



Death Anxiety and Social Change

A Communications Guide for Advocates

Goal of this Guide

With this guide we hope to help advocates for social change utilize a lens of death anxiety to better inform persuasive communication, especially on topics that inherently remind people of their mortality.

Why Apply the Lens of Death Anxiety to Your Work?

In order to persuade people of a position, you have to first understand and dismantle their defensive instincts. This is even more true if you deal with a topic that is an inherent mortality reminder, such as the death penalty, abortion rights, racial justice, or compassion in dying.

Ernest Becker's Synthesis

Awareness of mortality drives humans to invest in our cultural worldviews, which help us feel that we play an important role in a meaningful world. Feeling that we have contributed to something that will live on after us reduces the anxiety and discomfort that come with knowing that we will one day die.

Culture can provide a sense of immortality that eases death anxiety and enables us to go about our lives and function in society. For those who invest in religious worldviews, a sense of immortality can be literal (afterlife, heaven, reincarnation, etc.), while for others, immortality is symbolic (leaving behind a legacy, advancing in the workplace, achieving fame or notoriety, creating something of value, having children, etc.). The idea is that culture reduces death anxiety by giving us opportunities for living on, whether literal or symbolic. Becker called the ways people choose to pursue these opportunities our "immortality projects."

Terror Management Theory

Inspired by Becker's writings, three social psychologists—Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon—proposed Terror Management Theory (TMT) in 1986 to test the idea that people use culture as an existential anxiety buffer.

The theory posits that if our cultural buffers are working properly, people should feel relatively psychologically secure most of the time. However, when these cultural buffers are threatened or broken altogether (such as when a shooter goes into a school, or during a worldwide pandemic), worldviews can break down, and that underlying terror starts to rise to the surface. The question then becomes: What happens when terror does rise to the surface? How do people respond or "manage" in the face of existential threats in order to get back to a secure baseline?

What does "terror" mean in this context?

The term "terror" is somewhat misleading. While it aptly describes how we would feel if we were chased by a lion, it overstates how people with relatively stable, healthy lives would feel when contemplating mortality. In our day-to-day lives, most psychologically healthy people are not terrorized by the idea of our mortality, and hence the term may seem exaggerated. The authors of TMT specify that it is more about managing the *potential* for terror than terror itself. It is about the *underlying awareness* of mortality (anxiety) rather than actively being confronted with mortality (fear).

What Do the Studies Show? Principal Empirical Findings

Since the theory's creation, over 1,500 studies in dozens of countries have provided strong evidence that direct challenges to our worldviews increase death-related thoughts.¹ Put another way, challenging someone's beliefs indirectly reminds them of their mortality.²

In response, people overwhelmingly seek out self-esteem by becoming more entrenched in their worldviews, values, and beliefs; more committed to their own culture and in-group; and more antagonistic toward others.³

Examples of Defensive Behavior

It is important to recognize the emotions that might be aroused and the defensive reactions that might occur when engaging in persuasive advocacy. Challenges to someone's cultural worldview or "immortality project" can arouse death anxiety, resulting in avoidance or worse, lashing out against the message and the messenger.⁴

Some defenses are subtle, such as decreased reading comprehension of worldview-threatening material.⁵ In this way, people can avoid experiencing at least some of the threat to their worldview and associated self-esteem. Reading comprehension can suffer when people feel a sense of threat, so it is helpful to plan ahead and consider the modality and format of the content you present (e.g., adjusting reading level, including diagrams or infographics, verbal messaging, Q&A, etc.).

Other defensive moves are more easily observed. If presenting to a group, it can be helpful to point out types of defensive behavior in order to help the audience anticipate their own reactions. TMT theorists have identified four general categories of these reactions:⁶

Derogation is the belittling of others (e.g., mocking, insulting) who espouse a different worldview. If one is able to dismiss an opposing viewpoint, they thereby dismiss the validity of that worldview in relation to their own.

Example: During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Fox News host Sean Hannity recounted the leading Democratic candidate's "daily gaffes," "weird outbursts," and "public memory lapses" as "beyond troublesome." This shows how Hannity, a Republican, uses insults to discount Democrats' worldviews. This response can of course be found on both sides of the aisle.

Assimilation involves attempts to convert those who oppose our worldview to our own system of belief.

Example: Colonialism in North America involved forcing European culture on indigenous peoples in an attempt to wipe out their Indian identity. Children were forcibly taken from their families by the government and sent to boarding schools, where they were not allowed to speak their native language and were made to act, speak, and dress like white, European-descended people. The recent mass grave found in British Columbia on May 27, 2021, is a stark reminder of this dark time in history, and shows that when assimilation doesn't work, there can be worse consequences. This brings us to our next defense: annihilation.

Annihilation entails aggressive threats and/or actions aimed at killing or injuring members of the threatening worldview. If groups of people with opposing beliefs can be injured or killed, the implication is that their beliefs are truly inferior to our own.

Example: In New Delhi, India, at least 20 people were killed in February 2020 during violent clashes between groups of Hindus and Muslims. This violence followed announcement of a new law that provides an expedited path to citizenship for migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh provided they belong to one of six religions, excluding Islam. According to some news reports, Hindu mobs appear to have targeted Muslims primarily. Religious conflict often leads to great violence because religion is such a powerful way that people create meaning in their lives.

Accommodation involves appropriating aspects of an opposing worldview to diffuse the perceived threat.⁷ This is typically surface-level inclusion of another worldview, instead of engaging with the deeper differences. In this way, one is modifying one's own worldview to incorporate some minor aspect of the threatening worldview. Specifically, through accommodation we accept some pieces of the threatening worldview into our own, which renders the alternate worldview less threatening and at the same time allows our core beliefs to remain intact.

Example: When "hippies" first emerged in American culture in the 1960s and '70s, they were stigmatized. Over time, however, ripped jeans, rainbow t-shirts, peace signs, and granola bars all made it into the mainstream culture and thus were diminished as a threat.

Strategies To Mitigate Defensive Reactions to Your Work

Most advocates are aware of the importance of effective, persuasive messaging, but does your approach consider the lens of death anxiety? We've learned from decades of TMT research that incorporating awareness of human responses to death anxiety when designing messaging can help combat defensive reactions. These reactions are evoked by certain topics, ideas, or information that remind us of our mortality (either by bringing up death directly or by challenging our deeply held beliefs and values – our immortality projects).

Make Your Audience an In-Group

Using language that reflects the worldview or core beliefs shared by your audience will give them the feeling of being part of an “in-group.” This increases their sense of affiliation and decreases their defensiveness. Note, however, that members of the audience must have a strong enough attachment to that core belief/worldview to be willing to defend it.⁹ The first steps are to:

Understand the dominant pre-existing worldview of your target audience.

Identify a worldview to highlight that you think an audience will relate to and weave into your messaging to increase opportunity to align with audience members.

Instill a Sense of Common Humanity in Your Messaging

Consistent with the worldview you highlight, bring forth the idea of common humanity to decrease audience tendencies to scapegoat. In one TMT study, higher scores on a measure assessing identification with all humanity were associated with increased support for refugees and decreased support for extreme counter-terrorism measures.¹⁰

Boost Audience Self-Esteem

In addition to instilling a sense of common humanity, boosting self-esteem can help promote prosocial behavior and reduce defensive responses.^{12, 13}

Example: A group could be asked to silently think of three aspects of themselves that reveal that they are “good” people or elements of their life that give them self-esteem, before discussions about implicit bias. Similarly, asking people to think about or discuss helpful aspects of their worldviews or values can help reduce defensiveness.

Provide Worldview-Consistent Action Steps

If death reminders are present and/or presenting a worldview challenge, try to offer one or two worldview-consistent action items in direct response. By incorporating actions that affirm a shared worldview, you have a better chance of alignment with your audience.

Example: Shared worldviews could focus on such ideas as common humanity, safety, family bonds, or other centered values.

It is also imperative that your audience believe that the worldview-consistent action item can be accomplished. One way to do this is break down the “big” into something manageable.

Example: Mitigating or ending racism and xenophobia might seem insurmountable, but advocating for unjust laws to change is less overwhelming because there is a specific, measurable action.

Try the “Funnel Approach” When Messaging

Whether in writing or in person, start discussions of controversial or difficult topics at a distance (in time, in geography, etc.) then move the discussion closer to home. This allows the audience to take time to consider the issue at hand before potentially experiencing a sense of threat or feeling the need to be defensive (such as if the issue challenges their beliefs, or brings up death anxiety).¹⁴

Example: For discussions of race and racism, start further back in history, or use multiple examples from different historical periods, before narrowing in on current situations and examples.

As the threat becomes more palpable (e.g., the conversation becomes more challenging or personal) there are additional strategies to reduce resistance and discomfort:

Tap into whatever might be comforting for that particular group (e.g., going outside for the discussion, sitting closer together, meditative practice, etc.).

Use humor (carefully) to defuse existential threats, but be sure not to derogate someone or their worldview and thus make the situation more threatening.¹⁵

Example: Sheldon Solomon, one of the co-founders of TMT, often breaks the ice during speeches by saying that the problem with being human is that we have infinite potential with our minds and yet “we are no more significant or enduring than a lizard or a potato.” While some people may take offense at being called insignificant, the juxtaposition of humans and potatoes is so comical that it usually results in a burst of laughter, lowering people’s defenses and enabling them to be more open to listening to what comes next.

Utilize Research and Communication Experts

Whenever possible, bring in experts in fields that can help your work. The Ernest Becker Foundation offers targeted workshops to help organizations use research-based ideas for practical application and advocacy. We can also engage our network to help match your organization with relevant researchers for collaboration.

To End on a Hopeful Note

While major socio-political change may seem impossible, history has shown that significant change does occur, and that only about 3.5 percent of a given population is needed for that change to occur (not a 51 percent or greater majority of people as we might assume).¹⁶

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About Ernest Becker and Terror Management Theory

Ernest Becker (1924-1974) was a cultural anthropologist who researched and wrote about how human beings reckon with mortality and the effects that this awareness (of our own mortality) has on us. Becker, a multi-disciplinarian, drew from decades of psychological, philosophical, and anthropological thinking, which is why we refer to his work as a whole as a “synthesis.” Terror Management Theory, now a major social psychological theory, was developed out of Becker’s writings.

Terror Management Theory posits that our cultures provide a sense of meaning and purpose and buffer our death anxiety by offering a sense of literal or symbolic immortality. By living up to our culture’s standards, we get validation from others around us and society at large. Contributing to something larger than ourselves provides a sense of meaning and security.

Over 1500 studies have now provided support for TMT. Overall, when reminded of mortality, people seek out self-esteem, become increasingly committed to their cultures/in-groups, and increasingly antagonistic toward outgroups. This is because threats to one’s culture can feel like threats to our very existence itself, and can result in extreme defensive reactions.

While we cannot change certain basic elements of human nature or “solve” the problem of death, our hope is that the more we can understand about our psychological motivations, the more agency we will have in our responses, and the more we can use this understanding for the betterment of ourselves and society.

For more information and resources visit

www.ernestbecker.org

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