

New research suggests afterlife belief preserves hope when thinking about death

May 15 2015

The prospect of death does not necessarily leave people feeling hopelessly mortal but depends rather on afterlife belief, suggests new research from psychologists at the University of Kent.

Dr Arnaud Wisman and Dr Nathan Heflick, of the University's School of Psychology, set out to establish in four separate studies whether people lose hope when thinking about death - known as Terror Management Theory - under a range of different conditions.

The research was based on the premise that [self-awareness](#) among humans has been shown to create the potential for hope - or the general expectation and feeling that future desired outcomes will occur.

Paradoxically however, this self-awareness, which is thought to be unique to humans, also renders them conscious of their own mortality - known as [mortality salience](#). The psychologists found that mortality salience affected feelings of hope among people with high and low self-esteem in different ways.

Researchers first established that mortality reduced personal hope for people low in self-esteem, but not for people high in self-esteem. However, afterlife beliefs helped to preserve hope, even among those with low esteem who experience hopelessness when faced with the prospect of their own mortality.

In two studies, the team tested to see if 'immortality' would help people

with low [self-esteem](#) remain hopeful when thinking about death. In one, half the participants read a (bogus) statement indicating that scientists are convinced that there is life after death or a statement arguing that there is no life after death.

In the second, the researchers required that people read either a (bogus) statement that there was an identified gene that promises greatly elongated life, or a statement arguing that no such gene has been identified.

Both promises of immortality (life after death or elongated life on earth) preserved [hope](#) for people with [low self-esteem](#) when they had just thought about their own [death](#).

Provided by University of Kent

Citation: New research suggests afterlife belief preserves hope when thinking about death (2015, May 15) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-05-afterlife-belief-death.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.