

A grudge match between humanity and death -- who wins?

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Death can be terrifying. Recognizing that death is inescapable and unpredictable makes us incredibly vulnerable, and can invoke feelings of anxiety, hatred and fear. But new research by George Mason University psychology professor Todd Kashdan shows that being a mindful person not only makes you generally more tolerant and less defensive, but it can also actually neutralize fears of dying and death.

"[Mindfulness](#) is being open, receptive, and attentive to whatever is unfolding in the present moment," says Kashdan. In his latest research, Kashdan and his colleagues wanted to find out if mindful people had different attitudes about [death](#) and dying.

"Generally, when reminded of our mortality, we are extremely defensive. Like little kids who nearly suffocate under blanket protection to fend off the monster in the closet, the first thing we try to do is purge any death-related thoughts or [feelings](#) from our mind," says Kashdan.

"On the fringes of this [conscious awareness](#), we try another attempt to ward off death [anxiety](#). We violently defend beliefs and practices that provide a sense of stability and meaning in our lives."

Kashdan says this practice often has an ugly side—intolerance and abuse. "When people are reminded that death is impending, their racist tendencies increase," he says. In a series of experiments conducted by the University of Missouri-Columbia, for example, white people asked to read about a crime committed by another person give harsher

penalties for black compared with white defendants after being reminded of their mortality.

Kasdan wondered what might prevent these defensive, intolerant reactions from occurring. In a recent study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, he and his colleagues looked at what might happen when mindfulness and the terror of death collide.

"A grudge match between humanity and death," says Kashdan.

If mindful people are more willing to explore whatever happens in the present, even if it uncomfortable, will they show less defensiveness when their sense of self is threatened by a confrontation with their own [mortality](#)?

Based on the results of 7 different experiments, the answer appears to be yes. When reminded about their death and asked to write about what will happen when their bodies decompose (in grisly detail), less mindful people showed an intense dislike for foreigners that mention what's wrong with the United States (pro-U.S. bias), greater prejudice against black managers who discriminated against a white employee in a promotion decision (pro-white bias), and harsher penalties for social transgressions such as prostitution, marital infidelities, and drug use by physicians that led to surgical mishaps.

Across these various situations, on the contrast, mindful people showed a lack of defensiveness toward people that didn't share their worldview. Mindful people were diplomatic and tolerant regardless of whether they were prompted to think about their slow, systematic decline toward obliteration.

"What we found was that when asked to deeply contemplate their death, mindful people spent more time writing (as opposed to avoiding) and

used more death-related words when reflecting on the experience. This suggests that a greater openness to processing the threat of death allows compassion and fairness to reign. In this laboratory staged battle, mindfulness alters the power that death holds over us," Kashdan says.

Provided by George Mason University

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