



## Reports

# Pearls in the desert: Death reminders provoke immediate derogation of extrinsic goals, but delayed inflation

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## ABSTRACT

Psychologists and philosophers have argued that explicitly contemplating one's mortality makes extrinsically oriented goal pursuits, such as for wealth and fame, seem unimportant. Research inspired by terror management theory has shown, however, that when thoughts of death are active outside current focal attention, individuals bolster culturally sanctioned standards of self-worth. The present studies thus examined the hypotheses that (a) immediately after explicit reminders of mortality, individuals will trivialize extrinsic goals, but (b) when a delay and distraction follows an explicit mortality reminder, individuals will favorably evaluate extrinsic goals. Consistent with these hypotheses, Studies 1 and 2 showed that, relative to subjects reminded of an aversive control topic, mortality salience led to lower importance ratings for extrinsic goals. Study 2 further showed that, when mortality salience was followed by a distracter task, subjects gave higher importance ratings for a high priority extrinsic goal.

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## Introduction

For centuries, thinkers have noted that the thought of one's inevitable death can make efforts to obtain symbolic value seem inauthentic and meaningless. Existential psychologists and philosophers (e.g., Heidegger, 1927/1982; Yalom, 1980), as well as literary characters like Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge and Tolstoy's Ivan Illyich, have illustrated how encounters with mortality make extrinsic strivings (e.g., for wealth and social status) seem like wastes of one's finite time on earth. Indeed, following close brushes with death, people often eschew ego-enhancing ambition in favor of appreciating the here-and-now (e.g., Kinnier, Tribben-see, Rose, & Vaughn, 2001; Kuhl, 2002).

According to terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2007), however, seeking symbolic indicators of personal worth is a primary means by which humans mitigate concerns with death-related anxiety. The present two studies therefore examined conditions under which death-related thoughts lead to trivialization or inflation of extrinsic goals. Based on the dual-process model of terror management (for a review, see e.g., Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2005), we tested the hypothesis that immediately after explicit reminders of mortality, individuals will trivialize extrinsic goals, but when a delay and distraction follows the reminder, individuals will favorably evaluate extrinsic goals.

## TMT and the dual-process model

Based on the writings of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT states that cognitive capacities for symbolic self-reflective thought render humans aware of their inevitable mortality. The juxtaposition of this awareness with basic drives for continued survival creates a potential for intense anxiety, which individuals manage by maintaining faith in a *cultural worldview* (a set of shared symbolic beliefs about the meaningful nature of reality and how one may attain value in it) and *self-esteem* (the feeling that one is meeting or exceeding value standards espoused by the worldview). By sustaining these psychological structures, individuals may believe that they are not just finite animals but rather enduring beings who will continue past death either literally or symbolically.

Research on TMT has shown that reminders of mortality (mortality salience; MS) instigate various defensive responses aimed at reducing death-related concerns. The dual-process model of terror management (DPMTM; Pyszczynski et al., 2005) was designed to specify how and why responses to MS will differ as a function of whether death-related thought is in focal attention or outside of consciousness yet highly accessible. Research on the DPMTM has shown that immediately after an MS induction, when death-related thought enters consciousness, the accessibility of death-related constructs is equally low or lower than in control condition (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997). This reflects an active suppression of death-related thought (e.g., if individuals are under high cognitive load, then death thought accessibility is high immediately after explicit MS; Arndt et al., 1997). Under this condition, individuals exhibit proximal responses,

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consisting of pseudo-rational efforts to deny one's vulnerability to death (Pyszczynski et al., 2005). For instance, Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (2000) found that immediately after MS, participants reported themselves as high in emotionality when that trait was purportedly positively associated with longevity, but as low in emotionality when this same association was purportedly negative.

Research on the DPMTM has further shown that when a delay is interposed between MS and measures of DTA, the active suppression of death-related thoughts is relaxed, yielding a delayed increase in levels of DTA (e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997; Simon et al., 1997) and simultaneous low levels of explicit death-related focus (Greenberg et al., 1994). It is at this stage that individuals exhibit distal defensive responses to MS—efforts to bolster and defend a cultural worldview (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2000) or to procure a symbolic sense of personal value (e.g., Arndt, Schimel, & Goldenberg, 2003; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999). Studies show that these responses function to lower DTA. The delayed increase in DTA following MS is reduced if individuals are given an opportunity to bolster their worldview or self-worth (e.g., Arndt et al., 1997), and this reduction in DTA is not simply a renewed active suppression (Greenberg, Arndt, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2001). Studies further show that undermining individuals' worldview (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007) or their bases of self-esteem (Hayes, Schimel, Faucher, & Williams, 2008) increases DTA and not the accessibility of other negative thoughts, further supporting the roles of worldview defense and self-esteem striving in keeping DTA low.

#### *Applying TMT's dual-process model to extrinsic goal evaluation*

Goals often differ in their motivational underpinnings and consequences of their pursuit. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) asserts that some goals are pursued for the indirect, symbolic sense of personal worth they afford, while other goals are sought for direct fulfillment. The former are extrinsic goals (i.e., wealth, fame), characterized by focus on reward-based social contingencies. From the perspective of TMT, extrinsic goals offer social validation of one's self-esteem, affording a sense of symbolic permanence. In contrast, intrinsic goals (i.e., emotional intimacy, community connection) are characterized by inherent satisfaction rather than symbolic reward (Deci & Ryan, 2002). While intrinsic goals are indeed culturally valued, their pursuit is largely self-determined rather than intended to impress others or gain in status. Individuals with intrinsic motivations tend to be more psychologically secure and healthy than those concerned more with extrinsic pursuits (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002).

Thinkers have often suggested that evaluations of extrinsic aspirations are influenced by confrontations with death—specifically, that consciously recognizing one's mortality makes extrinsic sources of self-worth seem trivial and meaningless (e.g., Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004). Heidegger (1927/1982) argued that establishing a relation of the self to death through time or “being toward death” (*Sein zum Tode*) yields a style of living that is less dependent on socially espoused concerns and more engaged in continual discovery of one's essential felt state of being. Similarly, Yalom (1980) proposed that consciousness of death reduces habitual dependencies on external products and their attainment, which otherwise place limits on inherent personal potentials. Research on near-death experiences confirms that such reprioritization occurs (Noyes, 1980). In a content analysis of interviews with 17 adults who had experienced life-threatening situations, Kinnier et al. (2001) observed that “the threat of death mostly extinguished participants' attraction to the trappings of success ('title and status' in

the words of a 48-year-old man who had a heart transplant) and the glittering superficialities of physical beauty and material wealth.” (p. 174).

The present studies thus tested the hypothesis that, immediately after MS, conscious thoughts of mortality will lead individuals to trivialize extrinsic goals. However, consistent with the DPMTM, after a delay, with death thoughts highly accessible but no longer in focal attention, unconscious concerns with death will motivate striving for extrinsic sources of symbolic value and thus cause individuals to inflate rather than deflate the perceived importance of extrinsic goals.

We were not as interested in the impact of death-related thought on ratings of intrinsic goals because there is no clear basis for predicting differential effects as a function of immediate vs. delayed assessment. However, prior research (e.g., Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003) suggests that intrinsic goals may provide immediate comfort and serve as potential sources of personal value, suggesting that individuals may inflate the value of intrinsic goals both immediately after MS and after a delay.

### **Experiment 1**

In this study, participants contemplated either their own death or a negative topic unrelated to death, and then evaluated the importance of extrinsic and intrinsic goals immediately after the MS manipulation or following a delay.

#### *Method*

##### *Participants*

Sixty-four students (45 females, 19 males) were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (Salience: death vs. pain)  $\times$  2 (Delay: no delay vs. delay) factorial design.<sup>1</sup>

##### *Materials and procedure*

Participants were told the study concerned personality's relation to goals. Participants then completed several filler questionnaires and then, in the MS condition, received a questionnaire posing two open-ended questions: “Please briefly describe the feelings that the thought of your own death arouses in you” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead” (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Control condition participants received parallel questions regarding intense physical pain.

Next, half of the participants completed the dependent measure and the other half read a seven-page excerpt from “The Growing Stone,” a short story by Albert Camus (1957). Although reading speeds vary, pilot testing of the passage has found the range of time it takes is generally between 4 and 6 min. TMT researchers routinely use reading this passage as a delay between MS and dependent measures, both because of the excerpt's mundane descriptive nature, neutral affective tone, and lack of reference to death or existential issues, and because MS reliably leads to increased accessibility of death-related thoughts after the distraction of reading this passage. Greenberg et al. (1994; Study 4) as well as Harmon-Jones et al. (1997; Study 3) used the same MS prime as we used and the same delay manipulation, and, consistent with the DPMTM, observed low levels of DTA immediately after MS and high levels of DTA when the Camus passage was interposed between MS and the DTA measure. Before reading the passage, participants were informed that, later in the session, their memory

<sup>1</sup> In both Study 1 and Study 2, gender had no significant effects.

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