

Chapter 22

Fear not: religion and emotion regulation in coping with existential concerns

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The uniquely human capacity for self-reflection engenders existential concerns, including awareness of the inevitability of one's death, isolation, uncertainty about one's identity, and the apparent meaninglessness of random life events (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006). Religion helps individuals maintain coherence in the face of these potentially debilitating existential concerns (Batson & Stocks, 2004). For example, religion may assist in coping with death awareness by promising immortality or in coping with isolation by providing directions for establishing a relationship with God. However, these are not the only ways religion can promote coping with existential concerns. To understand the potential impact of religiosity on coping with existential concerns, it is necessary to understand how both existential concerns and religion are uniquely associated with emotion and emotion regulation.

Existential concerns arouse negative emotional states, including fear (Lambert et al., 2014) and anxiety (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992), and activate the same neural mechanisms associated with physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). The desire to cope with these aversive emotional states motivates individuals to alleviate existential concerns. Terror management theory (TMT) posits that fear of death "lies at the root of some very important psychological motives" (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2015, p. 4) and is the "central motivating force" of coping with death awareness (Pyszczynski et al., 2015, p. 18).¹ As such, coping with existential concerns engages emotion regulatory mechanisms (Gross & Thompson, 2007) that function to adjust one's current emotional state in line with one's desired emotional state. Religiosity is linked with such mechanisms (Vishkin, Bigman, & Tamir, 2014). Therefore emotion regulation may play a key role in how religion alleviates existential concerns. In what follows, we lay out a theoretical framework for how religiosity may facilitate coping with existential concerns via emotion regulatory mechanisms. In order to bridge the vast literatures of existential science, emotion regulation, and religion, we focus on the existential concern related to death awareness in particular, as formulated by TMT (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2015).

Forms of coping with fear of death

To deal with the aversive feelings aroused by death awareness, people must engage in one of two types of coping: problem focused or emotion focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping involves addressing or altering the situation that aroused the aversive feelings. Emotion-focused coping involves directly regulating the aversive feelings. The purpose of both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping is to manage emotional distress.

1. Fear of death figured prominently in the initial development of the theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), yet few subsequent studies were able to detect an increase in negative affect following a mortality salience manipulation. Consequently, terror management theorists suggested that fear resulting from mortality salience is unconscious (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). However, recent advances have been able to identify the conditions under which fear of death can be reliably detected. By focusing on reliable measures of fear and anxiety, recent research has detected an increase in fear following manipulations of mortality salience (Lambert et al., 2014). A separate research program has also consistently found that mortality salience increases anxiety by focusing on individuals who lack appropriate psychological buffers (Juhl & Routledge, 2016). These advances have reinstated the role of affect as a motivating force in terror management theory.

Problem-focused coping directs one's efforts toward defining the problem that led to the emotional distress, generating alternative solutions to the problem, weighing the alternative solutions in terms of cost and benefits, choosing among them, and acting on the chosen solution (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping directs one's efforts toward defining the desired emotional state (usually lessening aversive feelings), identifying emotion regulation strategies that can facilitate reaching the desired emotional state, and acting on the chosen emotion regulation strategy. For example, a student who feels anxiety before an upcoming exam has a number of ways to cope with her anxiety. Problem-focused coping would involve identifying the source of the anxiety (e.g., being inadequately prepared for the exam), generating solutions to alter the circumstances that lead to the anxiety (e.g., engaging in quiet study, attending review sessions), and enacting one or more of these solutions. In contrast, emotion-focused coping would involve identifying a desired emotional end-state relative to one's current emotional state (e.g., reducing anxiety), generating strategies to reach the desired emotional end-state (e.g., watching a stand-up routine on YouTube or reappraising the exam as less threatening), and enacting one or more of these strategies. In this example the motivation for engaging in both types of coping is alleviating the aversive emotion. The coping styles differ in how they approach this goal. Problem-focused coping attempts to reduce the aversive emotion by engaging in behaviors that will alter the situation that caused it, whereas emotion-focused coping attempts to reduce the aversive emotion by directly regulating it.

Depending on people's ability to alter their environment, problem-focused and emotion-focused coping can be adaptive or maladaptive. Emotions can be adaptive because they signal that there are environmental conditions that need to be addressed (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 2000). In some contexts, therefore, it is important to attend to one's emotions and not necessarily decrease them. In this respect, the emotion-focused coping in the example abovementioned might be maladaptive, to the extent that eliminating anxiety prior to a test eliminates the drive to study for the exam and thereby ignoring the signal to alter one's environmental conditions. Nevertheless, emotion-focused coping can also be adaptive. Consider nurses working in intensive care units whose work causes them to experience high levels of distress (Hay & Oken, 1972). Problem-focused coping would require the nurses to disengage from their job. In contrast, emotion-focused coping may help them reduce their distress to a level that would enable them to care for patients more effectively. The boundary condition that determines the adaptiveness of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping is the controllability of the stressor: problem-focused coping is most adaptive when stressors are controllable, whereas emotion-focused coping is most adaptive when stressors are uncontrollable (Troy, Shallcross, & Mauss, 2013).

We propose that the theory of coping styles can facilitate an understanding of how religion helps people handle death awareness. The framework of TMT has been conducive to understanding the problem-focused route of coping. Specifically, according to TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2015), awareness of one's eventual death instills fear and terror. These feelings are aversive and people strive to avoid them. One manner of alleviating these feelings is by enhancing one's self-esteem. Another manner of alleviating these feelings is by engaging in *worldview defense*: absorbing, adopting, and protecting cultural worldviews that instill a sense of meaning and significance, providing standards by which human behavior can be judged as valuable or providing an expectation of literal or symbolic immortality. For instance, when people's mortality becomes salient, they may endorse harsher punishment for moral transgressors (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), display greater in-group bias (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002), and evaluate more positively those who praise one's culture and evaluate more negatively those who criticize it (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Veeder, Kirkland, & Solomon, 1990). Coping by enhancing self-esteem or engaging in worldview defense decreases aversive feelings by establishing psychological buffers that instill a sense of permanence (secular legacy, supernatural afterlife) that mitigates death's threat of impermanence. If one's life is meaningful and significant, if one has a firm foundation for judging certain behaviors as valuable, or if one expects to attain immortality, then awareness of death is no longer emotionally debilitating.

Adopting such psychological buffers to decrease the source of fear of death is a problem-focused type of coping. Problem-focused coping with fear of death, such as enhancing self-esteem and engaging in worldview defense, has been studied extensively within the framework of TMT. Yet, emotion-focused coping may be just as prevalent, and under certain circumstances equally (if not more) effective. In Fig. 22.1, we present a model to address how both forms of coping can account for the role of religion in alleviating fear of death. The model integrates findings from TMT on the role of religion in coping with fear of death via problem-focused coping. According to TMT, death awareness (sometime referred to as *mortality salience*, the experimental paradigm for manipulating death awareness) arouses a fear of death. Fear of death motivates a problem-focused search for existential value, which can increase religious sentiments such as belief in afterlife, supernatural agency, and mind–body dualism (path 1; Vail et al., 2010). These sentiments lead to the reduction of fear of death (path 2; Vail et al., 2010).

In addition, we propose an alternative route to the reduction of terror via emotion-focused coping. In this route, religiosity is exogenous, symbolized by the dotted lines, meaning that it affects coping with fear but is not affected by it.

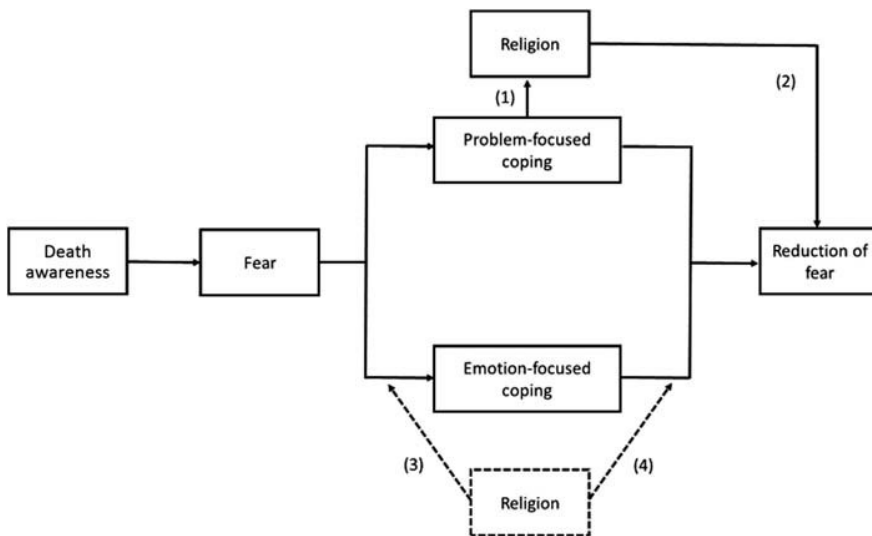


FIGURE 22.1 Religion and forms of coping in regulating fear of death.

In particular, when one feels fear as a result of becoming aware of death, religiosity increases the likelihood of engaging in emotion-focused coping (path 3). Furthermore, given that religiosity is associated with adaptive methods of coping with emotion, religiosity can successfully reduce fear of death (path 4).

In the following sections, we first offer an abridged review of the association between religion and problem-focused coping based on research conducted in the framework of TMT (see [Greenberg, Helm, Landau, & Solomon, 2020](#); for a comprehensive review). Second, we review the determinants of engaging in emotion-focused coping (vs problem-focused coping) and propose that religiosity is more likely to be associated with the selection of emotion-focused coping. Third, we explicate how religiosity may be associated with more successful enactment of emotion-focused coping. Fourth, we discuss implications of this model for understanding the interplay of religion and emotion regulation in coping with fear of death.

Religion and problem-focused coping with fear of death

TMT contends that to manage fear of death, people use problem-focused methods of coping that alter the perceived significance of one's existence. These coping methods provide a standard by which behavior can be assessed and valued, and the expectation of symbolic or literal transcendence of death to those who live up to these standards ([Pyszczynski et al., 2015](#)). Worldviews that provide individuals with a sense of significance include beliefs that life is meaningful ([Routledge & Juhl, 2010](#)), that one possesses self-worth ([Greenberg et al., 1986](#)), and that one has substantive relationships with others ([Castano, Yzerbyt, & Paladino, 2004](#)). Some of these cultural worldviews are particularly in sync with religious beliefs ([Vail et al., 2010](#)). Consequently, problem-focused coping with fear of death may increase the adoption of religious worldviews (path 1 in [Fig. 22.1](#)), which in turn may decrease fear of death (path 2 in [Fig. 22.1](#)). In the experimental research reviewed below on how fear of death affects religious worldviews, the theoretical justification was often consequentialist: it was assumed that fear of death would foster the adoption of religious worldviews that decrease fear of death. Given this state of the literature, the discussion below simultaneously captures how problem-focused coping with fear of death may foster the adoption of religious worldviews, and how religious worldviews may decrease fear of death.

Belief in supernatural beings

One of the most basic features of religion is belief in supernatural beings ([Tylor, 1871](#)). These supernatural beings are likely to be construed as being in a relationship with individuals ([James, 1902](#)) and possessing unique qualities or powers, such as omnipotence or omniscience ([Kapitan, 1991](#); [Metcalf, 2004](#)). To the extent that lack of personal control drives effects resulting from death awareness ([Fritsche, Jonas, & Fankhanel, 2008](#)) and contributes to fear of death, the reliance on more powerful beings, and the exercise of secondary control by invoking their intervention ([Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982](#)) can decrease fear of death. Experimental evidence has found that mortality salience,

a paradigm for increasing death awareness, increases belief in God and in divine intervention (Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006; Vail, Arndt, & Abdollahi, 2012). Furthermore, a correlational study found that belief in God is negatively associated with anxiety about death (Harding, Flannelly, Weaver, & Costa, 2005). Collectively, these results suggest that religiosity can attenuate the effect of death awareness on fear of death: death awareness increases belief in supernatural beings, and belief in supernatural beings is associated with less anxiety about death.

The afterlife and mind–body dualism

Another belief common to most religions is a belief in an afterlife (Vail et al., 2010). Belief in an afterlife provides literal immortality and consequently transcends death. Therefore belief in an afterlife may decrease fear of death.

Experimental evidence has found that mortality salience increases belief in an afterlife (Osarchuk & Tatz, 1973; Schoenrade, 1989). The belief in an afterlife is facilitated by a belief common to religion of mind–body dualism, or the belief that one’s mind and body are two distinct entities (Heflick, Goldenberg, Hart, & Kamp, 2015). By relegating the influence of death to the decay of one’s body, one’s mind can continue living even after one dies (Forstmann, Burgmer, & Mussweiler, 2012). Supporting the notion that mind–body dualism is essential to belief in an afterlife, experimental evidence has found that mortality salience increases belief in an afterlife, especially after making mind–body dualism salient (Heflick et al., 2015).

Furthermore, a manipulation of belief in an afterlife eliminated worldview defense responses following a mortality salience manipulation (Dechesne et al., 2003), suggesting that belief in an afterlife and worldview defense fulfills similar functions in coping with fear of death. This is in line with a correlational study that found that belief in an afterlife is negatively associated with anxiety about death (Harding et al., 2005). Collectively, these findings reveal that death awareness and fear of death increase belief in the afterlife, and belief in the afterlife eliminates the defensive effects of death awareness, possibly by decreasing fear of death.

Human uniqueness

Death and decay are common to all life forms, human and animals alike. Such a common fate renders human life insignificant, a sentiment expressed by Ecclesiastes: “Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same spirit; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 3:19; New International Version). However, a distinction between humans and animals is maintained in certain religious traditions, such as in the Biblical creation myth, in which humans are created in the image of God and given dominion over the creatures of the world. Experimental evidence has found that mortality salience increases preference for emphasizing distinctions between humans and animals (Goldenberg et al., 2001). Conversely, actions that obscure human uniqueness such as reminders of bodily functions (Cox, Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, & Weise, 2007) and exposure to evolutionary/antirealist arguments (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007) increase the accessibility of death-related thought. Collectively, these results reveal that mortality salience and fear of death increase belief in human uniqueness, while challenging belief in human uniqueness increases the accessibility of death.

Summary

According to a terror management analysis of the psychological functions of religion, death awareness and the consequent fear of death foster the adoption of religious worldviews, and these religious worldviews subsequently attenuate fear of death (Vail et al., 2010). There is direct empirical evidence for the first link between fear of death and the adoption of religious worldviews. There is indirect empirical evidence for the second link between these beliefs and lower fear of death. Most of the evidence for the second link comes from studies that measured changes in fear of death via changes in death-thought accessibility (DTA; see Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010). Evidence that DTA is a proxy for fear comes from a study that directed some participants to regulate their emotions following a mortality salience manipulation (Webber et al., 2015). Participants who regulated their emotions had lower DTA than participants who did not.

These links have been demonstrated in the association between death awareness and the belief in supernatural beings, belief in the afterlife and mind–body dualism, and belief in human uniqueness. Each of these beliefs is more likely to be adopted when experiencing fear of death, and each of these beliefs plays a role in subsequently reducing

fear of death. Having taken a brief look at the role of religion in problem-focused coping with fear of death, we next move on to the role of religion in emotion-focused coping with fear of death.

Religion and emotion-focused coping with fear of death

Two dominant lines of inquiry in research on emotion-focused coping address how likely one is to engage in it (path 3 in Fig. 22.1) and how successful one is in enacting it (path 4 in Fig. 22.1; McRae, 2013). These are, respectively, the antecedents and consequences of emotion-focused coping. Below, we review evidence that death awareness is associated with each of these processes. Then we review the determinants of each of these processes. Finally, we show that religiosity is linked with the determinants of each of these processes, leading to the conclusion that those who are more religious may be more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping and may also be more likely to be successful in enacting emotion-focused coping.²

Selecting emotion-focused coping

A handful of studies have established that emotion-focused coping may occur following a mortality salience manipulation. Evidence for this comes from increased accessibility of emotion concepts and differential allocation of attention to positive and negative stimuli. Specifically, a mortality salience manipulation increased the accessibility of positive affect words (DeWall & Baumeister, 2007), an effect associated with engagement in automatic emotion regulation (DeWall et al., 2011). Another study found that a mortality salience manipulation decreased allocation of attention toward fearful stimuli (MacDonald & Lipp, 2008), suggesting that people implicitly regulate fear when mortality is salient by not allocating attention to it. The allocation of attention to positive stimuli and away from negative stimuli following a mortality salience manipulation is also more likely to occur among individuals higher in self-control (Kelley, Tang, & Schmeichel, 2014), who are also more likely to engage in emotion regulation (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Together, these findings reveal that mortality salience increases the likelihood that people will engage in emotion-focused coping, whether by calling to mind positive affect or by diverting attention from negative affect.

Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping are equifinal means for achieving a desired end-state in coping (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Consequently, they are substitutable. As such, there are contextual- or individual-level determinants that affect the likelihood that each form of coping will be selected. The determinants that predict selection of emotion-focused coping are more common among people who are more religious. Below, we review some of these determinants and explain how they may be associated with religiosity.

Perceived control

People strive to maintain a perception of control over themselves and the environment (Rothbaum et al., 1982). Perceived control can be manifested in the ability to alter one's environment (primary control) or in the ability to alter one's self in line with the environment (secondary control). In trying to alter the context in which an aversive emotion was aroused, problem-focused coping involves a form of primary control (Compas, Banez, Malcarne, & Worsham, 1991). Conversely, in trying to alter the emotion experience, emotion-focused coping involves a form of secondary control. The likelihood of engaging in primary or secondary control is determined by how a situation is perceived (Rothbaum et al., 1982). Specifically, people are more likely to engage in primary control when they perceive that they can influence the situation. Conversely, people are more likely to engage in secondary control when they perceive that their influence over a situation is limited and in the hands of powerful others. Thus it follows that people are more likely to select problem-focused coping when they appraise the environmental conditions as amenable to change, whereas people are more likely to select emotion-focused coping when they appraise the environmental conditions as unalterable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

By endorsing appraisals that one's personal control is limited and that supernatural powers dictate earthly affairs, religion increases the likelihood of engaging in secondary control (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). The centrality of secondary control in religion was expressed by William James, who stated, "The life of religion . . . consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (James, 1902, p. 53). Consequently, people who are more religious may be more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping.

2. Throughout this section, we use the terms "emotion-focused coping" and "emotion regulation" interchangeably.

Resources

The likelihood of selecting particular coping styles is dependent on the resources one has for effectively engaging in each of them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, if one is experiencing distress due to financial strain, a problem-focused method of coping might include searching for a job. If one does not have resources to find a job (e.g., one is disabled or one is already working full time), the likelihood of engaging in problem-focused coping will decrease.

Resources in emotion-focused coping refer to the beliefs, goals, and strategies that facilitate coping effectively with emotions. These resources include possessing personal beliefs that emotions are controllable (Ford & Gross, 2018), possessing clearly defined emotion goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998) and possessing a range of effective emotion regulation strategies (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). As we will review in the next section, people who are more religious believe that emotions are more controllable, have more hedonic motives, and use a range of adaptive emotion regulation strategies (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, Schwartz, Solak, & Tamir, 2019). Thus people who are more religious have more resources for engaging in emotion-focused coping and consequently may be more likely to engage in it.

By endorsing appraisals that one's control over the environment is limited while possessing resources for enacting emotion regulation, people who are more religious may be more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping. When dealing with fear of death, in particular, this means that people who are more religious may be more likely to cope with fear of death by regulating their emotion and less likely to cope with fear of death by boosting their self-esteem and engaging in worldview defense (e.g., Newheiser, Voci, Hewstone, & Schmid, 2015). For example, upon discovering that one is terminally ill, a cancer patient may engage in problem-focused coping, such as by engaging in the myriad types of worldview defenses that boost one's self-esteem. Alternatively, he or she may engage in emotion-focused coping by directly trying to decrease one's fear of death. To the extent that such a person is religious, he or she is more likely to perceive the situation as outside of his or her personal control, and more likely to possess the resources to regulate one's emotions, and consequently more likely to engage in emotion regulation.

Enacting emotion-focused coping

The effectiveness of enacting emotion-focused coping is determined by several elements. First, as in other forms of self-regulation (e.g., Cervone & Peake, 1986), certain *beliefs* regarding one's ability to regulate one's emotions are necessary to engage in emotion-focused coping. Next, emotion-focused coping is directed by motives to approach or avoid certain emotional states (Tamir, 2016). These emotional states are the *goals* of emotion-focused coping and may refer to general classes of emotions, such as increasing positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions, or they may refer to particular emotions, such as decreasing fear or anger. Finally, engaging in emotion-focused coping requires *strategies* for altering one's present emotional state to the target emotional state. Strategies for altering emotions differ in their efficacy (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). To the extent that people endorse beliefs regarding their ability to alter their emotions in general and fear in particular, endorse motives to reduce negative emotions in general and fear in particular, and use emotion regulation strategies that are effective in altering one's emotions in a desired direction, they will be effective in reducing their fear of death via emotion-focused coping.

We first developed a theoretical account for the association between religiosity and each of these elements of emotion regulation (Vishkin et al., 2014), and then launched an empirical investigation to validate this account. Research on Christians in America, Jews in Israel, and Muslims in Turkey examined the associations between religiosity and beliefs about emotions, general and specific motives in emotion regulation, and use of emotion regulation strategies (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, et al., 2019). An additional study examined the association between religiosity and cognitive reappraisal, a particularly effective emotion regulation strategy (Vishkin et al., 2016). We argue that people who are more religious are guided by certain prescriptions and worldviews regarding which beliefs about emotions to endorse, which goals about emotion-focused coping to adapt, and which emotion regulation strategies to use. On the other hand, people who are less religious are not constrained by such prescriptions and worldviews and therefore are likely to display greater variability in these associations. Consequently, people who are more religious are likely to display a unique set of associations with beliefs, goals, and strategies in emotion-focused coping, relative to people who are less religious. Below, we review how each element of emotion-focused coping is related to effective or ineffective coping, and then review how each element is associated with religiosity.

Beliefs

People hold beliefs about the controllability of human attributes, including intelligence (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007), body weight (Burnette, 2010), and emotions (Tamir, John, Srivastava, & Gross, 2007). Beliefs about

controllability of emotions refer to how much people think emotions are controllable, in general, as well as how much people think they can control their own emotions (i.e., self-efficacy in emotion regulation; De Castella, Platow, Tamir, & Gross, 2018). Just as beliefs about the controllability of body weight promote successful body weight regulation (Burnette, 2010), beliefs about the controllability of emotions promote successful emotion regulation (Bigman, Mauss, Gross, & Tamir, 2016).

Religious texts contain numerous prescriptions about what to feel and what not to feel, such as feeling gratitude (e.g., “give thanks to Me and do not be ungrateful to Me,” Quran 2:152) and not feeling hate (e.g., “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart,” Leviticus 19:17, King James Version) nor fear (e.g., “Fear thou not; for I am with thee,” Isaiah 41:10, King James Version), an exhortation which appears in the Bible more than 70 times. By doing so, religion promotes an assumption that emotions can be controlled. Indeed, religiosity is associated with beliefs about the controllability of emotions, in general, as well as beliefs about one’s own ability to control emotions (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, et al., 2019). By endorsing such beliefs, people who are more religious may be more successful when engaging in emotion-focused coping in general, as well as when regulating fear of death, in particular.

Emotion goals

When people self-regulate, they adjust their behavior in pursuit of a desired goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Consequently, self-regulation is facilitated by clearly defined goals. In the context of emotion-focused coping, clearly defined emotion goals facilitate successful emotion regulation. Religion encourages emotion goals that can lead to the reduction of fear. In particular, religion promotes the pursuit of other-praising emotions, such as awe and gratitude, and discourages the pursuit of the self-praising emotion of pride (Vishkin, Schwartz, Ben-Nun Bloom, Solak, & Tamir, in press). These clearly defined emotion goals provide alternatives to the experience of fear and therefore their pursuit can decrease fear. In support of this notion a gratitude intervention successfully decreased fear of the recurrence of a life-threatening disease (Otto, Szczeny, Soriano, Laurenceau, & Siegel, 2016).

In addition to setting specific emotion goals, religion also directs people to regulate their emotions prohedonically by increasing positive affect and decreasing negative affect (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, et al., 2019). A prohedonic orientation is evident in some strands of religious thought. For example, elements in the Hassidic movement in Judaism emphasize that one is required to be in a constant state of happiness (Buber, 1975). Elements of Sufism in Islam describe happiness as the aim of human striving (e.g., Al-Ghazzali, 2005). The strand of religious thought termed by James (1902) as the mind-cure movement discouraged fear and encouraged positive thinking. Given that fear is a negative affective state (Russell, 1980), prohedonic emotion regulation is likely to decrease fear, together with other negative affective states. This proposition is supported by evidence that mortality salience increases the allocation of attention to positive affect (Kelley et al., 2014), as well as the accessibility of terms related to positive affect (DeWall & Baumeister, 2007).

Strategies

People use emotion regulation strategies to bring their current emotional state in line with their desired emotional state. Emotion regulation strategies differ in their relative effectiveness. Below, we review emotion regulation strategies that are associated with religiosity and elaborate on how they may be effective in decreasing fear of death.

Cognitive reappraisal

One of the most effective emotion regulation strategies is cognitive reappraisal (Webb et al., 2012). Cognitive reappraisal involves changing the meaning of emotional events so that they alter emotional experience (Gross & John, 2003). By targeting elements of emotions that occur early in the process of emotion generation, cognitive reappraisal is particularly effective (Gross & Thompson, 2007). The effectiveness of cognitive reappraisal has been demonstrated in the regulation of affective states in general and fear in particular (e.g., Shurick et al., 2012).

Religion supplies broad interpretive frameworks that are capable of giving meaning to daily experiences and world events (Geertz, 1966). To some religious Christians, present-day human evil is understood against the backdrop of The Fall from the Garden of Eden; to some religious Jews, existential threats evoke a biblical event as chronicled in the biblical story of Queen Esther—and just as that threat was annulled, so too will future threats be annulled (Geertz, 1966; Yerushalmi, 1982). Given that meaning-making is common to both cognitive reappraisal and religion, we hypothesized that religiosity would be associated with cognitive reappraisal. We found that religiosity is associated with the frequency of using cognitive reappraisal in a Christian, Jewish, and Muslim sample (Vishkin et al., 2016) and subsequently replicated this finding with similar samples (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, et al., 2019). In addition, we found that people

who are more religious were more effective in implementing cognitive reappraisal when instructed to do so (Vishkin et al., 2016). These findings reveal that cognitive reappraisal is a strategy that people who are more religious can use when engaging in emotion-focused coping to deal with aversive emotions in general, as well as when engaging in emotion-focused coping to deal with fear of death, in particular.

To the best of our knowledge, a single study has directly examined whether emotion-focused coping is effective in buffering the influence of death awareness (Webber et al., 2015). Death awareness was manipulated via a mortality salience manipulation by showing participants images of bodily functions, such as vomiting, that challenge human uniqueness by blurring the distinction between humans and animals. Participants who were instructed to engage in cognitive reappraisal subsequently showed lower death-thought accessibility, relative to participants who were not instructed to do so. This suggests that engaging in cognitive reappraisal following the mortality salience manipulation decreased aversive emotions, which then reduced the accessibility of thoughts about death.

Recent findings suggest that some forms of reappraisal may be more likely than others to be used to regulate fear. Whereas many negative emotions (e.g., anger, sadness) are elicited by negative events that have already occurred, fear is elicited by the expectation of a negative event that has not yet occurred (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989). Therefore people are more likely to regulate fear via forms of reappraisal that alter the expected outcome of an event (Vishkin, Hasson, Millgram, & Tamir, 2019). This type of reappraisal is called *changing future consequences* and could include telling oneself that things will turn out better than expected, or that what seems inevitable will not actually happen (McRae, Ciesielski, & Gross, 2012). This type of reappraisal is relatively common in religious texts. For instance, the Talmud recounts an event in which Rabbi Akiva was not welcomed as a guest to a town (Tractate Berachot, 60b). Unfazed, he said to himself that whatever God does is for the best and spent the night in the field. That night, bandits attacked the town and everyone was killed but him. Similarly, the Quran tells of a wealthy landowner who trusts in his crops rather than in God (Surah 18), whereas his friend is not wealthy but trusts in God. Contrary to the wealthy landowner's expectations, his crops ruin, and he ends up in a more dismal state than his friend. Likewise, a Hindu parable tells of a person walking at night on a dark path as he comes across a snake who is set to bite him (Elder, 2012). He is fearful, but as he draws closer he realizes that it is a rope rather than a snake. Common to all these religious stories is that what one expects to happen does not necessarily reflect what will happen. Such stories enforce reappraisals that alter the apparent outcome of events and therefore are especially relevant for regulating fear. Thus religion equips people with the ability to engage in forms of cognitive reappraisal that are particularly suited for regulating fear.

Rumination

Rumination is an emotion regulation strategy that involves repetitive thoughts on the experience of emotional distress (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Both reappraisal and rumination are emotion regulation strategies that involve cognitive elaboration. However, whereas cognitive reappraisal reinterprets a negative emotional event, rumination keeps people in a loop of repetitive thought about the event. Consequently, cognitive reappraisal often leads to less negative affect (Webb et al., 2012), whereas rumination leads to more negative affect (Segerstrom, Tsao, Alden, & Craske, 2000). People who are more religious are less likely to engage in rumination (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, et al., 2019), possibly because rumination and cognitive reappraisal recruit the same neural systems, including the left amygdala and the left ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, though for different purposes (Ray et al., 2005). Consequently, engaging in cognitive reappraisal may come at the expense of engaging in rumination. Specifically, once such systems have been recruited to engage in cognitive reappraisal among people who are more religious, they may be less available for engaging in rumination. A negative attitude toward rumination is reflected in some religious dictates. For example, the exhortation to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), rather than dwelling on who has wronged us and how we have been wronged, is a call to let go of an emotional event, rather than ruminating over it. The diminished tendency among people who are more religious to engage in rumination may help them avoid the intensification and maintenance of fear of death, allowing it to subside.

Distraction

Distraction refers to diverting one's attention from an emotion-eliciting stimulus (Gross, 1998). Distraction is an effective emotion regulation strategy (Webb et al., 2012), particularly when dealing with high-intensity emotional content (Sheppes & Gross, 2012). Given that fear of death can be debilitating (Becker, 1973), distraction may be a particularly effective coping strategy. Based on self-report measures, people who are more religious are more likely to report using distraction (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, et al., 2019). This may be due to the availability of religious

rituals, such as prayer, that can be used to distract oneself from emotional distress. By automating such behaviors via repeated enactment, these ritualized behaviors might require fewer cognitive resources to enact (Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010) and thereby offer particularly effective means of distraction in the face of cognitively taxing stressors. Further research is required to directly test why people who are more religious are more likely to engage in distraction.

Acceptance

Acceptance refers to establishing secondary control by recognizing the reality of a situation, or an emotion aroused by the situation, in order to accommodate it (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Acceptance can refer to acceptance of a situation or acceptance of an emotion. For example, upon learning that one has a terminal illness, one may experience fear of death. Utilizing situational acceptance would involve recognizing the situation and coming to terms with it, without trying to alter it. Utilizing emotional acceptance would involve recognizing one's emotional response to the situation and coming to terms with it, without trying to alter the situation. Whereas these two types of acceptance have been treated as similar (Hayes, 2004; Naragon-Gainey, McMahon, & Chacko, 2017), they are dissociated in relation to religiosity. Across contexts, people who are more religious report using more situational acceptance but less emotional acceptance (Vishkin, Ben-Nun Bloom, et al., 2019). Similarly, people who are more religious are more likely to cope with death via situational acceptance (Harding et al., 2005). Collectively, these findings suggest that in the context of fear of death, religiosity is associated positively with situational acceptance, but not with emotional acceptance. If, as William James suggested, "The life of religion . . . consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (James, 1902, p. 53), then it is fitting that a religiously motivated acceptance should involve focusing attention outwards, via situational acceptance, rather than inwards, via emotional acceptance.

However, it is unclear whether acceptance is effective in coping with fear of death. On the one hand, acceptance is an effective emotion regulation strategy (Troy, Shallcross, Brunner, Friedman, & Jones, 2017), that is associated with adaptive outcomes, such as fewer psychopathological symptoms, including anxiety (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). On the other hand, by accepting the present situation as it is, acceptance may increase the perceived likelihood that expected negative outcomes are going to occur and thereby increase fear. In line with this reasoning, people were less likely to select acceptance when regulating fear, relative to a reappraisal tactic of changing future consequences (Vishkin, Hasson, et al., 2019). In an additional study in which acceptance or changing future consequences were implemented to regulate sadness or fear, the least effective outcome was obtained when regulating fear via acceptance. How well acceptance can help coping with fear of death remains unclear.

Summary

People who are more religious are more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping of fear of death and they are more likely to do so effectively. People who are more religious are more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping of fear of death, relative to problem-focused coping, because they are more likely to perceive that they have less control over their environment. In addition, people who are more religious are more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping of fear of death because they have more resources to do so.

People who are more religious are more likely to enact emotion-focused coping effectively because of their beliefs, emotion goals, and available strategies. Their beliefs about the controllability of their emotions facilitate successful engagement in emotion regulation. Their emotion goals facilitate attempts to downregulate fear. They are more likely to use effective strategies, including cognitive reappraisal and distraction, and less likely to use ineffective strategies, such as rumination. People who are more religious, therefore, may be more likely to employ emotion-focused coping to cope with fear of death and do so more effectively than those who are less religious.

Religion and coping with fear of death: reinterpreting existing findings

TMT has assumed that religion affects coping with death awareness through problem-focused coping, such as by boosting self-esteem and engaging in worldview defense. The link between religiosity and emotion-focused coping with fear of death suggests a new way to interpret previous findings that investigated the association between religiosity and coping with fear of death. Some studies have suggested that certain dimensions of religiosity, such as intrinsic religiousness, mitigate worldview defense following mortality salience (Jonas & Fischer, 2006). For instance, Jonas and Fischer (2006, Study 1) examined worldview defense in a quasiexperimental design either immediately following a terrorist

attack or after a significant delay following a terrorist attack. They found that the time of measurement interacted with intrinsic religiosity to predict worldview defense, such that worldview defense was greatest immediately following the terrorist attack among people low (vs high) in intrinsic religiosity. They concluded that the difference between people low (vs high) in intrinsic religiosity is due to the tendency of people higher in intrinsic religiosity to use what we have labeled as problem-focused coping.

We offer another possible interpretation of such findings. Specifically, it is also possible that people higher in intrinsic religiosity used emotion-focused coping rather than problem-focused coming. According to this explanation, people higher in intrinsic religiosity may have been less likely to engage in worldview defense not because intrinsic religiosity served as a psychological buffer to death awareness, but because they felt less fear of death upon regulating their emotions.

Another study examined whether mortality salience, intrinsic religiosity, and priming religious beliefs interact to predict worldview defense (Jonas & Fischer, 2006; Study 2). When priming religious beliefs, mortality salience increased worldview defense among participants low (but not high) in intrinsic religiosity. The authors concluded that priming religious beliefs affirmed religious values among participants high (but now low) in intrinsic religiosity, which then buffered against the need to engage in an alternative form of problem-focused coping to cope with mortality salience.

We propose an alternative explanation. Specifically, priming religious beliefs may have increased the accessibility of religious beliefs, goals, and strategies related to emotion-focused coping. This, in turn, may have increased the likelihood of engaging in emotion-focused coping among people high in intrinsic religiosity following mortality salience. To test these alternative explanations, it would be necessary to directly measure whether people high and low in intrinsic religiosity differ in the extent to which they engage in emotion-focused coping (i.e., emotion regulation) and in their experienced fear of death following a mortality salience manipulation. If they do not, emotion-focused coping can be ruled out as an alternative explanation.

Future research should disentangle problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping when investigating the role of religiosity in coping with death awareness and fear of death. For example, one prediction derived from our model is that engaging in one form of coping should decrease the likelihood of engaging in the other form of coping, since both forms of coping are equifinal and therefore substitutable (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Thus when mortality is salient, people who regulate their fear of death via an emotion regulation strategy such as cognitive reappraisal should be less likely to subsequently engage in worldview defense or self-esteem enhancement, relative to people who do not regulate their fear of death. This design can be made more complex by adding intrinsic religiosity as a predictor. A prediction derived from our model is that, when mortality is salient, people high in intrinsic religiosity who regulate their fear of death via emotion regulation should be the least likely to engage in worldview defense, whereas people low in intrinsic religiosity who do not regulate their fear of death via emotion regulation should be the most likely to engage in worldview defense. These predictions await empirical investigation.

The distinction between two types of coping with fear of death addresses a central criticism of TMT. Critics of the theory have suggested that other types of threat may lead to the same effects as mortality salience (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). In contrast, proponents of TMT have maintained that even if the effects of some threats overlap with the effects of mortality salience, the latter are unique (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Based on our model, we propose that both sides of the argument may be correct. To the extent that mortality salience and other types of threat arouse fear, the methods of coping with such fear via emotion-focused coping will be identical. In contrast, to the extent that different types of threat differ in their nature, then engaging in problem-focused coping will entail different behaviors. For example, when managing fear of failure, one may engage in self-handicapping as a problem-focused method of coping (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Alternatively, one may directly regulate one's fear via cognitively reappraising the fear-inducing aspects of the situation. The latter strategy, but not the former, would fit the regulation of fear of death as well. The two forms of coping with death awareness and fear of death have broad implications for TMT that extend beyond the functions of religion.

Conclusion

Existential concerns, such as fear of death, arouse aversive emotions. According to TMT, these aversive emotions are a motivating force. Whereas previous research has focused on the role of problem-focused coping when dealing with aversive emotions that arise from death awareness, we point to emotion-focused coping as a complementary route for coping with aversive emotions. Furthermore, we suggest that religiosity may affect coping with fear of death via both routes. In the problem-focused coping route, religiosity is endogenous—the motivation to avoid fear of death increases

the adoption of beliefs in sync with religious worldviews, which in turn reduces fear of death. In the emotion-focused coping route, religiosity is exogenous—religiosity impacts the likelihood of engaging in emotion-focused coping and its successful enactment. The influence of religiosity on both routes suggests that previous findings on the role of religion in coping with fear of death might be due to a different mechanism than originally proposed. At a broader level, emotion-focused coping with fear of death is an underexplored route in coping with existential concerns, which deserves rigorous empirical investigation.

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Further reading

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