

# New study reveals people more likely to donate when reminded of own mortality

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New research from the UBC Sauder School of Business shows that people are 30 per cent more likely to donate their assets when faced with their own mortality.

The study examines how people respond to "mortality salience"—that is,

the uniquely human awareness that they're going to die.

Earlier studies have shown that some people console themselves by acquiring more [material possessions](#)—in other words, they subscribe to the notion that "He who dies with the most toys wins."

But the new research shows that people can also express a desire to pass important possessions on to others, because it gives them a kind of immortality the researchers call "transcendence."

"It sounds dramatic, but it's the idea that you can live on longer, symbolically through something else," says study co-author and UBC Sauder Professor Katherine White, who co-authored the study with UBC Sauder Professor Darren Dahl and Lea Dunn, assistant professor of marketing at the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington. "So, if a product or a possession is somehow linked to your identity and you pass that on to others, it could potentially have this ability to transcend the self."

The researchers first launched the study several years ago, long before the threat of COVID-19 had people more closely considering their mortality, and updating wills and planning estates.

"For many people, that [mortality salience](#) is much higher now, for better or for worse. People are just more aware of how fragile life can be," says Dahl. As a result, adds White, more people are likely thinking about the idea of symbolic immortality and where their possessions will go when they pass on.

To conduct the experiment, 512 participants were asked to arrive at the lab with a book they might consider giving away. One group was then given a task that made them contemplate their deaths, while the other considered what their typical day was like.

Later, participants were asked if they wanted to donate their book to charity; some were also offered the chance to write an inscription in the book and sign it, making the offering more personal. No researchers were present when participants made their decision to ensure there was no pressure to donate.

"The people who had contemplated their death were more than 30 per cent more likely to give away the product—particularly when they had connected it to themselves," says White.

"They're much more likely to donate it after they have somehow connected it to their identity."

However, the effect goes away if the item may be broken up or recycled, thereby losing its perceived potential for transcendence.

"Let's say you're passing on a car or a motorcycle. If it's broken up into pieces and sold off as parts, it's not the same as if your specific car or your specific product was left to endure," says Dahl. "The specialness of it, and the fact that it represents you, is broken up, and you're not a whole entity sticking around."

The effect also didn't work on people who had already satisfied that desire for transcendence through other channels.

White says the findings could be helpful to charitable organizations looking for people to donate a portion of their estates. "Anything they can do to connect the self to something that's more lasting will help," says White. "So, it could be something like a plaque or a mural or a somewhat permanently displayed list of donors—just a tangible representation of the self that's going to continue to exist."

Companies can also use transcendence as a selling point by marketing

products as having high emotional value or being precious and irreplaceable family heirlooms.

**More information:** Lea Dunn et al, A Little Piece of Me: When Mortality Reminders Lead to Giving to Others, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucaa020](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaa020)

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