

Reminders of death from disasters affect people's behaviors, research finds

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Prolonged reminders of death from long-term disasters affect people's choices and behaviors, finds a new study by King's College London researchers.

The research, published in the [*International Journal of Consumer Studies*](#), found that prolonged reminders of death, as found in disasters of long duration like the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change crisis, threaten people's ontological security (people's sense of routine and of the world being safe and predictable) over time.

This threat to ontological security causes a shift in behavior and particularly in consumer behavior, as materialistic purchases became less important than experiences with others, and more efforts were made to re-establish this sense of normality.

Previous research shows that when faced with short-term reminders of death, such as terrorist attacks, riots and [natural disasters](#) like flooding, earthquakes or [severe storms](#), people feel more selfish and concerned about their own well-being and safety, acting more impulsively as consumers.

King's academics found that the type of disaster (i.e. natural versus man-made like [terrorist attacks](#)), how present it is, and the duration of the disaster can influence people's behaviors too.

In a comparison of people's coping mechanisms in the face of natural and man-made disasters, researchers conducted 35 focus groups in the UK, Germany and France. They found that for disasters that disrupted people's daily routines and their overall ontological security over longer periods of time, like the COVID-19 pandemic, materialistic purchases were no longer as important as experiences with others.

The study also found that their behaviors demonstrated an attempt to re-establish ontological security.

"For me, visiting family and friends' houses and being able to do that without any restrictions suddenly felt valuable. Taking the kids to

playdates and being more involved with their lives, meeting with family and friends for that pizza, or going to the cinema for that movie, all of that felt very fresh, and that somehow, we are regaining our normality. I am even excited about planning a summer holiday abroad with extended family members." (Male study participant)

"Major ongoing disastrous events like the COVID-19 pandemic and wildfires have prevented people from seeing their families and friends, all of which have disturbed their sense of security and normal life. Events like these have changed how people subconsciously think about death, and it affects us. We are living in a period of regular crisis and so this sense is with us whether we think about it.

"Our research found that over a prolonged period, the unconscious awareness of death affected people's behaviors. In contrast to impulse buying and splurging, our study has shown people are compassionate and caring for others in their attempts to provide experiences to reconnect with family and friends, and it is these behaviors that are due to a need to re-establish a sense of security," says Dr. Rayan Fawaz, lead author of the study.

Professor Shintaro Okazaki, professor of marketing, added, "These findings demonstrate we can better understand how people respond to serious events or [natural phenomenon](#) that threaten [personal safety](#) and security, and how short or long-term reminders of death can inform personal behaviors. At the heart of these behaviors are attempts to recreate a sense of [security](#). One silver lining is that the temporality of the disaster may trigger positive outcomes and enable marketers to act more responsibly."

More information: Rayan S. Fawaz et al, What do we know about consumers' ontological security in disaster scenarios?, *International Journal of Consumer Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/ijcs.12926](https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12926)

Provided by King's College London

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