



Scared to death? Tom Pyszczynski knows why

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of occasional profiles highlighting the people behind the research happening at CU-Colorado Springs. If you have a research-related story suggestion, please e-mail University Relations at ur@uccs.edu.

You're not afraid of dying, you say.

You hate helmets, love glade-skiing at high speeds, believe in the afterlife, plan to swim with the sharks, and have one of those "No Fear" stickers plastered on the bumper of your mud-splattered ATV.

Tom Pyszczynski, a CU-Colorado Springs professor of psychology, has got news for you.

You're repressing, he says.

And apparently an increasing number of scholars, book editors and journalists agree.

Pyszczynski's theory, dubbed "terror management," has been steadily earning respect over the past 15 years in academic circles. But since Sept. 11 he and two colleagues who helped coin the expression and pioneer the research have been catapulted into the national limelight.

According to Pyszczynski and his two longtime friends- psychology professors Sheldon Solomon from Skidmore College and Jeff Greenberg from the University of Arizona, Tucson- we all dread death. Most importantly, this primal fear may be a major cause of racial and religious prejudices.

Pyszczynski explains terror management theory like this: Most living things have an innate propensity to stay alive. Humans share that drive but are nevertheless the only creatures on the planet saddled with the knowledge that they will die.

At a Glance



Tom Pyszczynski, professor of psychology

Tom Pyszczynski came to CU-Colorado Springs as an assistant professor in

August 1986 after serving as a visiting assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and at the University of Idaho.

He completed his graduate work at the University of Kansas, earning his Ph.D. in 1980 with a dissertation on cognitive strategies for coping with uncertain outcomes. He received a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

His research interests center primarily on "experimental existential psychology"- a term he jokingly calls an oxymoron, since existential psychology had heretofore been considered untestable.

Five years ago Pyszczynski was ranked as the 11th most productive researcher worldwide in social psychology. He garners about \$90,000 a year in National Science Foundation grants and has been funded by the NSF since 1988, with four consecutive grants, and is currently under consideration for a new one.

His awards include an Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship for research conducted in Germany in 1993 and in 2000, and a Netherlands Science Foundation Fellowship for research visits to the University of Nijmegen in 2000.

"What an appalling affront to share the intense desire for continued existence with all living things but be smart enough to recognize the ultimate futility of this most basic biological imperative," said Pyszczynski. "We think that clash creates the potential for terror."

To buffer this dread, humans construct a shield- a belief system to explain how the world works. Living up to the values of our belief system bolsters our self-esteem. Hence, we manage the terror through a complex psychological defense comprised of faith, politics, and social norms that makes us feel safe when we live up to its standards.

With this in mind, Pyszczynski and his two colleagues constructed an elaborate series of tests to see how people would respond when reminded of death. Study after study during the past 15 years has corroborated the link between fear of death and thinking negatively of other cultures, races, and people whose points of view contradict our own.

The test results sent ripples through the psychological community.

"I think the theory has had a big impact, and was controversial, because it delved into issues that no one else in experimental psychology was thinking about," said Pyszczynski.

Terror management theory yokes together existential psychology, philosophy, psychoanalysis and evolutionary thinking in ways that had never before been empirically tested. It was so unheard of that in 1987, when the trio published their first findings, one critic pronounced: "I'm absolutely certain this article will be of no interest to any psychologist, living or dead."

Some would call that a terrifying review. Not Pyszczynski, who still laughs about it today.

"It was inspiring," he said.

Pyszczynski has reason to smile. He's now sought-after as a speaker and is soon to have a book on the shelves at major bookstores. Commissioned by the American Psychological Association almost immediately after the World Trade Center bombings, the book, co-authored with Solomon and Greenberg is entitled "In the Wake of 9/11 - The Psychology of Terror." Pyszczynski has also been quoted in Glamour magazine, GQ, Playboy, the National Journal, the Los Angeles Times, Psychology Today, and the New York Times.

There is more to Pyszczynski's life, however, than terror.

A popular professor and a devoted dad to his 13-year-old daughter, he seems to have struck a balance in life. With a mane of flowing silver hair and a Brian Wilson poster on his office wall, it's not hard to imagine Pyszczynski at play. He is the bass guitarist of a garage band that jams a blend of reggae, jazz and African rhythm every Tuesday night. And he's a fearless experimenter in his Manitou Springs kitchen, currently obsessed with modern Japanese and Mediterranean cuisine.

It was in this spirit 20 years ago that Pyszczynski and his two close friends from graduate school- Greenberg and Solomon- met up in New Orleans for a psychology conference in the early 1980s. Sitting on the banks of the Mississippi River with a six-pack of beer, the conversation roamed from Cajun cooking to the space shuttle Challenger they saw flying overhead, piggybacked on a 747 en route to Cape Canaveral, to existential philosophy.

"I remember Sheldon had been reading books by Ernest Becker, and he'd gotten Jeff to read them and they wanted me to read one," he recalls. "So they said let's go to a

bookstore and get Tom a copy."

It became a turning point for Pyszczynski.

Becker, a cultural anthropologist, interdisciplinary scientific thinker, and 1974 Pulitzer Prize winner for his book, "Denial of Death," believed that humans would be paralyzed by terror if they were constantly aware of their mortality. Consequently, Becker argued, cultural belief systems evolved to explain the nature of reality and to manage the terror.

The trio took Becker's premises of a socially constructed reality a step further, to see how far people would go to preserve their constructs.

To test this, they came up with elaborate experiments. One study involved polling two sets of people; one group on a street corner and the other as they walked past a funeral home (a subtle reminder of death). Both were quizzed about the value of charity- an inarguable virtue in our society. Those nearest the funeral home ranked the merits of charity much higher than the others. The results continued to stack up- even in Europe, Israel, Asia, and among Aborigines in the Outback of Australia. When German test participants were reminded of death they sat farther away from the Turkish participants. Similarly, the Dutch, when exposed to thoughts of death, predicted they'd quash the Germans in a soccer match the next week even though the odds were stacked against the Dutch. Those without the death prompt predicted they'd lose or tie.

Despite the tests, who, after all, really believes that belittling others might save our bacon? Aren't we more rational than that?

Not really, says Pyszczynski.

The rational mind knows that it's abominable to condemn others for an imaginary shot at immortality. But thoughts of death, Pyszczynski said, don't reside in the rational mind. If they did, we'd be reduced to "twitching blobs of biological protoplasm," unable to perform even the simplest of tasks in life- from merging onto the expressway to keeping an appointment with the doctor who wants to discuss a suspicious looking shadow on your brain scan.

Hence, we repress in order to function.

"A rational person would realize the futility of condemning someone different as a means of reducing concerns about mortality," Pyszczynski wrote in a recent academic journal.

But terror, of course, is not a rational act. And these are not rational times.

Pyszczynski says that the recent surge of American jingoism is classic terror management. On the flip side, so too are calls for peace from those who value a passive response to the World Trade Center attacks.

Both responses demonstrate how terror can be a major civilizing force, said Pyszczynski.

"It compels us to live up to cultural standards of value; most of which are good for us," he said. "It makes us want to make sense out of life, be a good person and be loved by others- all good things.

"For example, although many studies have shown that reminders of death often lead to increased bigotry and closed-mindedness, if people are first reminded that they value tolerance- the view that everyone has a right to their own opinions and values- then reminders of death increase tolerance.