Terror Management Theory

-idea that our basic identity & motivation function to decrease our deeply rooted anxieties that arise from awareness that we will die.

Premise:
Becker (1971): humans differ from other animals in awareness of existential issues -specifically cognitive ability to comprehend that we will die

Results in Annihilation Anxiety (overwhelming terror)

TMT: examines how people manage this terror

Specific Strategies:
1. faith in shared conception of reality (worldview)
   - imbue life with meaning & way to transcend death either figuratively or literally
2. self-esteem
   - buffers anxiety; developed by meeting standards of culture

Specific Hypotheses for how strategies develop:
1. Mortality Salience: activating people’s awareness of mortality leads people to defend cultural beliefs and self-esteem striving
2. Self-esteem as Anxiety buffer: increased self-esteem helps people deal with threats and decreases anxiety

Initial Goals were to explain why:
1. People have intense need to feel good about themselves
2. Why people across the world have difficulty in existing peacefully with those who are different.

Criticisms:
1. It doesn’t make sense to control anxiety about death. Wouldn’t it be more adaptive to be motivated to come up with adaptive and protective responses?
2. Does existentialist terror really exist universally? If people are motivated to avoid death, then how can you explain risk-taking behavior?

-Reply:
- risky behavior can increase self-esteem.
existential angst can be brought on not just by fear of death, but by uncertainty, meaning of life, etc)

**Cognitive Architecture of TMT**
- people learn to associate decreased existential distress with symbolic, cultural values

- activation of process produces 2 systems of defense

1. **proximal defenses:** reduce self-relevant threat of conscious thoughts of death (denial; “not me, not now”).
   - Requires mental energy
   - thought of death is active and influencing perceptions even if we are not consciously aware of it

EX: COFF__ __

2. **distal or symbolic psychological defenses:**
   - bolster faith in cultural beliefs

**Implications for understanding motivations:**
1. **Love & Death:**
   - close relationships help people cope with awareness of inevitability of death
   - provide reservoir of cultural meaning and self-esteem
   - awareness of death increases efforts to initiate social interaction (Taubman Ben-Ari, et al, 2002)
   - thinking about a parent can reduce death thought accessibility, motivate people to seek novel others who remind them of their parents

2. **Stereotypes and Simple structure:**
   - when MS is heightened, people tend to think in more stereotypical ways and prefer individuals who conform to stereotypes that society offers.
   - individuals with High Need for Personal structure (PNS) respond to mortality concerns with preference for well-ordered and unambiguous meaning
   - extends to art: PNS subjects dislike art that is devoid of clear meaning

**Applying TMT to Social Issues**
1. **Politics:**
   Preference for political leaders: people became more supportive of Bush vs Kerry when faced with concerns about mortality (Landau, et al, 2004b)

Reminders of death increase Iranians support for martyrdom attacks against US & Americans’ endorsement of radical military action against countries perceived as threat to US (Pyszcznski, et al, 2006)
2. Legal decision-making:
- Municipal judges asked to contemplate mortality set bail amounts for alleged prostitutes (who presumably violated cultural norms) $400 higher than judges in control condition.

- Mortality salience affects evidence deemed inadmissible (Cook, Arndt, & Lieberman, 2004).

- Suggest that thoughts of death in court can disrupt due process.

3. Health Decisions:
- Health threats, such as cancer, can activate death-related thoughts.
- Can motivate health-related responses that are geared towards removing death-related thoughts from focal attention.
- Can be adaptive (exercising) or maladaptive (vulnerability denial).

Note: Management of unconscious thoughts of death can ironically contribute to reluctance to engage in health promoting behavior if they conflict with distal motivations to bolster self-esteem or affirm one’s beliefs.

- Ex: MS can decrease use of sunscreen to protect against skin cancer but doesn’t allow tanning.

- Just thinking about our bodies can highlight threat of death: prospect of BSE conjures unconscious thoughts of death and might be avoided.