

# Research findings

## TERROR MISMANAGEMENT

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### WHAT WAS THE AIM?

Terror management theory (TMT) seeks to understand the impact of death anxiety on human behaviour. According to TMT, the human motivation to stay alive, paired with the awareness that death can occur at any given moment, has the power to evoke feelings of anxiety and powerlessness. Recent research suggests that death anxiety may be a basic fear underlying a range of psychological conditions, including depression and anxiety disorders. For instance, awareness of death (or mortality salience) has been found to increase avoidance in social anxiety.

Attentional bias refers to placing attention (or eye gaze) on images that are socially threatening (e.g., angry faces). That is, socially anxious individuals fear negative evaluation by others, and so they often look for evidence in the environment that confirms these fears.

Given that attentional bias to social threat is a core feature of social anxiety, the aim of our study was to examine the impact of mortality salience on attentional bias in social anxiety.

### HOW DID WE DO IT?

We had 36 socially anxious and 37 non-socially anxious undergraduate students randomly allocated to either an experimental (mortality salience) or control condition. Participants in the experimental condition completed a mortality salience induction designed to evoke death-related thoughts. This induction technique has been used extensively in death anxiety research. The control induction was designed to prompt thoughts of intense physical pain. After the experimental/control induction, participants completed a range of self-report measures, and an eye-tracking procedure to evaluate initial bias towards social threat (0–500 milliseconds), and late-stage avoidance away from threat (0–3000

milliseconds). Participants viewed 32 angry–neutral and happy–neutral face pairs, counterbalanced and presented in a random order.

### WHAT DID WE FIND?

As we predicted, socially anxious participants who were reminded of their own death demonstrated significantly more initial bias to social threat (happy and angry faces) than socially anxious control participants. They also demonstrated significantly more initial bias to social threat than non-socially anxious participants who were reminded of their own death. However, this effect was not found for late-stage avoidance of social threat. That is, mortality salience had a unique effect on initial bias to social threat for socially anxious individuals, but did not impact late-stage avoidance of social threat.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

Our findings confirm that death awareness is capable of increasing anxious responding in socially anxious individuals. In particular, reminders of death were found to increase initial focus towards social threat (both happy and angry faces) for the socially anxious group. This corresponds with the theoretical perspective that social anxiety is associated with fear of both positive and negative social evaluation. Results from this study improve our understanding of the role that death anxiety may play in psychological functioning. Additional clinical support and management may be needed for socially anxious individuals who report an underlying fear of death. Numerous approaches to the treatment of death anxiety have been developed, and may be helpful for such individuals.

#### FIND OUT MORE

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