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From avoidance to approach: The effects of mortality salience and attachment on the motivation to repair troubled relationships



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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that mortality salience (MS) increases relational strivings and that attachment style moderates these effects. The present study investigated the effects of MS and attachment on relational strivings toward troubled close relationship partners (family members, friends, and romantic partners). MS increased participants' expectations for improvement in their troubled family relationships. In particular, MS increased fearful-avoidant individuals' relational strivings toward troubled family members. The same pattern emerged for friendships, controlling for relationship importance. However, MS decreased individuals' expectations for improvement in their troubled romantic relationships. The present research extends both the terror management and attachment literature, suggesting that MS can motivate fearful-avoidant individuals to overcome their avoidant tendency and repair their troubled relationships.

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1. Introduction

Humans are the only known species who are aware of their inevitable death. According to terror management theory (TMT), humans have developed psychological defenses to protect them from this terrifying reality (Becker, 1973; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Terror management theorists argue that close relationships provide one defense against death anxiety because relationships give meaning to life, offer security and protection, and provide symbolic immortality (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003).

Several studies have shown that mortality salience (MS) increases the desire to form and maintain close relationships (see Mikulincer et al., 2003, for a review). Under MS, participants show increased commitment to romantic partners (Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002), exaggerated perceptions of how positively romantic partners see them (Cox & Arndt, 2012), greater desire for intimacy in romantic relationships (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000), increased desire for proximity to parents (Cox et al., 2008), greater ease of recalling positive interactions with parents (Cox et al., 2008), and greater perceptions of temporal proximity of positive experiences with friends (Wakimoto, 2011).

Whereas MS increases relational strivings, thinking about the dissolution of close relationships increases death-thought accessibility. For example, participants were more likely to provide death-related words on a word completion task after thinking about problems in their relationships (Florian et al., 2002) or imagining being separated from a relationship partner (Mikulincer, Florian, Birnbaum, & Malishkovitz, 2002).

Although thinking about relationship problems increases death-thought accessibility, no study has examined whether MS motivates efforts to repair relationship problems. Research has shown that MS increases relational strivings following a partner's criticism (Hirschberger, Florian, Mikulincer, 2003) and forgiveness in response to a partner's hurtful offense (Van Tongeren, Green, Davis, Worthington, & Reid, 2013). However, in these studies, participants only imagined a single negative interaction. Furthermore, although Wakimoto (2011) found no effect of MS on the subjective temporal distance of a negative interaction with a friend, Wakimoto suggests that participants may not have perceived a single negative experience as a threat to the continuity of the friendship. Therefore, the present study specifically tested whether MS motivates relational strivings toward troubled close relationship partners.

1.1. Moderating role of attachment style

Although several studies suggest that close relationships serve a terror management defense, research has shown that attachment style plays an important role in determining whether close

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relationships can effectively buffer existential concerns. Current attachment models conceptualize attachment along two dimensions: avoidance and anxiety (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Securely attached individuals exhibit low levels of avoidance and anxiety, whereas insecurely attached individuals may exhibit high anxiety (the anxious-ambivalent or preoccupied type), high avoidance (the dismissive-avoidant type), or high anxiety and avoidance (the fearful-avoidant type).

Mikulincer and Florian (2000) found that securely attached individuals showed greater desire for intimacy in romantic relationships following MS, whereas insecurely attached participants did not. Similarly, Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler, and Mikulincer (2002) found that securely but not insecurely attached participants showed lower levels of rejection sensitivity, enhanced feelings of interpersonal competence, and greater willingness to initiate social interactions with strangers following MS.

Other research suggests that the terror management function of close relationships may not be limited to securely attached individuals. Following MS, Cox et al. (2008) found that securely attached individuals showed increased relational strivings toward a romantic partner, whereas anxious-ambivalent individuals showed increased relational strivings toward a parent. Moreover, Hart, Shaver, and Goldenberg (2005) demonstrated that even fearful-avoidants, whose baseline desire for closeness in their relationships was significantly lower than securely attached and anxious-ambivalent individuals, desired more closeness in their relationships following MS.

1.2. Current study

This study investigated the effects of MS and attachment style on relational strivings toward troubled relationship partners. Because previous research has shown that MS increases relational strivings, MS was expected to motivate participants to repair their relationship problems and increase their expectations for improvement and future relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, because attachment style and relationship type appear to be key factors in determining which attachment group responds to MS with increased relational strivings (Cox et al., 2008), the present study investigated the moderating effects of attachment style in different types of troubled relationships. This study examined troubled friendships, family relationships, and romantic relationships because (1) it is easier for people to identify a troubled relationship if they are not constrained by the type of relationship from which they must choose, and (2) these are the attachment figures individuals seek in threatening situations (Hart et al., 2005).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 242 students from Rutgers University participated in this study. Of these, 20 were unable to identify a troubled friendship, family relationship, or romantic relationship and were excluded from the sample. The final sample contained 222 participants (138 women).

2.2. Materials and procedure

Before signing up for the study, participants completed a modified version of Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, and Brumbaugh's (2011) Relationship Structures Questionnaire, a brief but psychometrically strong 9-item measure assessing attachment anxiety and avoidance toward a particular individual. Because participants completed this questionnaire before the study, each item

was modified to assess general attachment, and due to space constraints in the prescreening questionnaire, one of the six avoidance items was removed. The final 3-item anxiety ($\alpha = 0.83$) and 5-item avoidance ($\alpha = 0.70$) measures were reliable.

Upon arrival for a study on "Personality Styles and Life Experiences," participants were randomly assigned to a MS or control condition. Participants were asked to describe (a) the emotions that the thought of [their own death/experiencing dental pain] arouse in them, and (b) what they think will happen to them physically [as they die/experience dental pain]. Because previous research has shown that MS effects occur only after a delay, when people are distracted from consciously thinking about their death (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010), participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Scales (PANAS-X; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and read a short excerpt from a novel following the manipulation.

After the distractor tasks, participants were asked to think of an important person in their lives they had not been getting along with well. Participants indicated whether their troubled relationship partner was a friend, family member, or romantic partner. They rated the severity of the problems they were experiencing and the importance of the relationship on 7-point scales; higher scores represented greater problem severity and relationship importance.

Participants then completed the dependent measures. Four items measured how likely it would be for the relationship to improve (*Improvement*; $\alpha = 0.94$), two items assessed how much effort they would put into repair the relationship (*Self effort*; $\alpha = 0.94$), two items assessed how much effort their partner would put into repair the relationship (*Partner effort*; $\alpha = 0.94$), and two items assessed how much mutual effort would be undertaken to repair the relationship (*Mutual effort*; $\alpha = 0.94$). All items were rated on 7-point scales. Because the 10 items were strongly correlated with each other, a single improvement index was created by averaging participants' responses to these items (*Composite Expectations for Improvement*; $\alpha = 0.94$). Higher numbers represented greater expectations for improvement.

Participants also reported how long it would be until their relationship improved (*Time until resolution*; 1 = less than 1 week, 7 = never) and completed an adapted version of Wakimoto's (2011) relationship satisfaction measure, in which they rated the extent to which the 8 adjectives (e.g., "supporting" and "lasting") would describe their relationship with the person *in the future*. Items were rated on 7-point scales, with higher numbers representing greater relationship satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.96$).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

The majority of participants identified a troubled family relationship ($N = 81$) or friendship ($N = 109$), whereas fewer identified a troubled romantic relationship ($N = 32$). On average, participants rated the problems they were experiencing in their relationships as moderately severe and expected them to take several months to improve.

3.2. Analysis strategy

For each type of relationship, a series of GLM analyses was performed with condition (dummy coded), attachment avoidance (henceforth avoidance), and attachment anxiety (henceforth anxiety) as predictors. Continuous predictors were standardized.

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