An unscathed past in the face of death: Mortality salience reduces individuals' regrets

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Individuals primed with death report fewer regrets than a control group.
- The effect likely results from the motivation to uphold one's self-esteem.
- Competing cognitive explanations (e.g., cognitive comparison) are discussed.
- The findings extend Terror Management Theory and the Theory of Regret Regulation.

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ABSTRACT

Folk wisdom and popular literature hold that, in the face of death, individuals tend to regret things in their lives that they have done or failed to do. Terror Management Theory (TMT), in contrast, allows for the prediction that individuals who are confronted with death try to minimize the experience of regret in order to retain a positive self-esteem. Three experiments put these competing perspectives to test. Drawing on TMT, we hypothesized and found that participants primed with their own death regret fewer things than control-group participants. This pattern of results cannot be attributed to differing types of regrets (Study 1). Furthermore, we provide evidence suggesting that the effect is not purely a product of cognitive mechanisms such as differing levels of construal (Study 2), cognitive contrast, or deficits (Study 3). Rather, the reported results are best explained in terms of a motivational coping mechanism: When death is salient, individuals strive to bolster as well as protect their self-esteem and accordingly try to minimize the experience of regret. The results add to our conceptual understanding of regret and TMT, and suggest that a multitude of lifestyle guidebooks need updating.

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Introduction

"Non, je ne regrette rien" ("No, I don't regret anything") sang the French singer Édith Piaf—three years before her untimely death in 1963. In her famous song she emphasizes that she regrets neither the bad nor the good things in her life and will leave them all in the past. The song's lyrics are also in line with the well-known proverb that says "life is too short for regrets." However, many people will possibly think that it is difficult to follow this common saying. One might assume that one's regrets will appear even more profound and numerous when one is reminded of the undeniable fact that time on earth is limited. After all, people are left with too little time to fulfill all their wishes and to make up for all the mistakes they have made in trying to. The internet and the popular literature market are full of advice, telling people

which places to see, which books to read, and which activities to do before they die (e.g., "1,000 Places to See Before You Die", Schultz, 2012), or cautioning against what might happen if humans live their lives in the "wrong way" (e.g., "The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing", Ware, 2011). These writings share the underlying assumption that an individual will most certainly experience regret as soon as realization sinks in that his or her life is limited, because the individual has made uncorrectable mistakes or missed out on things he or she should have done.

Contrary to the popular belief that humans might experience stronger regrets when thinking about their death and in line with Édith Piaf's message, we argue that the common saying "life is too short for regrets" might be easier to follow than people think, particularly because it reminds them of their death. Building on Terror Management Theory (e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997) as well as on the Theory of Regret Regulation (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007), we propose that thoughts about one's own death will not increase but instead decrease the number of regrets individuals experience due to the need to maintain one's self-esteem after a death prime.

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Regret: a threat to self-esteem

Regret can be defined as "a comparison-based emotion of self-blame, experienced when people realize or imagine that their present situation would have been better, had they decided differently in the past" (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007, p. 4). It is thought to be an aversive, cognitive feeling which individuals are typically motivated to avoid (Landman, 1987; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Regret usually occurs when individuals realize that they have made a mistake or a suboptimal decision, especially if it is very easy to imagine a different outcome (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Medvec, Madey, & Gilovich, 1995; Zeelenberg et al., 1998). It is a complex emotion which requires both the higher cognitive ability to imagine other possible outcomes as well as personal agency, meaning that the individual made a certain choice, which he or she could have done differently (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007).

Regret plays a major role in people's lives; in fact, it is the most frequent out of nine negative emotions (Saffrey, Summerville, & Roese, 2008). There are many things humans may regret, such as decisions to act as well as decisions not to act (acts of commission and omission, Gilovich & Medvec, 1994), a regrettable outcome of a decision as well as a regrettable decision process (Connolly & Zeelenberg, 2002), and even mere thoughts, events, or future decisions that have not yet occurred (Landman, 1987; Zeelenberg, 1999). Regret is often related to negative states such as anger, wistfulness, emotional distress, and despair (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998; Landman, Vandewater, Stewart, & Malley, 1995), and typically represents failure experiences (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that regrets have also been found to pose a threat to people's self-esteem. Josephs, Larrick, Steele, and Nisbett (1992) showed that people with low self-esteem in particular protect themselves against the outcomes of risky decisions by trying to minimize the regret that they will experience. Therefore, individuals should be particularly motivated to protect themselves against regret when they need to maintain a high level of self-esteem—for instance, when they are confronted with their own death.

Mortality salience and the self-esteem buffer

Terror Management Theory (TMT) and the Mortality Salience (MS) hypothesis conceptualize how death awareness affects human behavior and cognitive processes (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Greenberg et al., 1990; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). The theory's general assumption is that the human instinct for self-preservation and the knowledge that one is invariably going to die one day, create a great potential for anxiety (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). This potential for existential anxiety or "terror" becomes especially salient when an individual is made aware of his or her mortality, for instance, by confrontation with any stimulus that reminds the individual of death. Since death anxiety is considered to be a highly aversive state, humans will try to protect themselves against it by means of a dual process (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999): First, proximal defenses set in when individuals consciously think about death and entail the suppression of death-related thoughts as well as the denial of one's vulnerability. Second, distal defenses set in a few minutes after a death prime. They are defined as unconscious defenses, which subsequently take place when thoughts of death are still active but not in focal attention anymore. Distal defenses are typically not directly related to death but serve the goal of reducing anxiety by enabling "the individual to construe himself or herself as a valuable participant in a meaningful universe" (Pyszczynski et al., 1999, p. 853). For this purpose, individuals make use of certain buffering mechanisms, which consist of (a) stronger belief in one's cultural worldview and the set of standards and values associated with that worldview, and (b) the belief that one is meeting or exceeding those standards (Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Both mechanisms bolster self-esteem by assuring the individual that his or her

existence in the universe has a certain meaning and by promising literal or symbolic immortality to the ones who believe in and comply with the standards of value in a specific culture (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004).

Several studies demonstrate that after a death prime, individuals increase their efforts or report stronger intentions to endorse behaviors and opinions which are linked to personally or culturally important domains of self-esteem, such as social norms of tolerance (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992), individualism/collectivism (Kashima, Halloran, Yuki, & Kashima, 2004), financial aspiration (Jonas, Sullivan, & Greenberg, 2013; Kasser & Sheldon, 2000), charity and prosocial behavior (Gailliot, Stillman, Schmeichel, Maner, & Plant, 2008; Jonas, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002; Jonas et al., 2008; Jonas et al., 2013), reciprocity (Schindler, Reinhard, & Stahlberg, 2013), and health-related behaviors (Arndt, Schimel, & Goldenberg, 2003; Routledge, Arndt, & Goldenberg, 2004). On the same note, individuals tend to avoid behaviors and distance themselves from opinions that pose a threat to their self-esteem (Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000). The striving for positive self-esteem goes so far that even irrational and potentially harmful behavior, such as risky driving, smoking, or tanning, will be pursued if the behavior contributes to an individual's positive self-esteem (Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999; Cox et al., 2009; Hansen, Winzeler, & Topolinski, 2010; Routledge et al., 2004). For instance, Hansen et al. (2010) showed that participants who derived self-esteem from smoking improved their attitudes towards smoking after being exposed to death warnings on cigarette labels compared to control warnings. In line with theoretical assumptions about different proximal and distal defenses, this pattern only occurred after a delay, suggesting that individuals unconsciously defend themselves against threat by engaging in a re-interpretation of potentially threatening thoughts in a positive, self-affirming way. In this concrete example, they might for instance have thought about reasons why smoking benefitted them (e.g., smokers are more fun and social than non-smokers).

Taken together, a broad array of studies indicates that individuals will be both motivated to maintain self-esteem as well as protect it from additional threat when mortality is salient. To do so, individuals typically engage or plan to engage in behaviors that promote self-esteem by emphasizing culturally or personally important values or norms.

To the present date, previous research has mainly focused on behavior and decisions that are related to the future or the present, and therefore can easily be changed or adapted to suit the current goal to bolster self-esteem. Different from the present or future, the past cannot be changed. However, here we suggest that even negative decisions and past behavior may be used to bolster one's self-esteem by finding some good in the bad. Specifically, we argue that the need to protect one's self-esteem, which arises from MS, will influence how individuals interpret potentially regrettable issues.

Mortality salience decreases regrets

Zeelenberg and Pieters (2007) suggest that humans are motivated to regulate their regrets even in a normal state, because regrets are perceived as aversive. We assume that individuals for whom mortality was made salient will be particularly motivated not to feel regretful because they need to maintain and protect their self-esteem. While a successful pursuit of self-esteem results in positive emotions as well as a sense of control and safety, failed attempts to bolster one's self-esteem typically result in individuals feeling even more worthless, anxious, and vulnerable to threat (Crocker & Park, 2004). Since the experience of regret poses a threat to one's self-esteem, admitting one's failures and wrong decisions after a death prime will therefore counteract the goal of pursuing self-esteem and may tear down individuals' defenses against death anxiety.