

# Thinking about Death and Pain Makes People Funnier

Death anxiety may promote humor creativity

Dealing with death is difficult, be it the death of a close relative or thoughts of your own mortality. Dying is an inevitable outcome of being human, but knowing that does not make most people happy. Humor has been long established as a good coping mechanism against many of life's adversities. When feeling "down", many people find comfort in watching a comedy film, reading a funny book, or joking with friends. I have also written about how humor can help people deal with tragedies, and when it might be OK to joke about them. A new study looks at how anxiety about death can boost humor creation.

The authors of the study are basing their research on what is known as Terror Management Theory. This theory is usually used to explain the paralyzing effect of being aware of one's own mortality. Thinking about your own death is known to lead to several negative outcomes, such as having stronger nationalistic attitudes, derogations of outgroup members, depression and more.

But not all thoughts about death need to have negative outcomes. It is possible that when facing death anxiety, humor can help serve as a buffer, and people who think about death are actually funnier.

To test this hypothesis, 123 students (97 of them women) participated in the study and were assigned to one of four conditions. Half the subjects were implicitly primed to think of death by subliminal priming in the following way: pairs of words were flashed on a computer screen, and the subjects were asked if they were related to each other. The word "DEATH" displayed on the screen immediately after the first word for 33 milliseconds, which is too brief for people to see. The other half was primed explicitly by asking them to "briefly describe the thoughts and emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you". As controls, other subjects were primed to pain instead of death. They either watched the word "PAIN" flashing on the screen following the same procedure described above for the implicit prime, or were asked to write a description about "...the emotions that the thought of dental pain arouses in you...and what you think will happen to you as you physically experience dental pain" for the explicit prime. Pain is a good control, as it is also an aversive stimuli but different from death.

After exposing the subjects to one of the four primes (two about death, two about pain), the subjects completed a humor creation task that I have used in my own studies. They were given four caption-less cartoons and were asked to write the funniest caption they could think of for each of them. Six independent judges rated the cartoons for funniness.

The results were quite interesting. In the subliminal priming condition, subjects who were exposed to the word "DEATH" created funnier captions compared to the subjects who were

primed to the word "PAIN". However, a reverse pattern emerged on the written priming task. Subjects who were primed to pain yielded funnier captions than those primed to death.

The results showed that implicit and perhaps automatic and unconscious thoughts about death can make people funnier, while explicit thoughts on death reduces creative humor ability. It is still possible that both the implicit and explicit death primes yielded funnier captions than ordinary, non-aversive primes, but the researchers did not use such controls in this study, so we don't know.

Notwithstanding the study limitations, it seems that adverse thoughts might help boost creative humor. This raises the question: is it possible that the greatest comedians of all time are the ones that have the most painful thoughts or ones that are consumed with thoughts on death? The suicide of Robin Williams sure comes to mind in this context, and also the study I reviewed recently that shows how comedians might be more likely to suffer from psychotic traits. Perhaps humor is rooted in tragedy, pain and struggle in ways we cannot imagine or fully understand yet.

Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/humor-sapiens/201505/thinking-about-death-and-pain-makes-people-funnier>

