

# From Terror to Joy: Faced with Death, Our Minds Turn to Happier Thoughts

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Philosophers and scientists have long been interested in how the mind processes the inevitability of death, both cognitively and emotionally. One would expect, for example, that reminders of our mortality—say the sudden death of a loved one—would throw us into a state of disabling fear of the unknown. But that doesn't happen. If the prospect of death is so incomprehensible, why are we not trembling in a constant state of terror over this fact?

Psychologists have some ideas about how we cope with existential dread. One emerging idea—"terror management theory"—holds that the brain is hard-wired to keep us from being paralyzed by fear. According to this theory the brain allows us to think about dying, even to change the way we live our lives, but not cower in the corner, paralyzed by fear. The automatic, unconscious part of our brain in effect protects the conscious mind.

But how does this work? Psychologists Nathan DeWall of the University of Kentucky and Roy Baumeister of Florida State University ran three experiments to study existential dread in the laboratory. They prompted volunteers to think about what happens physically as they die and to imagine what it is like to be dead. It's the experimental equivalent of losing a loved one and ruminating about dying as a result.

Once the volunteers were preoccupied with thoughts of death and dying, they completed a series of word tests, which have been designed to tap into unconscious emotions. For example, volunteers might be asked to complete the word stem "jo\_" to make a word. They could make a neutral word like *job* or *jog*, or they might instead opt for the emotional word *joy*. Or, in a similar test, they might see the word *puppy* flashed on a screen, and they would instantaneously have to choose either *beetle* or *parade* as the best match. *Beetle* is closer to *puppy* in meaning, but *parade* is closer to *puppy* in emotional content. The idea is that the results represent the unconscious mind at work.

The results, as reported in the November issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, are intriguing. The volunteers who were preoccupied with thoughts of death were not at all morose if you tapped into their emotional brains. Indeed, the opposite: they were much more likely than control subjects to summon up positive emotional associations rather than neutral or negative ones. What this suggests, the psychologists say, is that the brain is involuntarily searching out and activating pleasant, positive information from the memory banks in order to help the brain cope with an incomprehensible threat.