Terror Management Theory and Fear of Death

Narcisa Ispas

Psychologist, PhD(c), Doctoral School of Theology and Religious Studies, Bucharest University, Romania
narcipostbox@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper examines Terror Management Theory (TMT) and its role in shaping human psychology through the awareness of mortality. It explores the existential defense mechanisms—cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships—that help individuals cope with the fear of death. While these mechanisms provide psychological security, they can also foster prejudice and aggression when worldviews are challenged. Integrating insights from psychology, philosophy, and theology, this study highlights the dual impact of mortality salience, which can enhance prosocial behavior but also reinforce in-group biases. The interdisciplinary approach underscores the necessity of meaning-making frameworks in managing existential anxiety and proposes strategies for mitigating its negative consequences.

Keywords: Terror Management Theory, Fear of Death, Existential Anxiety, Self-Esteem, Cultural Worldviews, Close Relationships, Social Behavior, Defense Mechanisms

Introduction

Death represents one of humanity's most profound concerns, serving as a subject of reflection in philosophy, psychology, and theology. Universally, the fear of death deeply influences human thought and societal structures, leading to the development of cultural and religious systems that provide meaning and hope in the face of this inevitable end. From philosophical and psychological interpretations of existential anxiety to the theological perspective on resurrection, death remains a crucial point of reference in understanding the human condition. This paper examines death anxiety from an interdisciplinary perspective, exploring its impact on individual lives and societal structures.

Existential psychotherapist Yalom (2010) argues that learning how to live properly is inseparable from learning how to die properly, emphasizing the link between death anxiety and the search for meaning (p. 44). Similarly, Brădățan (2015) asserts that death, through its inevitable nature, gives life a clear structure, and the way we manage it defines the authenticity of our existence: "If death were somehow forbidden, life would suffer a devastating blow" (p. 6). In addition, Kreeft (1992) contends that the rarity of life enhances its value (p. 51), while Dederen (2000) highlights that "fear of death without the hope of resurrection remains the most fundamental fear experienced by human beings" (p. 330).

In this context, theology adds an essential dimension to the interpretation of death, transforming it from a mere biological event into a stage within the divine plan. The Judeo-Christian tradition does not perceive death as absolute annihilation but as a process integrated into the promise of resurrection and divine restoration (Mihăilă, 2022, p. 65). Mircea Eliade (1957) offers a symbolic perspective on the fear of death, noting that in almost all religious traditions, death is seen not as annihilation but as a transition, a rite of passage. According to Eliade, this perspective helps individuals redefine their anxiety about death, integrating it into a broader symbolic system where death becomes a sacred act rather than an irreversible end (p. 113). This vision contrasts with Freud's psychoanalytic perspective (1955/1895), which views the fear of death as an unconscious defense mechanism against the inexorable reality of the end, and with Becker's theory (1973), which suggests that the denial of death is one of the driving forces of human civilization (Rotaru, 2023, pp. 62-79).

Reflections on death and the nature of human existence have been deeply rooted in religious contexts throughout history. Religion has played a crucial role in providing guidelines for both personal and social life. However, in the present day, many of these

responsibilities have been transferred to psychologists, who are perceived as authorities on human nature, being the ones from whom people seek answers in times of crisis and support in the process of self-discovery (Wulff, 1997, pp. 12–13).

Nevertheless, death is a profoundly personal phenomenon, and the experience of loss varies from one individual to another. "It is important to understand that each person's reaction to death is unique, just like their fingerprint. Everyone will cope with loss in their own way. There is no universal formula!" (Garrett, 2015, p. 14).

Death can be seen as an organizing factor of human existence, acting as "a skilled editor that arranges your life in a way that makes it intelligible," bringing clarity to how people live their lives (Brădățan, 2015, p. 7). The fear of death, one of the most widespread and complex human anxieties, is not innate but develops gradually, influenced by the awareness of one's mortality and life experiences: "we are not born with it" (Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2015, p. 17).

An essential element in managing this existential fear is approaching it from a solid ethical and philosophical perspective. Without a well-defined moral framework, specialists dealing with the issue of fear of death risk failing to provide effective solutions for treating existential anxiety and its associated neurotic symptoms. Pfister (1948) emphasizes that ethics play a crucial role in maintaining mental balance, functioning as a psychological hygiene factor both at the individual and collective levels (pp. 503–504).

This study analyzes the impact of fear of death on daily life and explores how religious beliefs, values, and social structures contribute to managing this existential anxiety.

The psychology of death anxiety: Reactions and defense mechanisms

Even those who dedicate their lives to understanding and treating emotional suffering struggle to manage their own anxiety about death. Bertman (1991) highlights this challenge through a question that suggests the complexity of the subject: "Why is it so difficult to associate with people who are dying?" (p. 45). This question underscores the profound difficulty we have in confronting not only the death of others but also our own mortality, a topic also analyzed by Freud. He believed that the human mind is incapable of processing the idea of its own death, a defensive mechanism that protects us from existential anxiety. He illustrates this phenomenon through a personal reflection on survival:

> "I am glad that I am the one who survived; I express this sentiment with the naive egoism of the husband who tells his wife, 'If one of us dies, I will move to Paris.' My expectation naturally assumes that I will not be the one who dies" (Freud, 1995/1938, p. 329).

This tendency to avoid thoughts of one's own mortality is also supported by modern theories of death anxiety. To better understand the dimensions of this phenomenon, it is useful to analyze the concept of "terror," which plays a crucial role in triggering psychological reactions to death. The Cambridge Dictionary defines this term as "extreme fear" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025), while Merriam-Webster characterizes it as "a state of intense or overwhelming fear" (Merriam-Webster, 2025). In this sense, Becker (1973) argues that "terror always refers to the fundamental aspects of life and death" (p. 150), suggesting that this anxiety is not merely an emotional response but also a fundamental psychological defense mechanism.

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) explain that terror is a natural biological response to the threat of death, triggering instinctive reactions of fight, flight, or freeze. This deeply influences human behavior, leading to panic and self-defense reactions:

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) explain that "Terror is the natural and generally adaptive response to the imminent threat of death. All mammals, including humans, experience terror. When an impala sees a lion about to pounce on it, its amygdala sends signals to the limbic system, triggering a fight, flight, or freeze response. A similar process occurs in us. Whenever we feel mortally threatened—by an out-of-control car, an armed mugger, a tightness in the chest, a suspicious lump, extreme turbulence on a plane, a suicide bomber exploding in a crowd—the feeling of terror consumes us; we are driven to fight, flee, or freeze. Panic follows (…). The terror of death has greatly influenced human behavior (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015, pp. 11-12, 155).

In addition to immediate panic reactions, individuals develop more complex adaptation mechanisms to manage their anxiety about death. Awareness of one's mortality not only generates fear but also profoundly influences human motivations and behaviors. Routledge and Vess (2019) emphasize that it "disrupts and undermines numerous motivational processes that support self-preservation," leading individuals to seek meaning as a way to counteract this anxiety. This need to attribute meaning to existence transforms Terror Management Theory (TMT) into an essential perspective for understanding human behavior (pp. 66-67).

Thus, the fear of death is not merely an isolated emotional reaction but a factor that deeply shapes the way people live their lives. From individual strategies of denial and avoidance of death-related thoughts to cultural and religious mechanisms that provide meaning to existence, death anxiety remains one of the most powerful driving forces of human behavior.

Terror Management Theory: Origin and Psychological Impact

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) formulated Terror Management Theory (TMT) to explain how awareness of one's mortality influences human thinking and behavior. This theory posits that fear of death plays a fundamental role in human life, driving individuals to construct their identity, religious beliefs, and worldview. The theory finds its roots in the work of Ernest Becker, who laid the foundation for a deep understanding of how people manage existential anxiety. Becker argues that "human activity is largely driven by unconscious efforts to deny and transcend death" (cited in Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015, p. 6).

Becker (1973), building on Freudian perspectives on unconscious mechanisms, states that "the unconscious does not know death" (p. 22) and that "man carries death within him unconsciously, as part of his biology" (p. 99). Thus, anxiety about death is not merely a rational or cultural process but a biologically ingrained mechanism deeply embedded in the human psyche.

Reflecting on the survival instinct present in all living beings, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) emphasize that, unlike other organisms, humans are aware that, regardless of their efforts, they cannot avoid death. This reality is expressed in their observation that "unlike bats and worms, we humans know that, no matter what we do, sooner or later, we will lose the battle against death" (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015, p. 10).

While some researchers perceive death as a final stage of development, Verhey challenges this view, arguing that, in reality, it represents "the end of growth" (Verhey, 2011, p. 53), a perspective different from that of Kübler-Ross (1986), who considered death "the final stage of growth." This difference reflects two distinct ways of understanding death: either as an absolute end or as a natural phase in the human developmental process.

In their analysis of the structure of TMT, Harvell and Nisbett identify four essential components: awareness of one's mortality, cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships. Among these, awareness of mortality is the central mechanism that drives

individuals to seek security and comfort in cultural values and interpersonal relationships to manage existential anxiety: "awareness of mortality becomes the primary mechanism that drives individuals to seek the metaphorical 'blanket' of cultural worldviews and close relationships to overcome the psychologically uncomfortable state of anxiety" (Harvell & Nisbett, 2016, p. 137).

Similarly, DeSpelder and Strickland (2020) highlight that people manage their fear of death by finding meaning in life and developing a positive perception of their own value. These aspects are significantly influenced by the cultural context in which each individual is socialized: "people learn to alleviate their fear of death by finding meaning in life and value in themselves, with this meaning and value being provided by the culture in which they are socialized" (p. 24). This need to find security in stable cultural structures and strong interpersonal relationships is essential for maintaining psychological balance. Harvell and Nisbett explain this phenomenon by stating that "TMT posits that people are constantly and unconsciously motivated to maintain confidence in their cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships to protect themselves from the anxiety generated by the awareness that death is inevitable" (Harvell & Nisbett, 2016, p. 6).

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) emphasize that this awareness of one's own mortality is a distinctive trait of human existence:

> Only we, humans, as far as we know, are aware of our own existence in a specific time and place. (...) What a joy it is for us to be alive and, at the same time, to know this! However, because we humans are aware that we exist, we also know that, one day, we will no longer exist. Death can come at any time, a fact that we can neither predict nor control. This is undeniably unpleasant news. Even if we are fortunate enough to avoid attacks from venomous insects or predators, knives, bullets, plane crashes, car accidents, cancer, or earthquakes, we understand that we cannot continue indefinitely (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015, p. 11).

This inevitable reality forces each person to reflect on their own existence, leading to the emergence of existential anxiety. The most common reaction to this anxiety is the activation of defense mechanisms that help avoid direct confrontation with the idea of one's own mortality. Harvell and Nisbett explain this tendency by stating: "People tend not to focus on their own disappearance, instead preferring to think about the importance of their lives or to completely avoid thoughts related to death" (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006, cited in Harvell & Nisbett, 2016, p. 17).

TMT explains how fear of death profoundly influences human behavior, driving individuals to construct their identity and seek security in cultural values (Rotaru, 2024, pp. 301-318), interpersonal relationships, and beliefs that provide meaning to existence.

The Four Fundamental Components of TMT

TMT identifies four fundamental components: mortality awareness as the triggering factor and three psychological defense mechanisms—cultural worldview, self-esteem, and close relationships. Together, these elements help individuals manage existential anxiety.

1. Mortality awareness. Harvell and Nisbett (2016) state that "mortality awareness is the central element of TMT and refers to an individual's understanding that they will die" (p. 137). Studies have shown that as individuals become more aware of their own mortality, they increase their concern for their identity and the social world in which they live. In this regard, Routledge and Vess (2019) state that "a brief reminder of one's mortality leads individuals to show a higher level of defense of their worldview and to pursue activities that have the potential to enhance their self-esteem" (p. 4, 7).

Harvell and Nisbett (2016) observe that when people are confronted with the reality of their own death, they turn to cultural worldviews as a psychological refuge. Thus, "when mortality becomes evident, individuals tend to turn to their cultural worldviews as a form of protection against the anxiety triggered by the thought of the inevitable experience of death" (as cited in Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2000, p. 137). Consequently, individuals may develop "an increased potential for compassion, empathy, forgiveness, and prosocial behavior" (Arrowood & Cox, 2023, p. 39).

However, awareness of one's own mortality does not only have positive effects. Studies show that this awareness can generate contradictory reactions, including defensive behaviors. For example, it has been demonstrated that "the subconscious activation of the idea of death can lead people to seek self-esteem in ways that increase their vulnerability to death" (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 9). Additionally, this awareness can reinforce prejudices and even lead to aggression.

The major issue lies in the fact that cultural worldviews are largely subjective constructions of reality. This discrepancy becomes evident when individuals encounter people with fundamentally different beliefs. Routledge and Vess state that,

> under non-threatening conditions, people can tolerate and even appreciate other cultures, groups, and value systems. However, TMT predicts that when an existential threat arises and people are strongly motivated to maintain confidence in their cultural worldview, they will react with more prejudice and hostility toward members of opposing cultures and groups. (…) Reminders of death could increase real aggression against those who violate the worldview (pp. 5-6).

In this context, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) explain how people react when confronted with thoughts of their own mortality: "When we are confronted with reminders of death, we react by criticizing and punishing those who oppose or violate our beliefs and by praising and rewarding those who support or uphold these beliefs" (p. 17).

Therefore, TMT identifies three essential psychological resources for managing existential anxiety:

- Cultural worldview, which provides a sense of order, meaning, and stability. Although people tend to view their cultural worldview as a natural aspect of their existence, in reality, it is a fragile construct that requires constant reinforcement through rituals, traditions, and social institutions. If this worldview is questioned, individuals may be overwhelmed by existential uncertainty (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 5).
- Self-esteem, which helps people perceive their own existence as valuable and meaningful. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) explain this aspect as follows: "We do not just need to see life in general in this way (in accordance with the cultural worldview we hold); we also need to see our own life in this way" (p. 13). Self-esteem allows individuals to see themselves as important members of society and thus protects them from the anxiety caused by awareness of their own mortality.
- Close relationships, which constitute another essential element of the system for managing existential anxiety. Harvell and Nisbett (2016) emphasize that "close relationships have been proposed as a third element of the anxiety-buffering system, alongside worldviews and self-esteem" (p. 5). Interpersonal relationships not only provide emotional support but also strengthen the sense of continuity and belonging, thereby reducing the negative effects of mortality awareness.

Awareness of mortality profoundly influences human behavior, generating both adaptive and defensive reactions. To manage the existential anxiety associated with this awareness, individuals rely on three essential psychological mechanisms: cultural worldview, self-esteem, and close relationships. These resources function as a protective system against

the fear of death, providing emotional stability and reducing the impact of existential uncertainty. While mortality awareness can foster empathy and prosocial behavior, it can also amplify prejudice and hostility, especially in contexts where cultural worldviews are challenged. Terror Management Theory highlights the crucial role of these mechanisms in maintaining psychological balance, emphasizing the importance of a coherent cultural worldview, solid self-esteem, and secure interpersonal relationships in reducing anxiety related to one's own mortality.

2. The cultural worldview serves as the framework through which individuals interpret their existence, giving it meaning and coherence. It includes values, beliefs, norms, and traditions specific to each society, contributing to the formation of personal identity and a sense of belonging. Essentially, the cultural worldview shapes the perception of reality and provides individuals with a clear sense of purpose in life.

According to Terror Management Theory, maintaining a stable cultural worldview is essential for psychological balance, as it helps manage the anxiety associated with awareness of one's mortality. Routledge and Vess (2019) argue that "people need to maintain confidence in a cultural worldview because it fulfills a crucial psychological function in managing existential terror" (p. 5). Harvell and Nisbett (2016) emphasize that cultural worldviews act as "a common lens through which life and reality are perceived" (p. 3), providing stability and durability by defining societal values and offering a sense of security and belonging. Furthermore, they give existence a profound meaning by integrating the idea of continuity beyond death.

Cultural worldviews offer hope in two distinct forms of immortality: literal and symbolic.

- Literal immortality involves the continuation of existence after physical death, often associated with religious concepts of the afterlife, such as heaven, reincarnation, or other post-mortem beliefs.
- Symbolic immortality, on the other hand, manifests through an individual's contribution to something greater than themselves, either by passing on values to future generations or leaving a lasting impact on history (Harvell & Nisbett, 2016, pp. 3-4).

In this context, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) explain that "our beliefs in literal and symbolic immortality help us manage the potential terror that arises from the awareness of our inevitable physical death" (p. 13).

Therefore, the cultural worldview plays a crucial role in reducing existential anxiety, providing a stable framework for interpreting reality and maintaining psychological balance. It allows individuals to construct their identity and integrate into a community, fostering a sense of continuity and significance beyond physical existence. As a result, cultural beliefs not only provide meaning to life but also function as a psychological defense mechanism against the fear of death.

3. Self-esteem is an essential factor in managing the fear of death, providing individuals with a sense of security and personal worth. According to Routledge and Vess (2019), "self-esteem acts as a buffer against anxiety even before a child can fully comprehend death in an abstract way" (p. 180). Similarly, Harvell and Nisbett (2016) state that "individuals with higher self-esteem tend to be more capable of managing the anxiety induced by mortality awareness than those with lower self-esteem" (p. 137).

Self-esteem reflects how a person evaluates their own worth and competence. Most individuals protect this perception through self-defense mechanisms, especially when facing threats to their identity (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Within Terror Management Theory (TMT), self-esteem is considered a construct influenced by cultural norms, with each individual being assessed based on the standards imposed by their society

(Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Thus, when confronted with mortality awareness, individuals seek to strengthen their sources of self-esteem, either through social validation or personal achievements (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 103).

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) describe self-esteem as "a powerful vaccine against fear, not only at a psychological level but also at a deeply physiological level," arguing that many people fight to preserve their self-esteem "in the same way that worms and bats fight to stay alive, because for us humans, self-esteem is our symbolic protection against death" (p. 49).

> Like bats and worms, we fight with all our strength when faced with physical death. But we humans go much further. Even the slightest suggestion of our mortality drives us to work harder to leave a mark on the world. We strive to prove our worth, even in the smallest ways. Approval from our boss, a compliment from a friend, or even subtle recognition from a passing stranger can strengthen our sense of value, while disapproval, criticism, and being ignored can overwhelm us with a wave of anxiety. This relentless struggle to prove our worth is one of the many ways in which, in the words of poet Dylan Thomas, 'we rage against the dying of the light' (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015, p. 41).

An essential aspect of self-esteem is the diversification of its sources. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) suggest that "by placing our psychological eggs in multiple baskets, we increase our chances of having sustainable ways to feel good about ourselves" (p. 49). Becker (1971) identifies four progressive levels of self-esteem:

- Personal, based on confidence in one's own abilities
- Social, derived from interpersonal relationships
- Secular, anchored in belonging to groups and institutions
- Sacred, which involves a connection with God or a transcendent meaning (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 182)

In line with Kierkegaard's philosophy, Becker considers the sacred level to be the highest form of self-esteem, as it provides individuals with "true autonomy," reducing their dependence on external validation and connecting them to "something greater, something cosmic" (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 182). This perspective explains why people who anchor their identity in spiritual or religious beliefs often exhibit greater resilience in the face of existential anxiety.

In conclusion, self-esteem plays a crucial role in protecting the human psyche against the fear of death. Diversifying sources of validation and anchoring oneself in a spiritual dimension allow for more effective management of existential anxiety. Ultimately, this need to demonstrate value and leave a legacy reflects the deeply human desire to transcend one's own mortality. However, "although TMT highlights the anxiety-buffering function of worldviews and self-esteem, it has also been argued that close relationships fulfill a comparable function in managing mortality" (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 48).

4. Close relationships constitute a fundamental pillar of emotional balance and a powerful mechanism for managing death-related anxiety. According to Harvell and Nisbett (2016), close bonds provide "existential security," playing a protective role against both "existence-related anxiety" and general anxiety, functioning as an "anxiety buffer" (pp. 8, 10, 18). Specifically, "awareness of one's own mortality increases investment in structures such as close relationships," highlighting the importance of these connections in combating the fear of death and maintaining psychological balance (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 328).

Mikulincer and his collaborators (2003) demonstrated that meaningful interpersonal relationships are essential in providing life with meaning and reducing existential anxiety,

even when other psychological protection mechanisms, such as cultural worldviews or self-esteem, are deficient. Furthermore, the fragility of close relationships is directly correlated with a heightened perception of death as a threat (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003).

From another perspective, close relationships also function as symbolic protective mechanisms against death-related anxiety. They offer individuals a sense of continuity and durability—a form of "symbolic immortality," through which a person's existence persists in the memory of loved ones and in the impact they have had on others. Moreover, interpersonal relationships expand personal identity, allowing individuals to see themselves reflected in those with whom they have strong bonds (Routledge & Vess, 2019, p. 70).

Ray Galvin explains this idea from a narrative perspective, showing that individual identity is not strictly limited to one's self but is also reflected in others:

> My personality does not live only within me. It lives in everyone who has ever known me. I was born into a community, I learned to speak my native language in and through a community, and I became a person through interactions with others in a community. Who I am is unique, but much of me is borrowed from others. My father, my mother, my sisters, my brother, my elementary school teachers, my close family, my mentors, and my close friends are all "inside" me and contribute to the formation of who I am, just as I am "inside" them and contribute to their identity. When I am absent from them due to travel or their passing, I do not cease to be the person I am; what constitutes me continues to exist. (Galvin, n.d., p. 129).

However, not all interpersonal relationships positively contribute to reducing existential anxiety. Mikulincer and his collaborators observed that only relationships built on a secure attachment model fulfill this protective role. In contrast, relationships marked by insecurity or emotional instability can become additional sources of stress and anxiety (Mikulincer, Florian & Hirschberger, 2003).

Unlike classical theories of anxiety, which attribute psychological disorders to ineffective strategies for managing existential stress (Freud, 1926; Yalom, 1980), Terror Management Theory (TMT) suggests that psychopathology can emerge when an individual fails to adequately utilize three essential resources for psychological protection: cultural worldview, self-esteem, and close relationships. The absence or dysfunction of these elements amplifies death-related anxiety and can contribute to the development of various forms of psychological distress (Routledge & Vess, 2019, pp. 349, 421).

TMT and Psychological Development

As children develop self-awareness and begin to perceive the concepts of life and death, existential anxiety becomes increasingly present. This anxiety leads to the emergence of defense mechanisms necessary for maintaining emotional and psychological balance. The fear of death does not suddenly appear in adulthood but gradually forms during childhood. According to Terror Management Theory (TMT), individuals learn to manage this fear throughout their psychological development. From the stage in which infants are entirely focused on immediate needs to the moment when children begin to understand the concepts of life and death, this adaptation process plays a crucial role in developing defense strategies against existential anxiety.

Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) describe this latent fear as "the worm at the core" of the human condition, emphasizing that "we are not born with this terror." In the first months of life, infants are exclusively concerned with their immediate needs, such as food and comfort. However, as they grow, each child becomes "embedded in a symbolic world," beginning to internalize a system of values and meaning, which is essential for constructing a sense of psychological security. If this process of symbolic integration is

disrupted, the child may develop insecurities and ineffective defense mechanisms that will influence their emotional and cognitive development (pp. 12, 17, 18).

A crucial aspect of this process is the gradual transfer of the sense of security from parents to the cultural worldview of society. According to Becker (1971), this transition "generally occurs smoothly because parents transmit their worldview and cultural values to the child from early childhood" (p. 67). Thus, self-esteem functions as "a long-term extension of an effective anxiety-buffering mechanism" (Routledge & Vess, 2019, pp. 181-182).

As mortality awareness becomes an inevitable reality, children begin to develop initial strategies for managing this anxiety. Studies suggest that as early as "three years old, children are aware of death," and this understanding causes discomfort, leading them to adopt "rudimentary versions of terror management strategies that they will rely on as adults" (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2015, pp. 25-26). Both children and adults use avoidance mechanisms, trying to distract themselves with daily activities or trivial concerns.

One specific mechanism children use to manage death-related anxiety is the personification of fear through imaginary figures, such as witches, trolls, or goblins. This externalization of fear allows children to transform an abstract and frightening concept into a more concrete one, over which they can exert some control. Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) explain that "by giving death a human form, it becomes easier to avoid. If death were a person, you could reason with it, negotiate, trick it, or defeat it with your superior intelligence or the help of a magical entity" (pp. 26-27).

As psychological development progresses, the ability to manage the fear of death becomes increasingly dependent on external influences, such as education (Rotaru, 2021, pp. 190-196), family environment (Rotaru, 2011, p.5), and religious beliefs (Rotaru, 2015, pp.318-322). The attachment formed with parents remains a central element in maintaining emotional security, directly impacting how individuals perceive and respond to the reality of their mortality (Harvell & Nisbett, 2016, p. 5).

Conclusion

Terror Management Theory (TMT) provides a complex perspective on how individuals manage death-related anxiety, highlighting the central role of cultural worldviews, self-esteem, and close relationships in maintaining psychological stability. Mortality awareness is not merely a source of fear but a key factor in shaping identity and social behavior. While existential defense mechanisms can foster compassion, empathy, and prosocial behaviors, they can also intensify prejudice and aggression, particularly in contexts of cultural or ideological threats.

An interdisciplinary approach to the fear of death, combining psychology, philosophy, and theology, underscores the fact that this fundamental anxiety cannot be eliminated but only managed through adaptive strategies. This study reaffirms the importance of a coherent cultural worldview, strong self-esteem, and secure interpersonal relationships in maintaining emotional stability.

Ultimately, managing the fear of death remains one of the major challenges of human existence, profoundly influencing how individuals define the meaning of life. A deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved in this dynamic can contribute to the development of more effective strategies for reducing existential anxiety and fostering a more balanced and empathetic human behavior.

References

Arrowood, R. B., & Cox, C. R. (2023). *Terror management theory: A practical review of research and application.* Brill.

Becker, E. (1971). *The birth and death of meaning: An interdisciplinary perspective on the problem of man* (2nd ed.). Free Press.

Becker, E. (1973). *The denial of death*. The Free Press.

Bertman, S. L. (1991). *Facing death: Images, insights, and interventions*. Hemisphere Publishing.

Brădăţan, C. (2015). *Dying for ideas: The dangerous lives of the philosophers*. Bloomsbury.

Cambridge Dictionary. (2025). *Terror*. Retrieved February 2, 2025, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/terror

Dederen, R. (2000). *Handbook of Seventh-Day Adventist theology*. Review and Herald.

DeSpelder, L. A., & Strickland, A. L. (2020). *The last dance: Encountering death and dying* (11th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Eliade, M. (1957). *Das Heilige und das Profane* (B. Prelipceanu, Trans.). Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH. (Original work published in 1957).

Freud, S. (1949). *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*. Digital Library India.

Freud, S. (1955). *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 1, J. Strachey, Ed. & Trans.). The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis. (Original work published in 1895)

Freud, S. (1995). *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud* (A. A. Brill, Trans. & Ed.). Modern Library. (Original work published in 1938)

Galvin, B. (n.d.). *Narrative therapy in pastoral ministry*. Retrieved from http://justsolutions.eu/Resources/NarrTherGalvin.pdf

Garrett, L. (2015). *When death speaks: Listen, learn, and find comfort*. ABC Press.

Harvell, L. A., & Nisbett, G. S. (Eds.). (2016). *Denying death: An interdisciplinary approach to terror management theory*. Routledge.

Koole, S. L., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2006). *The psychology of existential concerns: Understanding the human need for meaning, existential security, and self-esteem*. Guilford Press.

Kreeft, P. (1992). *Love is stronger than death*. Ignatius Press.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1986). *Death: The final stage of growth*. A Touchstone Book, Simon & Schuster.

Merriam-Webster. (2025). *Terror*. Retrieved February 2, 2025, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/

Mihăilă, C. (Ed.). (2022). *Teme în teologie biblică şi hermeneutică: Sesiune de comunicări ştiinţifice ale studenţilor & absolvenţilor U.E.O.* Risoprint Publishing House.

Mikulincer, M., Florian, V., & Hirschberger, G. (2003). The existential function of close relationships: Introducing death into the science of love. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 7*(1), 20–40. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0701_2

Pfister, O. (1948). *Christianity and fear*. Macmillan.

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., Arndt, J., & Schimel, J. (2004). Why do people need self-esteem? A theoretical and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin, 130*(3), 435–468. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.3.435

Rotaru, I-G. (2011). "Familia–loc hărăzit de Dumnezeu pentru formarea caracterului", *Argeşul Ortodox* X (514), 5.

Rotaru, I-G. (2015). Natura şi scopul Legii Morale a celor sfinte Zece Porunci. *Păstorul Ortodox* (pp. 318-322), Archdiocese of Argeş and Muscel Publishing House.

Rotaru, I-G. (2021). Valences of Education. *Proceedings of the 23th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities* (pp. 190-196), Princeton.

Rotaru, I-G. (2023). Aspects of Biblical Philosophy on the Development of World Civilizations. *Scientia Moralitas. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 8* (1), 62-79.

Rotaru, I-G. (2024). Moral Values and Human Values: Support for Sustainable Societal Development. In Chivu, L., Ioan-Franc, V., Georgescu, G., De Los Ríos Carmenado, I., Andrei, J.V. (Eds.), *Europe in the New World Economy: Opportunities and Challenges. ESPERA 2023. Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics,* pp. 301-318, Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71329-3_17 https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-71329-3_17

Routledge, C., & Vess, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Handbook of terror management theory*. Academic Press.

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2015). *The worm at the core: On the role of death in life*. Random House.

Verhey, A. (2011). *The Christian art of dying: Learning from Jesus*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Wulff, D. M. (1997). *Psychology of religion: Classic and contemporary* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Yalom, I. D. (2020). *Existential psychotherapy*. Basic Books.