Does a Candy a Day Keep the Death Thoughts Away?
The Terror Management Function of Eating

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To examine whether the soothing effect of food may be related to terror management processes, 149 Israeli college students were assigned to a mortality salience, fail salience, or neutral condition. Then, they were exposed to 1 of 3 tasting conditions ranging from pleasant to unpleasant or to a fourth condition with no tasting. Following this procedure all participants were asked to judge the severity of 10 social transgressions and recommend punishments. The results showed that in the no-tasting condition mortality salience led to more severe judgments of social transgressions than in the 2 control conditions. However, this effect was attenuated in the tasting conditions, especially in the positive taste condition wherein death primes led to less severe judgments of transgressions than in the other conditions. The discussion examines the utility of a terror management perspective in understanding the relation between stress and overeating.

The link between death and food seems to be well established, probably due to the simple fact that we need to eat to survive. Food also seems to hold a more symbolic meaning of life affirmation and is a means of celebrating life and feeling alive. Furthermore, the work of Rozin and his colleagues (e.g., Rozin, 1996; Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin, & Wrzesniewski, 1999) suggests that food is a central component of many human festivities, as well as an integral part of the mourning rituals of many societies. In this research we attempt to examine the link between death and eating and propose that food may serve as a death-anxiety buffer. Moreover, we examine the possibility that the well-established link between emotional distress and eating may be a function not only of acute stressors but also of chronic, existential sources of distress. These questions are examined from the perspective of terror management theory (TMT; e.g., Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997).

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND OVEREATING

Problems related to overeating have become a growing concern in most Western societies (e.g., Horgen & Brownell, 2002). One of the leading explanations for this phenomenon is the relation between emotional distress and the soothing qualities of food (e.g., Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991; Heatherton, Striepe, & Wittenberg, 1998). Studies have shown that overeating often occurs during times of acute distress (e.g., Baucom & Aiken, 1981; Cools, Schotte, & McNally, 1992), and that foods, especially those high in sucrose, have soothing qualities (e.g., Reid & Hammersley, 1998).

The literature on emotional distress and overeating suggests that only those distressful experiences that pose a substantial threat to the self instigate overeating, and that overeating serves as a distraction to remove threatening material from consciousness (e.g., Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991). According to this model, different forms of emotional distress will have profoundly different effects on the desire to eat. Emotional distress that bears no immediate threat to the self should not be a significant instigator of disinhibited eating. However, conditions of distress that impact directly on the self, and may threaten it, will induce defensive overeating. In line with this view, studies that compared dieters and nondieters showed that only threats that were ego relevant (i.e., had a negative implication on one’s self-image) had a negative influence on dieters’ attempts to restrain their eating (Heatherton et al., 1998).

Another important ingredient of this model is self-awareness. Ego-threatening conditions will lead to defensive overeating only when self-awareness is low. High self-awareness should buffer the impact of ego threat on the
overeating response. Consistent with this hypothesis, studies have shown that when dieters and nondieters are presented with an ego threat, only the dieters under conditions of low self-awareness will show defensive overeating. This effect disappears under conditions of high self-awareness (e.g., Heatherton, Polivy, Herman, & Baumeister, 1993; Heatherton et al., 1998).

An ironic consequence of the escape model of eating just described is that dieters under conditions of self-related threat disengage from their long-term goals of reducing their weight, a goal that ultimately would increase their self-image, in favor of a short-term strategy of protecting the self from the anxiety related to the immediate threat. This process of foregoing a long-term cherished goal for an immediate reward that carries long-term negative consequences, to both physical health and self-esteem, presses for further explanation. What is the nature of the threat that requires an immediate defensive response to protect a psychological construct (the self) at the expense of compromising that same construct in the long run? If the function of dieting is to increase feelings of self-worth, abandoning that important long-term goal because of a temporary threat does not seem to make intuitive sense.

In our view, one possible solution to this problem lies in understanding the nature of the threat and the function of the self in regard to this threat. If the acute threat is unbearable to the extent that it demands an immediate response, one might be motivated to remove the threat even at the expense of sacrificing cherished long-term goals. This ironic process of protecting the self only to further compromise it in the long run may be related to terror management processes. TMT (Greenberg et al., 1997) examines a fundamental human threat—the terror of death—and posits that both short-term and long-term defensive strategies are utilized to remove this threat from conscious awareness. Due to many similarities between theories of defensive overeating and TMT—both suggesting a threat and a defensive maneuver to remove the threat—we examine whether TMT may provide new insights on eating as a distress-reducing strategy.

**TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY**

TMT rests on the assumption that humans are continuously motivated to drive thoughts of death out of conscious awareness (for a comprehensive review see Greenberg et al., 1997). Based primarily on the writings of Becker (1973), TMT posits that humans share with all living organisms a biological propensity for survival in the service of reproduction (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). However, unlike all other beings, humans are poignantly aware that they are alive and that one day they must die. This combination of a propensity for life coupled with an awareness of death places humans in an irresolvable paradox. To cope with this threat, TMT suggests that people have developed elaborate defensive mechanisms that enable them to shield themselves from death awareness.

These mechanisms have recently been conceptualized as a dual process model of defenses against death (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Accordingly, people defend against the terror of death in two distinct modes of psychological defenses that are activated along a temporal sequence. The first mode of defense takes place immediately when exposed to thoughts of death (proximal defenses) and consists of direct attempts to remove the threatening material from conscious awareness. Proximal defenses consist of immediate behavioral and cognitive maneuvers aimed at escaping or denying the threat. The activation of proximal defenses will result in a temporary reduction in the accessibility of death-related cognitions (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Simon 1997; Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000). After a brief reduction in the accessibility of death-related thoughts, the second line of defense, the distal defenses, is activated to ensure that thoughts of death will not permeate conscious thinking. Unlike proximal defenses, distal defenses involve the activation of symbolic cultural constructs that are seemingly unrelated to the topic of death.

Most of the research conducted under TMT has focused on two distal defenses: the cultural worldview defense and self-esteem. According to TMT, investing in a cultural worldview enables people to expand their self onto a structure that is greater and more enduring than the physical self. A sense of self-esteem is obtained when one feels that he or she is successfully living according to cultural prescriptions. Together these defenses offer the solace of literal immortality in the form of belief in an afterlife, as well as the possibility of symbolic immortality by ensuring that certain aspects of the self will continue to exist after death.

Due to the death-denying function of the cultural worldview, an encounter with a different worldview may pose a threat to the validity of one’s belief and the defense from death awareness that they provide. As a result, one may be motivated to reject the threatening worldview at all costs and defend one’s belief.

To test these theoretical propositions, terror management studies have primed thoughts of death (mortality salience) and examined cultural worldview defenses. These studies have found that making mortality salient increases the motivation to invest in one’s worldview, as well as avoid, derogate, punish, and even aggress against worldview-threatening others (e.g., Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Greenberg et al., 2000; Greenberg et al., 1990; Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2003; McGregor et al., 1998).

Moreover, research has shown that both dispositionally high and experimentally enhanced self-esteem causes people to respond less defensively to mortality salience inductions (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1993; Greenberg et al., 1992; Harmon-Jones, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & McGregor, 1997).
Much of the research stimulated by TMT has focused on distal terror management defenses. Less empirical attention has been devoted to the activation of proximal defenses that serve as an immediate distraction against death concerns. Although these defenses are often short-lived, it is not necessarily the case that they bear no importance. In this study we examine the soothing properties of food in relation to proximal terror management defenses in an attempt to shed light on the relation between stress and defensive overeating.

DEATH AWARENESS AND THE SOOTHING PROPERTIES OF EATING

The escape model of eating disinhibition (e.g., Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991) has amassed an impressive body of literature showing that people who diet are particularly susceptible to defensive overeating when faced with threat. However, they specified two qualifying conditions for defensive overeating to occur: (a) the threat must have a negative impact on the self, and (b) self-awareness must be low.

In this research we argue that defensive overeating may function as a proximal terror management mechanism. The basis of this argument rests on the similarities between the escape model of overeating and TMT. Mortality salience primes seem to satisfy the conditions put forth by Heatherton and his colleagues for defensive overeating to take place. Specifically, (a) primes of death threaten the self-concept; (b) thoughts of death motivate people to avoid the self-focused state, and therefore may lead to a state of low self-awareness (Arndt, Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1998); and (c) primes of death induce immediate attempts to remove the threatening thoughts from consciousness.

Based on the similarities between TMT and the escape model of overeating, it seems that the study of defensive overeating may benefit from the insights obtained by TMT. Specifically, the dual process model of defense against death awareness proposed by TMT (Pyszczynski et al., 1999) may help shed light on the ironic process wherein people who are motivated to lose weight respond to self-related threats with defensive overeating. From this perspective, the threat posed by thoughts of death leads to a strong motivation to remove these thoughts from consciousness. Eating may be a particularly appealing form of proximal defense as it contains many soothing features: (a) Certain components of food, such as sucrose have a biologically soothing effect (e.g., Reid & Hammersley, 1998); (b) food may be related to a feeling of being nurtured and cared for; (c) although in modern societies food is abundant, in our evolutionary history food was scarce and directly related to the ability to sustain life, so in this sense eating may function as a symbolic life-affirming activity; and (d) food may serve as a cognitive or behavioral distraction from acute threats as Heatherton et al. (1998) proposed. For these reasons defensive overeating may serve as an effective proximal terror management mechanism.

THIS STUDY

In this study we focus on the first and most basic question of this model: Does food buffer the impact of death primes on other well-established terror management defenses? This study enables us to examine whether different types of foods, ranging from pleasant to unpleasant, have a terror management function. Moreover we are able to examine their terror management properties against previously validated distal worldview defenses.

Accordingly, we designed a $3 \times 4$ between-subject factorial design with prime condition as one factor and taste condition as the other. In the prime condition we compared the mortality salience prime to both a neutral prime condition (watching television) and a negative non-death-related prime condition (failing an important exam) to ensure that our effects are specific to death. In the taste conditions we compared three different taste conditions (positive taste, neutral taste, negative taste) to a no-taste condition to examine whether taste in general, or a specific taste, buffers against the impact of the death prime. As our dependent measure, we examined the judgments of social transgressions, which is a well-validated terror management mechanism (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2001, 2002).

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and forty-nine undergraduate students from Ashkelon Regional College in Israel (50 men and 99 women) ranging in age from 17 to 46 ($Mdn = 24$) volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were approached by an experimenter and asked if they would be willing to participate in a study about food. Participants that were either on a diet or observed other food restrictions were not included in the sample.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were individually recruited and escorted into a room where an experimenter presented the study as an examination of personality and food preferences. First, they were asked to fill out a bogus personality test, which served to guise the purpose of the study. Following the personality inventory, participants received one of three open-ended questions by random assignment. Participants in the mortality salience condition ($n = 50$) received the following items: “What do you think happens to you as you physically die and once
you are physically dead?” and “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you.” Participants in the exam fail condition (n = 50) were asked parallel questions, replacing all references to death with “failing an important exam.” Participants in the neutral condition (n = 49) were asked parallel questions, replacing references to death with “watching television.” In all three conditions, the questionnaire consisted of two items with space provided below each for one paragraph of response. This method has been successfully used in numerous terror management studies (e.g., Florian et al., 2001; Greenberg et al., 1990).

Immediately following this procedure, an experimenter blind to experimental conditions randomly presented participants with a white envelope that contained one of the following options: In the pleasant food condition participants received a piece of butterscotch candy. In the unpleasant food condition participants received a similar sized piece of anis-flavored candy that was covered with Mara™—a bitter solution used for the prevention of nail biting. In the neutral food condition participants received a piece of a sodium-free nonfat cracker, and in the no-food condition participants received a piece of cardboard.

The choice of food for each condition was determined in a pretest (n = 30) in which participants were randomly divided into six taste conditions, two representing each of the experimental conditions. After tasting the sample, participants were asked to complete an 11-item food preference questionnaire on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much; α = .92). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences between the groups, F(5, 24) = 8.81, p < .001. Duncan post-hoc tests indicated that the Mara-laced anis candy was the least liked (M = 1.6) and the butterscotch candy was the most liked (M = 5.56). The sodium-free nonfat cracker fell between these two extremes (M = 3.9) and was significantly different from both the butterscotch and anis candies (all ps < .05). In all the conditions except for the no-food condition, participants were asked to hold the sample in their mouth for 2 minutes and then to spit it out. In the no-food condition, participants were asked to wait for 2 minutes for the next questionnaires. To ensure that the participants did not construe this procedure as a reward or punishment, we asked all participants at the end of the study about this component of the experiment. All participants indicated that they believed they were given an envelope at random. Following this procedure all participants completed a leisure-time activity scale that served to distract participants as in previous terror management studies (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990).

Next, participants provided their judgments of social transgressions on a shortened version of the multidimensional social transgressions scale (MSTS) that has been found to be reliable and valid in previous studies (e.g., Florian et al., 2002; Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). The scale included 10 vignettes, each built as a brief newspaper report, describing (a) the concrete cause of a particular social transgression, and (b) the most damaging consequence of the transgression to the victim (see Florian & Mikulincer, 1997, for vignette wording and a full description of the construction process).

Participants were requested to read each story and to provide two judgments. First, they evaluated the severity of the transgression on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not severe at all) to 7 (very severe). Second, they evaluated the severity of the punishment that should be administered to a transgression on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very light punishment) to 7 (very heavy punishment). Following Florian et al. (2002), we calculated an overall judgment score by averaging the scores on the two scales (Cronbach’s α = .87). Higher scores indicated more severe judgments and punishments of the transgressions.

Finally, participants were asked to complete a short demographic sheet, were thanked for their participation, and were then debriefed.

RESULTS

To examine whether food moderates the impact of death primes on the judgment of social transgressions, a 3 × 4 ANOVA was performed with prime condition (death, fail, neutral) and food conditions (no food, unpleasant, neutral, pleasant) as the factors. Participants’ global punishment scores served as the dependent variable. This analysis did not reveal a main effect of prime condition, however it yielded a marginally significant main effect for food condition, F(3, 137) = 2.43, p = .07. Scheffé post-hoc tests indicated that participants in the pleasant food condition recommended significantly less punishment (M = 4.53) than participants in the unpleasant food (M = 4.93) and neutral food conditions (M = 4.86; all ps < .05). No significant differences were found between the unpleasant, neutral, and no-food conditions.

In line with our hypotheses, this analysis also yielded a significant Mortality Salience × Food Condition interaction, F(6, 137) = 4.92, p < .001 (see Figure 1). To examine the source of this significant interaction, we conducted one-way ANOVAs for prime condition (death, fail, neutral) for each food condition (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, no food). The error term of these analyses was the within-subjects variance of the global two-way ANOVA.

In the no-food condition the ANOVA revealed a significant effect of prime, F(2, 137) = 12.79, p < .001. Planned comparisons examining differences between prime conditions (see no-food condition in Figure 1) indicated that judgments were highest in the mortality salience condition (M = 5.38, SD = .63) and significantly greater than judgments in

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1Analyzing severity ratings and punishment recommendations separately yielded similar results.
the fail salience ($M = 4.63, SD = .53$) and neutral ($M = 4.44, SD = .30$) conditions, $t(38) = -4.96, p < .001$. No significant differences were found between the fail salience and neutral conditions, $t(38) = .997, p = ns$. This finding replicates previous research that has shown that death primes increase punishments of social transgressions (e.g., Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Florian et al., 2002), and indicates that this effect is specific to death and not to other negative primes (e.g., failure). Consistent with our hypotheses, in the unpleasant and neutral food conditions the ANOVA failed to reach significance, $F(2, 137) = 1.60, p = .2$, and $F(2, 137) = .76, p = .46$, respectively.

Interestingly, in the pleasant food condition the ANOVA was significant, $F(2, 137) = 4.39, p = .01$. Planned comparisons examining differences between prime conditions (see pleasant food condition in Figure 1) indicated that judgments were lowest in the mortality salience condition ($M = 4.02, SD = .67$) and were significantly different from judgments in the fail salience ($M = 4.9, SD = .88$) and neutral ($M = 4.68, SD = .6$) conditions, $t(31) = 2.85, p < .01$. There were no significant differences between the fail salience and neutral conditions, $t(31) = .74, p = ns$. Overall, these findings indicate that death primes led to more severe judgments of social transgressions when no food was administered. However, when a pleasant-tasting food was given the opposite effect occurred and participants in the mortality salience condition exhibited the least severe judgment of social transgressions.

To determine whether the food conditions, neutral and negative, also have terror management properties, additional one-way ANOVAs examining the differences among taste conditions in each one of the prime conditions were conducted. These analyses revealed a significant difference in transgression judgment in the death condition, $F(3, 137) = 9.517, p < .001$. Planned comparisons examining differences between food conditions (see death condition columns in Figure 1) indicated that judgments were highest in the no-food condition ($M = 5.38, SD = .63$) and were significantly greater than judgments in the three food conditions, $t(46) = 3.78, p < .001$. Judgments were lowest in the pleasant food condition ($M = 4.02, SD = .67$) and were significantly different than judgments in the unpleasant and neutral food conditions, $t(46) = 3.86, p < .001$. Importantly, judgments in the unpleasant and neutral food conditions were significantly lower than judgments in the no-food condition, $t(46) = 2.24, p < .05$, suggesting that these food conditions also have terror management properties. There was no significant difference between the unpleasant ($M = 4.96, SD = .37$) and neutral ($M = 4.83, SD = .80$) food conditions, $t(46) = .51, p = ns$. As expected, the one-way ANOVAs in the fail salience and neutral conditions were not significant, $F(3, 137) = 1.2, p = ns$, and $F(3, 137) = 2.1, p = ns$, respectively.

Overall, the results further validate our hypotheses and indicate that all types of food administered in the study, whether unpleasant, neutral, or pleasant, buffered against the effects of death on the judgment of social transgressions. Moreover, when the food was pleasant the death prime led to even less recommendation of punishments compared to judgments in the fail salience and neutral conditions. The buffering effect of food seems to increase as food pleasantness increases.

**DISCUSSION**

Overeating issues have become one of the major public health concerns of most Western societies. This problem is undoubtedly the result of a multitude of factors, some of which are biological and others more social or psychological (Horgen & Brownell, 2002).

In this research we set out to examine whether food may have soothing properties against chronic existential threats. Our findings present preliminary evidence supporting the contention that food has terror management properties that provide people with temporary relief from death-related concerns. Specifically, we found that death primes led to more worldview defense compared to both a neutral and negative non-death-related prime, when no tasting sample was provided. However, participants who were given a tasting sample immediately following the death prime did not exhibit the worldview defense. These results suggest that a taste of food, even bitter and foul tasting, buffers the impact of death primes on the worldview defense. However, it seems that the more pleasant the food, the stronger its buffering effect.

To rule out the possibility that the differences between the food and the no-food conditions were due to the time elapsed between the prime and our worldview measure, we carefully monitored time in all conditions. In addition, in the no-food condition participants were given a piece of cardboard for two reasons: first, to ensure that our experimenters remained blind to conditions, and second, to ensure that our effects were specific to food and not to the provision of something that could be construed as a reward from the experimenter.
It is important to note that our findings indicate that the buffering effect of food was specific to the terror of death and not to other types of negative primes. To rule out the possibility that death is only a stronger example of negative affectivity we included both a fail salience and neutral prime. Our findings clearly show that the fail salience prime had a significantly different effect from the death prime and was not significantly different from the neutral prime.

The findings of this study support our hypotheses and suggest that food has terror management properties. Unlike other studies examining defensive overeating (e.g., Heatherton et al., 1998), in this study we did not focus on the differences between people who are trying to monitor their weight and those who are not. In fact, we excluded from our sample potential participants who were on a diet. We did so because we wished to examine our basic hypothesis about the terror management function of food. If food per se has death anxiety buffering properties, there should not be major differences between those who are and those who are not concerned with their diet.

There are two possible ways of understanding these results from a terror management perspective. The first is that eating is a proximal terror management mechanism that serves as a temporary distraction from death. This explanation is also consistent with the escape model of defensive overeating (e.g., Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991) that has emphasized the role of eating as a distraction from self-relevant threats. The fact that food also seems to have powerful soothing qualities (Barr & Young, 1999) could make food a preferred mode of distraction when death is salient. Moreover, the life-affirming and nurturing aspects of food may amplify its effect as a terror management mechanism.

Another possible explanation for our findings is that food is a central component of the cultural worldview of most human societies. In Western societies, in particular, the fast-food culture encourages the consumption of supersized portions of high-fat, high-sugar foods, often at the expense of long-term health (Wadden, Brownell, & Foster, 2002). It is possible that in modern society, wherein religion and the family are losing their central functions, many people are left exposed to existential concerns with few alternatives for relief. Under these circumstances self-soothing by eating may be the most available and easy means of coping with powerful threats.

Although we did not specifically study dieters, the results of this study may offer some explanations of the relation between existential fears and defensive overeating. It seems that reminders of death may elicit a conflict between proximal and distal terror management mechanisms, wherein eating may provide short-term comfort at the expense of long-term costs to self-esteem and worldview needs. This ironic process is difficult to break, as eating may serve as an effective proximal defense by distracting one from thoughts of death, by providing soothing and comfort, and by symbolizing life and continuity. In fact, our study shows that the taste does not necessarily have to be pleasant and that neutral or even negative tastes will have a buffering effect as well.

For dieters this proximal defense may interfere with their long-term goal of losing weight. In Western societies there is a great deal of emphasis on attaining ideal standards of physical appearance and beauty. One of the major components of Western standards of beauty is thinness. Those who live up to these standards are treated more favorably (e.g., Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Ritts, Patterson, & Tubbs, 1992), and those who do not are often rejected (e.g., Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971). Consequently, those who are overweight may feel that they are not in accordance with the predominant cultural worldview, and are more likely to be rejected by others and suffer from low self-esteem. As self-esteem and the cultural worldview are central terror management mechanisms, these individuals may be more exposed to the terror of death.

Unable to satisfy the cultural worldview or boost their self-esteem, overweight people may be caught in a vicious cycle of overeating that produces short-lived comfort from threat at the expense of long-term detrimental consequences. The short-lived effect of this mechanism may be particularly problematic, as these people need to eat often to maintain a state of psychological equanimity.

One practical implication of this conclusion is that the treatment of people with overeating problems should not necessarily focus on the eating habits themselves, but on the cycle that sustains and reinforces them. This research has identified existential fears as one such underlying process. This research adds to the knowledge amassed by Heatherton and his colleagues and suggests that the key to breaking out of the cycle of overeating may be the enhancement of other defensive mechanisms such as self-esteem and aspects of the cultural worldview that are more congruent with physical and psychological health. One should keep in mind, however, that at this point these conclusions about people with overeating problems remain speculative, as our sample did not consist of people who were on a diet. Future research should extend this research to populations with eating problems and weight concerns.

This study also adds to the terror management literature by identifying taste, a sensory process not related to the worldview defense, as a terror management mechanism. Due to the design of this study wherein the taste samples were administered immediately following the death prime, it is reasonable to assume that taste functions as a proximal defense. However, we did not examine these questions directly.

Another important implication of this study to terror management theory is in further validating the terror management contention that the relation between mortality salience and worldview defense is unique to death and not to other types of threat. This study clearly shows that in the no-food condition only the death prime led to increased worldview defense, compared to both the fail salience and neutral condi-
tion. Moreover, in all of the taste conditions, the buffering properties of taste were manifested in the mortality salience conditions and not in the other control conditions. This was most evident in the pleasant taste condition, wherein only under mortality salience levels of worldview defense were reduced even below the no-food condition. These findings do not suggest that taste is a buffering mechanism only against the threat of death, but that the link between death and worldview defense is unique and may be temporarily attenuated by taste. It is likely, as other studies have shown, that food may attenuate the impact of other types of threats as well (e.g., Heatherton, Herman, & Polivy, 1991).

Before reaching any final conclusions, one should keep in mind several limitations of this study. First, our study merely represents an initial step in examining the relevance of TMT to defensive overeating. This study validated our first hypothesis that food buffers the impact of death primes on the worldview defense. Future studies should examine the next logical steps of this model such as the impact of death on the desire to eat. Second, the sample in this study represents a specific culture and age group—Israeli college students. Future studies should examine these hypotheses on other samples. Third, in this research we relied on certain tastes, primarily sweet, bitter, and neutral. Other studies should replicate these findings with other tastes as well (e.g., hot or sour). Fourth, we did not examine the differences between dieters and nondieters or look at differences in body image perceptions. Future studies should examine these variables as well to determine whether the terror management properties of food are general or specific to a certain population.

In spite of these limitations, this research sheds light on the relation between threat and overeating, and offers a provocative new way of looking at the mechanisms that may drive people to eat against their own best interests. More than this research offers any definite solutions, we believe it poses important questions that may serve as food for thought, so to speak, for future investigation.

REFERENCES


