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Your culture may influence your perception of death

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Contemplating mortality can be terrifying. But not everyone responds to that terror in the same way. Now, a new study which will be published in an upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds cultural differences in how people respond to mortality. European-Americans get worried and try to protect their sense of self, while Asian-Americans are more likely to reach out to others.

Much of the research on what psychologists call "mortality salience" – thinking about death – has been done on people of European descent, and has found that it makes people act in dramatic ways. "Men become more wary of sexy women and they like wholesome women more. People like to stereotype more. You see all these strange and bizarre occurrences when people think about the fact that they aren't going to live forever," says Christine Ma-Kellams of the University of California Santa Barbara, who carried out the research with Jim Blascovich. Particularly, people try to protect their sense of self, by putting down people who aren't like them or distancing themselves from innocent victims.

But, as a cultural psychologist, Ma wondered if this reaction might be different in other cultures. In particular, she wanted to look at people of Asian backgrounds, whose sense of self is generally more linked to people around them.

Ma-Kellams recruited both European-Americans and Asian-Americans

for the study. Each person was told to either write down thoughts that come to mind when thinking about their own death – or to write down their thoughts about dental pain. (Those people were the control group.) Then they were asked to decide what bail should be set for a prostitute and given a survey on their attitudes toward prostitution. As other research has found, European-American people who had thought about death were much harsher towards the prostitute than those in the control group. But Asian-Americans who thought about death were much kinder toward the prostitute – even though they started out more conservative.

In a second experiment, participants were presented with a less extreme case, a story about a university employee who'd been injured in an accident through no fault of his own. The same result was found; European-Americans were more likely to blame him if they'd contemplated their own mortality, while Asian-Americans were less likely to blame him.

This aligns with research that finds that European-Americans and Asian-Americans think about the self very differently. "For European-Americans, everyone wants to save themselves after thinking about [death](https://medicalxpress.com) because loss of self is the worst possible consequence," Ma-Kellams says. "Asians don't necessarily see themselves in that individualistic kind of way. Self is very much tied up with the people around you." In this case, that means that when they're threatened with their own mortality, Asian-Americans apparently reach out to other people.

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