

Terror Management Theory: Past, Present, and Future

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Scientists tell us that humans are just animals evolved to survive long enough to reproduce and care for offspring before dying. Yet we want to view life as something more and accomplish something more: to have lives that are meaningful and significant. These desires spring from the human capacity to understand our own vulnerability and mortality. This awareness creates a unique ever-present potential for experiencing terror. To manage this potential terror, cultural conceptions of reality have been constructed to imbue life with meaning and with possibilities for the individual to attain enduring significance (self-esteem). Humans function relatively securely as long as they sustain faith in such a worldview and their value within it because it provides people with the sense that they are not just transient animals fated only to obliteration; rather they will in some way transcend their own death. This terror management theory has been supported by over 400 studies clarifying how we humans manage this potential terror. I will briefly summarize this work and then focus on some recent research examining brain activity associated with terror management and the implications of the theory for understanding death construals, dating preferences, supernatural fantasies, and the desire for fame.