

Religion can comfort or terrorize in response to death concerns

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To many people, death is seen as a frightening concept. Although it is in general a common theme in books, music, and movies, we prefer to keep thoughts of our own death to a minimum.

According to the Terror Management Theory, we adopt different worldviews, such as religion, to give our lives meaning and to provide order, thereby preventing us from being overwhelmed by the idea of death. But a new study shows that the terminally ill can be overwhelmed with both religious struggle and depression as a result of being unable to cope with thoughts of death.

In their study, psychologists Donald Edmondson, Crystal Park, Stephanie Chaudoir, and Jennifer Wortmann of the University of Connecticut gave questionnaires to a large number of Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) patients asking them about how religious they were, how often they thought of death, and how often they felt symptoms of depression. The researchers hypothesized that religious worldviews would break down and depression would set in patients with increasing thoughts of death.

The results of their study, which appear in the August issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, were very interesting. Patients that frequently had thoughts and concerns about death often were found dealing with symptoms of depression as well as thoughts of abandonment or punishment by God.

“Our findings suggest that properly functioning religious worldviews offer comfort by buffering the individual against death concerns near life’s end,” the authors wrote, “but that the breakdown of these worldviews leaves the individual vulnerable to the terror of death.”

A few limitations of this study, such as the large majority of Christian participants, prevent it from covering all aspects of this complex topic. Future studies are therefore necessary to provide further insight into religion and the terror management system.