

Researchers find anxiety may be at root of religious extremism

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Anxiety and uncertainty can cause us to become more idealistic and more radical in our religious beliefs, according to new findings by York University researchers, published in this month's issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

In a series of studies, more than 600 participants were placed in anxiety-provoking or neutral situations and then asked to describe their personal goals and rate their degree of conviction for their religious ideals. This included asking participants whether they would give their lives for their faith or support a war in its defence.

Across all studies, anxious conditions caused participants to become more eagerly engaged in their ideals and extreme in their religious convictions. In one study, mulling over a personal dilemma caused a general surge toward more idealistic personal goals. In another, struggling with a confusing mathematical passage caused a spike in radical religious extremes. In yet another, reflecting on relationship uncertainties caused the same religious zeal reaction.

Researchers found that religious zeal reactions were most pronounced among participants with bold personalities (defined as having high self-esteem and being action-oriented, eager and tenacious), who were already vulnerable to anxiety, and felt most hopeless about their daily goals in life.

A basic motivational process called Reactive Approach Motivation

(RAM) is responsible, According to lead researcher Ian McGregor, Associate Professor in York's Department of Psychology, Faculty of Health. "Approach motivation is a tenacious state in which people become 'locked and loaded' on whatever goal or ideal they are promoting. They feel powerful, and thoughts and feelings related to other issues recede," he says.

"RAM is usually an adaptive goal regulation process that can re-orient people toward alternative avenues for effective goal pursuit when they hit a snag. Our research shows that humans can sometimes co-opt RAM for short term relief from anxiety, however. By simply promoting ideals and convictions in their own minds, people can activate approach motivation, narrow their motivational focus away from anxious problems, and feel serene as a result," says McGregor.

Researchers also measured participants' superstitious beliefs and deference toward a controlling God in order to distinguish religious zeal from meeker forms of devotion. "Anxiety-provoking threats sometimes also cause people to become paranoid and more submissive to externally-controlling forces, so we wanted to rule out that interpretation for our results," he says. Anxious uncertainty had no effect on either superstition or religious submission.

Findings published last year in the journal Psychological Science by the same authors and collaborators at the University of Toronto found that strong [religious beliefs](#) are associated with low activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, the part of the brain that becomes active in anxious predicaments.

"Taken together, the results of this research program suggest that bold but vulnerable people gravitate to idealistic and religious extremes for relief from [anxiety](#)," McGregor says.

More information: The findings, reported in two separate articles, "Anxious Uncertainty and Reactive Approach Motivation (RAM)" and "Reactive Approach Motivation (RAM) for Religion," were co-authored by McGregor and York University graduate students Kyle Nash, Mike Prentice, Nikki Mann, and Curtis Phills. Both appear in the July issue of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Provided by New York University

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