

Morbid thoughts whet the appetite

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Can watching TV news or crime shows trigger overeating? According to new research in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, people who are thinking about their own deaths want to consume more.

Authors Naomi Mandel (Arizona State University) and Dirk Smeesters (Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands) conducted several experiments in Europe and the United States where participants wrote essays on their feelings about their own deaths. They then checked off items on a grocery list or ate cookies. Consumers who wrote about their own deaths wanted to buy more and ate more than those who wrote about a painful medical procedure (the control group).

"People want to consumer more of all kinds of foods, both healthy and unhealthy, when thinking about the idea that they will die some day," write the authors.

The researchers found people with low self-esteem, in particular, tend to over-consume after death-related thoughts. Mandel and Smeesters explain the effect using a theory called "escape from self-awareness." "When people are reminded of their inevitable mortality, they may start to feel uncomfortable about what they have done with their lives and whether they have made a significant mark on the universe. This is a state called 'heightened self-awareness.' One way to deal with such an uncomfortable state is to escape from it, by either overeating or overspending," they write.

The study also revealed that placing a mirror in front of the participants

reduced the desire to over-consume.

"Consumers, especially those with a lower self-esteem, might be more susceptible to over-consumption when faced with images of death during the news or their favorite crime-scene investigation shows," the authors conclude.

Source: University of Chicago

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