

A new study shows an increase in humorous creativity when individuals are primed with thoughts of death

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Humor is an intrinsic part of human experience. It plays a role in every aspect of human existence, from day-to-day conversation to television shows. Yet little research has been conducted to date on the psychological function of humor. In human psychology, awareness of the impermanence of life is just as prevalent as humor. According to the Terror Management Theory, knowledge of one's own impermanence creates potentially disruptive existential anxiety, which the individual brings under control with two coping mechanisms, or anxiety buffers: rigid adherence to dominant cultural values, and self-esteem bolstering.

A new article by Christopher R. Long of Ouachita Baptist University and Dara Greenwood of Vassar College is titled *Joking in the Face of Death: A Terror Management Approach to Humor Production*. Appearing in the journal *HUMOR*, it documents research on whether the activation of thoughts concerning death influences one's ability to creatively generate humor. As humor is useful on a fundamental level for a variety of purposes, including psychological defense against anxiety, the authors hypothesized that the activation of thoughts concerning death could facilitate the production of humor.

For their study, Long and Greenwood subdivided 117 students into four [experimental groups](#). These groups were confronted with the topics of pain and death while completing various tasks. Two of the test groups were exposed unconsciously to words flashed for 33 milliseconds on a

computer while they completed tasks – the first to the word "pain," the second to the word "death." The remaining two groups were prompted in a writing task to express emotions concerning either their own death or a painful visit to the dentist. Afterward, all four groups were instructed to supply a caption to a cartoon from The New Yorker.

These cartoon captions were presented to an independent jury who knew nothing about the experiment. The captions written by individuals who were subconsciously primed with the word death were clearly voted as funnier by the jury. By contrast, the exact opposite result was obtained for the students who consciously wrote about death: their captions were seen as less humorous.

Based on this experiment, the researchers conclude that humor helps the individual to tolerate latent anxiety that may otherwise be destabilizing. In this connection, they point to previous studies indicating that humor is an integral component of resilience.

In light of the finding that the activation of conscious thoughts concerning [death](#) impaired the creative generation of humor, Long and Greenwood highlight the need for additional research, not only to explore the effectiveness of [humor](#) as a coping mechanism under various circumstances, but also to identify its emotional, cognitive, and/or social benefits under conditions of adversity.

More information: www.degruyter.com/view/j/humr. ...-0012.xml?format=INT

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