

Fear of Death Prompts Leaders to Look Towards the Future

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One day in 1888, a wildly successful Swedish inventor came upon the obituary for his younger brother, Ludwig. He discovered that the newspaper had confused the two brothers—mistakenly reporting that the inventor had recently died. The obituary was harsh, dubbing the inventor, who had made his enormous fortune through manufacturing dynamite and weapons of war, the “Tradesman of Death.” Deeply troubled by the dark legacy he would have left behind, the inventor used his fortune to fund a prize to recognize those who had “conferred the greatest benefit to mankind.”

The inventor, Alfred Nobel, is now internationally renowned for his positive legacy. Nobel’s brush with death illustrates a psychological theory called terror management theory: Awareness of our own mortality has a strong, measurable—and often prosocial—impact on our decision making.

“Humans are fearful of death and the sense of finality of who we are and what we’ve contributed,” explained psychological scientist Morela Hernandez (University of Virginia). “When mortality is salient, it inspires a very significant desire to build a positive legacy.”

Research suggests that reminding leaders of their own mortality may be one way to encourage them to make better, or at least less selfish, decisions.

“We are willing to give up benefits now so that others can benefit in the future,” Hernandez said. “This legacy motive is an interesting mechanism that drives stewardship behavior.”

In a series of experiments published in [*Psychological Science*](#), Hernandez and colleagues predicted that

prompting participants to think about death would boost their desire to leave a positive legacy through deeds that benefit others in the future.

In the first experiment, 54 college students read a short news article and then wrote a short statement about the author's writing style. One group of students read an article titled "Person Killed in Aircraft Brake Failure Accident," while the control group read an article titled "Has Russian Math Whiz Solved \$1M Puzzle?"

Participants then saw a statement thanking them for participating and confirming that they would be entered in a lottery for a \$1,000 prize. They were also told that they could proactively set aside a portion of the potential winnings to go to charity. The charity was either described as meeting the immediate needs of people in the community or as creating lasting improvements that would benefit communities in the future.

Those prompted to think of death strongly favored donating to the future-oriented charity (an average of \$236 compared to \$40 for the present-oriented charity). On the other hand, those in the control group showed the opposite behavior, donating far more money towards people's immediate needs than their future needs.

In a second online experiment, 71 participants read one of the two articles from the first study. They were then asked to imagine themselves as the vice president of an energy company. The company had discovered a new, highly efficient source of energy. As a leader in the company, it was their job to decide how to distribute this resource. They could keep the new resource within their own branch of the company for future use, or they could share it with other branches of the company to be used either immediately or in the future.

Again, relative to individuals in the control condition, individuals primed with death donated more resources to recipients in the future than to those in the present. Those primed with death also contributed more to the other branches of the company relative to those in the control condition.

"Our work suggests an additional situation in which death priming can produce beneficent behavior: Not only does death priming increase the desire to help other people with whom individuals already feel a connection (e.g., those in our cultural groups), but it also induces a desire to connect with others in the future as a mechanism for establishing a legacy, which produces beneficence to these future others," Hernandez and colleagues conclude.

Of course, constantly reminding people of their impending deaths is not necessarily a great long-term business strategy. In a [new review](#) on terror management theory, psychological scientists Jacob Juhl (University of Southampton) and Clay Routledge (North Dakota State University) find that reminders of death can provoke anxiety and harm psychological well-being.

Reference

Juhl, J., & Routledge, C. (2016). Putting the terror in terror management theory evidence that the awareness of death does cause anxiety and undermine psychological well-being. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(2), 99-103. doi: 10.1177/0963721415625218

Wade-Benzoni, K. A., Tost, L. P., Hernandez, M., & Larrick, R. P. (2012). It's only a matter of time death, legacies, and intergenerational decisions. *Psychological Science*, 23(7), 704-709. doi: 10.1177/0956797612443967