

How you think about death may affect how you act

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How you think about death affects how you behave in life.

That's the [conclusion](#) of a new study which will be published in an upcoming issue of [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. Researchers had people either think about death in the abstract or in a specific, personal way and found that people who thought specifically about their own death were more likely to demonstrate concern for society by [donating blood](#).

Laura E.R. Blackie, a Ph.D. student at the University of Essex, and her advisor, Philip J. Cozzolino, recruited 90 people in a British town center. Some were asked to respond to general questions about death – such as their thoughts and feelings about death and what they think happens to them if they die. Others were asked to imagine dying in an apartment fire and then asked four questions about how they thought they would deal with the experience and how they thought their family would react. A control group thought about dental pain.

Next, the participants were given an article, supposedly from the BBC, about blood donations. Some people read an article saying that blood donations were "at record highs" and the need was low; others read another article reporting the opposite – that donations were "at record lows" and the need was high. They were then offered a pamphlet guaranteeing fast registration at a blood center that day and told they should only take a pamphlet if they intended to donate.

People who thought about death in the abstract were motivated by the story about the blood shortage. They were more likely to take a pamphlet if they read that article. But people who thought about their own death were likely to take a pamphlet regardless of which article they read; their willingness to donate [blood](#) didn't seem to depend on how badly it was needed.

"Death is a very powerful motivation," Blackie says. "People seem aware that their life is limited. That can be one of the best gifts that we have in life, motivating us to embrace life and embrace goals that are important to us." When people think about death abstractly, they may be more likely to fear it, while thinking specifically about your own death "enables people to integrate the idea of [death](#) into their lives more fully," she says. Thinking about their mortality in a more personal and authentic manner may make them think more about what they value in [life](#).

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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