

Implicit and emotional responses to mortality in Sufi meditators: evidence from affective misattribution and death-thought accessibility tasks

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Contemplative practices within Sufi tradition offer a distinctive approach to death, emphasizing acceptance, spiritual transcendence, and the dissolution of ego boundaries. In this study, we explored the psychological and implicit effects of long-term Sufi meditation on mortality salience (MS) using an Iranian sample composed of 25 Sufi meditators and 31 matched non-meditators. Participants completed a battery of tasks before and after MS induction, including the Affective Misattribution Procedure (AMP) and a Death-Thought Accessibility (DTA) task. AMP results showed that meditators had overall lower pleasant response rates compared to controls, suggesting a more tempered or restrained affective style. While controls showed a reduction in implicit self-bias after MS induction, Sufi meditators displayed a subtle increase, possibly reflecting a re-centering toward the self in the face of existential threat, consistent with contemplative integration rather than defensiveness. In the DTA task, which assesses the unconscious accessibility of death-related thoughts, Sufi meditators produced significantly more death-related word completions than controls. This heightened accessibility, however, was not accompanied by increased anxiety, as shown by lower scores on state anxiety measures post-induction. These findings support the idea that Sufi meditation fosters a more open and non-defensive cognitive stance toward death and provide preliminary evidence that familiarity with death cultivated through contemplative practice may reduce its associated fear as predicted in the framework of the Terror Management Theory.

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