Dealing with Death

"True joy is a profound remembering; and true grief the same." - Clive Barker, Weaveworld

Death presents two of the greatest quandries facing humanity: how to cope with losing the people closest to our hearts and how to contend with our own inevitable demise. As anyone who has been confronted with either of these challenges first-hand can tell you, it sometimes seems miraculous that the rest of humankind marches on - dissecting tv show plots, complaining about the weather - when these issues are at the fore. Even when they're not front and center, they lurk in the background, haunting us with their possibilities, cultivating worry and unease.

What might assist us in combating this death-related anxiety? Is there anything in our emotional arsenal that might come to our aid?

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is an intriguing emotion. On the one hand, nostalgia can be intensely positive, imbued with a rosy glow of familiarity and belongingness. On the other hand, it can be intensely negative, accompanied by longing and loss and frustrated desires. Indeed, research indicates that when people are asked to characterize nostalgia, they pinpoint both positive (love, sharing, rose-tinted, warmth) and negative (sad, yearning, heart-wrenching, missing) elements, with the positive elements tending to win out.

mia bella madre

So nostalgia itself may be an emotion that is both negative and positive. What if we are confronted with sadness related to death? In the context of an existing state of sadness, does engaging in nostalgic reflections make us feel better or worse?

Nostalgia, mortality threat, and existential meaning.

Recently in my own lab, student researcher Ryan Glode and I have been exploring whether nostalgic versus ordinary event memories have differential impacts on a sad mood state. Participants all watch a sad film clip in which a mother loses her young daughter to leukemia, and are then randomly assigned to reflect on either a nostalgic or an ordinary event memory. Preliminary results indicate that when you examine how people's moods change from right after the sad clip to right after the memory reflection, the nostalgic folks recover less from their feelings of sadness compared to the ordinary event recallers. Examining the content of their memories, this is perhaps unsurprising - many people in the nostalgia condition choose to recall times of family togetherness right after a loss of a loved one, or to reflect on warm times leading up to such a loss.

Compellingly though, the people engaging in nostalgia also experience slightly greater increases in happiness compared to the ordinary event recallers. So while the sadness from the death-related clip lingered, they nonetheless were feeling more happy at the same time- in essence, nostalgia was associated with feeling both better AND worse.\*

A compelling body of work by social psychologist Clay Routledge and colleagues suggest that the reason nostalgia may work in this way - making us feel better despite having negative elements - is that it increases our sense of existential meaning. Waxing nostalgic anchors us in a life filled with socially meaningful events and relationships, even if these events and relationships happen to be in the past. His research suggests that nostalgia may increase positive mood, self-esteem, perceptions of social connectedness, and buffer people against death-related anxiety.

The importance of context

As is true so often in psychology, context is critical. There are likely circumstances in which nostalgia works against us. For instance, if you are mired in memories of the past and pining for "the one who got away", these reflections are likely to dull your ability to appreciate the one you're with. But if instead you dwell on the glint in your college roommate's eye as you led her onto the dance floor at your wedding, or on a favorite aunt's delighted shriek as she plunged into the cold waters of the Atlantic to win a family game of Steal the Rocks... these nostalgic reflections may in some small way blunt the keen sorrow that these loved ones are no longer in your life. They may also relieve a bit of the existential horror intrinsic to being mortal. Someday you too will pass on - but you will live on in the memories of your loved ones, who will recall your times together with both the warmth and the ache of nostalgia.

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