The Effect of Mortality Salience, Regulatory Mode, and Goal Progress on Meaning In Life

Previous research in terror management theory has shown that people attempt to protect themselves from the awareness of their eventual death by engaging in activities that provide “viable pathways to symbolic (e.g., culturally valued achievements) or literal (e.g., religious afterlife) immortality.” In other words, many people use personal goals to shelter themselves from the idea of ceasing to exist. Dr. Matthew Vess and Dr. Joshua Hicks, faculty members of the TAMU psychology program, recently conducted a study to explore the ways that mortality salience, regulatory mode, and goal progress effect one’s judgment of meaning in life.

Dr. Vess, Dr. Hicks, and colleagues focused on long-term goal pursuit in the application of terror management theory to meaning in life. They hypothesized that those who perceived themselves as farther away from long-term goal completion would have more consistent meaning in life levels when reminded of death. They posited that those who perceived themselves as closer to completing a goal would show less consistency in meaning in life when reminded of death as having a long-term goal can be an important source of meaning in life.

To study this hypothesis, they ran two studies. In Study 1, 118 participants completed filler measures and identified a long-term academic goal. They completed another filler measure, and participants were then assigned to one of three conditions: mortality salience, neutral control, or existentially relevant control. In the mortality salience condition, participant answered 2 open ended questions about dying. In the neutral control condition, participants were asked about the experience of listening to music. In the existentially relevant control, participants were asked about experiencing feeling unsure about themselves. The participants in the mortality salience condition then completed a word search task to remove thoughts of death from their primary attention. All participants were showed their earlier identified long-term academic goal. The participants were split into two conditions: high progress condition and low progress condition. The high progress condition participants were asked how much work they had completed so far to reach their goal, whereas the low progress condition participants were asked how much work they still had to complete to reach their goal. Participants then completed a measure of state affect in which they indicated how much they were experiencing six dejection/happiness emotions and six agitation/calmness emotions. Lastly, participants completed the Meaning in Life subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. In Study 2, the sample size was increased, and the study looked at levels of locomotion, “initiating movement away from a current state to a new state with no necessary ultimate destination, direction, or

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Erin and Alex are currently undergraduate psychology majors. They will be giving updates of the cutting-edge science occurring in the psychology department throughout the semester.
able to adopt new goals more quickly, potentially making it easier for them to find a new meaning in life upon completion of a previous long-term goal. In Study 2, the researchers hypothesized that mortality salience would result in lower meaning in life when people feel close to completing a long-term academic goal, but they expected to see these results only in those participants that showed low levels of locomotion. 259 students completed nearly the same procedure as Study 1; however, in addition to the measures in Study 1, participants in Study 2 also completed the locomotion scale during the first series of filler measures.

In Study 1, the hypothesis was supported. They found that participants in the mortality salience and close to goal completion group showed lower reports of meaning in life compared to the neutral control and existentially relevant control groups. They also found that participants in the mortality salience and low levels of goal progress group showed higher levels of meaning in life in the mortality salience condition. This suggests that having a goal that is far away from completion does lead to protection from a decrease in meaning in life when exposed to the thought of death. In Study 2, results supported the hypothesis again. Participants in the mortality salience and close to completing long-term goal condition showed lower levels of meaning in life only for those participants that were low in locomotion. This indicates that people who have a hard time adapting to new goals are shielded from the decrease of meaning in life after thoughts of death by being far away from completing their goal, whereas those who are better able to adapt to new goals in life will maintain meaning in life levels despite their goal completion status. In Study 2, they did not find that participants in the mortality salience and low goal progress condition had higher levels of meaning in life as they did in Study 1.

This research is important in the advancement of the field of existential psychology because it indicates that while “both progressing towards and achieving important long-term goals no doubt contribute to global feelings of efficacy, competence, and personal significance,” those low in locomotion may be benefited in terms of meaning in life by being farther away from completing their goals or perhaps having multiple goals to focus on. According to Dr. Vess, “having a stable long-term goal appears to provide a strong foundation for meaning.”

For more information on this study, go to http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ejsp.2192/full.