Terror Management Theory

• Basic psychological conflict that results from having a desire to live but realizing that death is inevitable.

• This conflict produces terror, and is believed to be unique to human beings.

• Moreover, the solution to the conflict is also generally unique to humans: culture.
  • Cultures are symbolic systems that act to provide life with meaning and value.
  • Cultural values therefore serve to manage the terror of death by providing life with meaning.
Terror Management Theory and Symbolic Immortality

- **Symbolic immortality** is achieved by providing the sense that one is part of something greater that will ultimately outlive the individual.

- The simplest examples of cultural values that manage the terror of death are those that purport to offer **literal immortality** (e.g., belief in afterlife, religion).

- Other cultural values—including those that are seemingly unrelated to death—offer **symbolic immortality**.
  - National identity
  - Posterity
  - Cultural perspectives on sex
  - Human superiority over animals
  - Others
Terror Management Theory and Self-Esteem

• Cultural values contribute to self-esteem.
• Self-esteem = the personal, subjective measure of how well an individual is living up to their cultural values.
• Self-esteem acts to protect one against the terror of death. However, it functions to provide one's personal life with meaning, while cultural values provide meaning to life in general.
Terror Management Theory

Implications

- Self Esteem increases with:
  - Participation in culture
  - Strength of worldview
  - Strength of beliefs

- Self Esteem decreases Anxiety
Terror Management Theory

Implications

- Threats to worldview / culture / beliefs increases anxiety over death
Terror Management Theory Implications

- Increases in awareness / anxiety over death leads to entrenchment of worldview / culture / beliefs
Strength of Belief
Strength of Belief

• Prevailing View
  • More religiosity = greater well-being (Myers, 2000)
  • Out of 100 studies reviewed, 80% found that religious beliefs and practices were positively related to life satisfaction. (Koenig & Larson, 2001)
    • Mechanisms for this effect include
      • Strong social support
      • Healthy lifestyle
      • Existential certainty of strong convictions (Salsman et al., 2005; Stark & Maier, 2008)
Strength of Belief, cont.

• **Curvilinear relationship** (Galen & Kloet, 2011)

  • **Higher belief certainty** (both confidently religious and atheists) = greater well-being relative

  • **Low certainty** (unsure and agnostics) = lower wellbeing
Strength of Belief, cont.

(Galen & Kloet, 2011)
Strength of Belief, cont.

• Those with more certain religious beliefs, either strong belief in God or strong lack of belief in God, had greater emotional stability than those with weak or unsure beliefs.

• Members of a cohesive group are likely to display greater emotional stability to the extent that they are actively involved in a supportive social milieu. (Galen & Kloet, 2011)

• Rather than specifically religious content being a prerequisite for mental well-being, it is likely that existential certainty or coherence of a worldview mediates the relationship between religious participation and mental health. (Ellison, 1991)

• Ideological confidence in a coherent worldview may buffer anxiety.
  • Supported by System Justification Theory, the belief in a just world, and Terror Management Theory
Strength of Belief, cont.

• Conversely, **doubting one’s worldview** is associated with **higher distress**. (Krause et al., 1999)

• Confident non-believers have greater psychological well-being than the uncertain believers.

• “Luke-warm” religious believers who **fail to follow through with beliefs** who would be at highest risk for **mental distress**. (Galen & Kloet, 2011)