, show greater openness to information that challenges their personal beliefs (Niemic et al., 2010). In an attempt to extend this work, we sought evidence that curiosity can leverage the value of mindful presence in responding non-defensively to threatening events. The existential threat that occurs when considering one's own death is a central threat to the self and provided the test case for the hypothesis that curiosity and mindful attention can operate together to foster adaptive responses to this threat.

#### 1.1. Terror management theory

Terror management theory (TMT) proposes that as intelligent creatures, humans are aware that their own death is unavoidable. This recognition creates the potential for omnipresent existential anxiety. When a person's mortality is made apparent by instructing people to consider their own death, unconscious existential anxiety is generated that is then managed through two key defensive reactions (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). In the short-term, proximal defenses such as the suppression of death-related thoughts operate at the conscious level. Proximal defenses only push a threat of existential anxiety away temporarily without actually resolving it. Scientists have discovered that this suppression attempts merely to push death-related thoughts beyond conscious awareness, leading to the threat manifesting at the unconscious level. When unsuccessful, the use of proximal

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defenses results in the use of distal defenses to ward off death anxiety (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010).

Distal defenses, such as affirmation of one's cultural worldview, serve as protection from highly accessible death-related thoughts that are outside of conscious awareness. A cultural worldview provides an explanation for existence and a set of values that prescribe good and bad behavior. By acting in accordance with the values of their cultural worldview, humans are able to believe that their lives have lasting meaning and they will achieve immortality after their body perishes.

Much of the TMT literature has focused on the social consequences that can follow defense of worldviews to ward off existential anxiety. When reminded of the inevitability of death, in-group favoritism and out-group hostility is enhanced. This defensive position reaffirms a person's security in their own cultural worldview, which in turn alleviates anxiety. However, evidence has emerged for basic existential threats that affect nearly all human beings, regardless of their cultural worldviews. When primed to consider their own death, Goldenberg et al. (2001) found that it is threatening to be reminded that humans, in the end, are simply animals that crave food, water, sex, and sleep (i.e., our "creatureliness"). According to TMT, one strategy for managing existential anxiety is to focus on the higher meaning of human life. Being reminded that humans are no different from other animals directly undermines this strategy. After mortality salience, people who read an essay describing humans as similar to animals resulted in denigration of the essay writer, thereby alleviating the threat generated by their commentary (Goldenberg et al., 2001).

### 1.2. *Terror management theory and mindfulness*

Evidence has emerged that mindful attention reduces both proximal and distal defensive responses to existential threat. In a series of studies, Niemiec et al. (2010) found that those with a disposition toward mindful attention engaged in less thought suppression following a mortality salience induction, and were less likely to respond to existential threat with a variety of distal world-view defenses or with distal defense of self-esteem.

Mindfulness is theorized to be distinct from other buffers against existential anxiety in that it does not manage existential threat through reaffirming the values of a specific cultural worldview but rather through the way in which mindful people process threatening information. Thus, mindfulness does not appear to require the bolstering of one worldview at the expense of another.

### 1.3. *The present study*

Evidence indicates that mindful attention can buffer defensive responses to existential threat (Niemiec et al., 2010), and researchers have theorized that curiosity might enhance the value of this dimension in openly (non-defensively) responding to personal threats. Our central hypothesis was that people with dispositionally higher levels of both mindful attention and curiosity would exhibit less defensive reactions to an existential threat than those with higher levels of either one alone, or those lower in both traits. To examine this, we believed it was appropriate to examine a form of defense that affects a wide array of people, regardless of their particular cultural worldview. Thus, we used a paradigm in which mortality salience was induced, after which individuals were shown an essay emphasizing either the similarities between people and other animals (i.e., "creatureliness") or the uniqueness of human beings (Goldenberg et al., 2001). People who were both mindfully attentive and curious were expected to show a benign response to information suggesting that humans are simply one of many creatures in the animal kingdom. That is, curiosity was expected to enhance the value of mindfulness as a buffer against an

existential threat to the self. Finally, to address construct specificity, we controlled for trait self-esteem and the Big Five personality traits to insure curiosity and mindful attention effects were not accounted for by other positive attributes or neuroticism, and controlled for political attitudes because liberals tend to be morally focused on equality and might be more prone to accept views that animals and humans are more similar than different.

## 2. *Method*

### 2.1. *Participants*

Participants consisted of 118 undergraduate students at a large, Mid-Atlantic university. Of the participants, 95 (80%) were women and 23 (20%) were men. All were 18 or older with a mean age of 19.81 ( $SD = 3.25$ ). Participants identified themselves as Caucasian ( $n = 72$ ; 60%), as Asian-American ( $n = 21$ ; 18%), African-American ( $n = 13$ ; 11%), Hispanic ( $n = 5$ ; 4%), Native-American ( $n = 1$ ; 1%), or another race or ethnicity ( $n = 6$ ; 5%). Students received research credit for their participation after being recruited from online advertisements in the psychology department. All students provided informed consent and this study met The Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association.

### 2.2. *Procedure*

There were two parts to the experiment. In the first part, participants completed a series of demographic and personality trait questionnaires, including measures of mindful attention and curiosity (see Section 2.3). Then participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental inductions (identical to prior designs; e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). In Version A, participants received a mortality salience induction where they were asked to describe what they thought would happen to them as they died and after they were dead in explicit detail, including any emotions aroused by the thought of their own death. In Version B, the control condition, participants were asked to imagine the experience of dental pain including what they thought would happen to them as they experienced dental pain and after they had experienced it, including thoughts and emotions aroused by the dental pain. In sum, participants were randomized into each cell of our  $2$  (mortality salience,  $n = 54$  versus control,  $n = 64$ )  $\times$   $2$  (self-threat,  $n = 62$  versus control,  $n = 56$ ) design.

The first part was followed by an assessment of mood, which served as a delay between the induction and the second part wherein participants read an essay that they were told was written by a senior honors student at a local university (identical to study 2 of Goldenberg et al., 2001). In Version A, the self threat condition, participants read an essay that described humans as slightly more intelligent than other animals but otherwise no different from animals in any meaningful way (humans as just another animal). In Version B, the control condition, participants read an essay that described humans as having characteristics such as the capacity for language and morality that made them highly unique from other animals (humans as unique). In both conditions, after reading the essay participants were asked to rate the essay writer on intelligence, how much they agreed with them, and how much they liked them.

### 2.3. *Measures*

#### 2.3.1. *Curiosity*

The 10-item Trait Curiosity and Exploration Inventory-II (CEI-II; Kashdan et al., 2009) assesses the degree to which people tend to seek out new knowledge and experiences and be willing to

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