



The Effects of Mortality Salience on Parental Response

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Introduction

Previous research suggests that individuals pursue close relationships because they help people cope with mortality awareness (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). Further, there is some evidence to suggest that persons achieve a sense of death transcendence through the prospect of parenthood. For example, following reminders of death, people have a greater desire for children (e.g., Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005), have more vivid and accessible thoughts about parenthood (Yaakobi, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2014), are more negative toward strict birth-control policies, and more positive toward younger family members (Zhou, Liu, Chen, & Yu, 2008). However, no prior work has examined parenting behaviors directly. For this reason, the purpose of the present research was to examine whether individuals display more behaviors associated with responsive caregiving following reminders of mortality.

Method

- Caregiving behaviors were coded by two individuals who were trained independently. Over the course of training they established inter-rater reliability ($\alpha = .95$).
- The extent to which participants engaged in caregiving-based touching behaviors (i.e., holding the baby in a meaningful way to calm or soothe the baby) toward the simulated crying infant served as the dependent variable.
- For example, the coding scheme included the amount of time (in seconds) that participants spent holding or playing with the infant's hands or feet as well as patting or rubbing the child's face, arm, and/or back).



**RealCare Baby 3
(Infant Simulator)**

Discussion

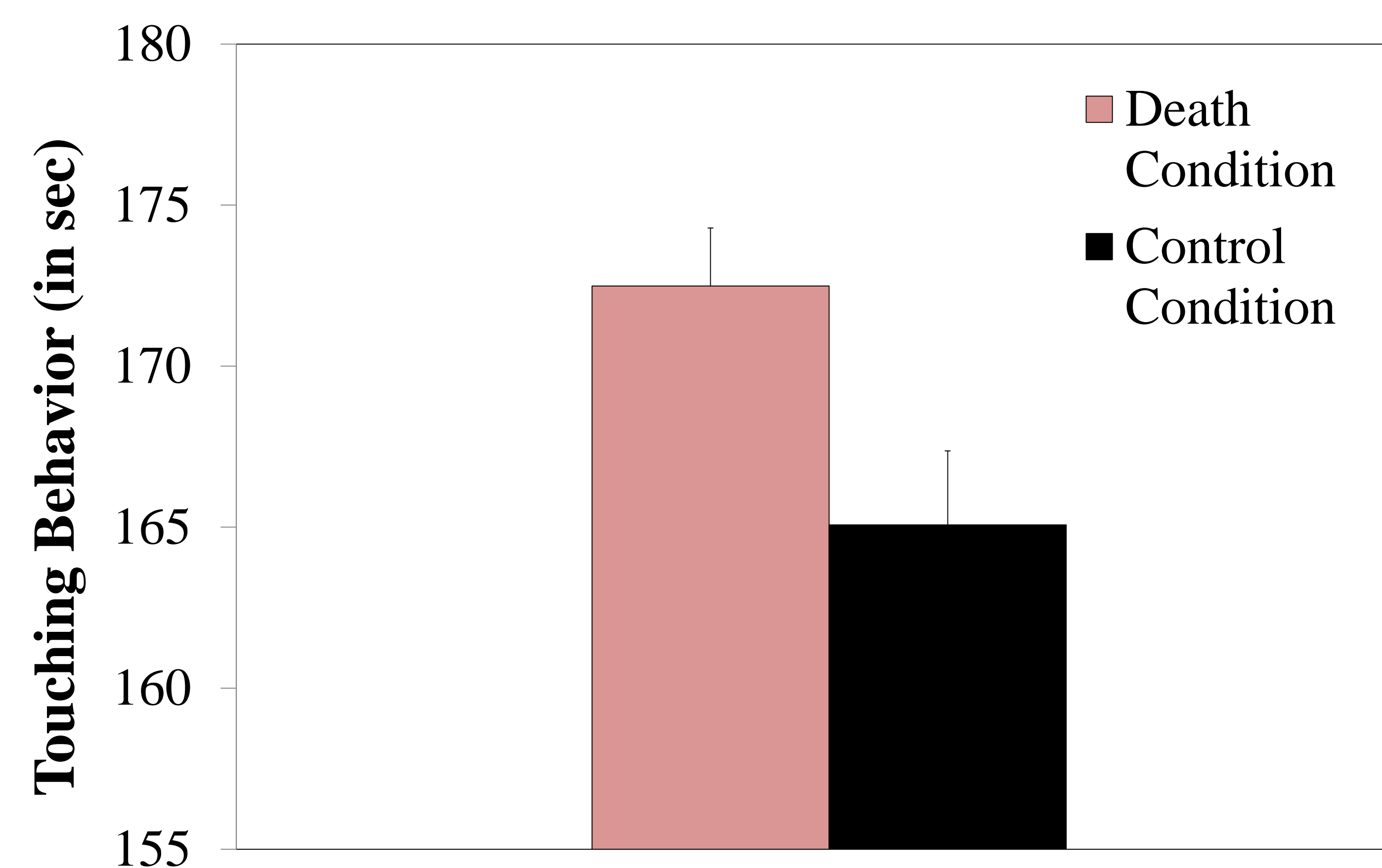
- The present study examined whether reminders of death increase caregiving behaviors. Based on previous research (Wisman & Goldenberg, 2005; Zhou et al., 2009), it was hypothesized that individuals would engage in greater caregiving (i.e., touch) toward a simulated crying infant following reminders of mortality versus a control.
- The results revealed that, in comparison to the control condition, reminders of death led participants to engage in a greater degree of caregiver-based touching behaviors while interacting with a simulated crying infant.
- These initial findings suggest that people may display more optimal parenting behavior in the real world when thoughts of mortality are salient.

Method

- Participants consisted of 120 undergraduates from Texas Christian University (83 female; age range 18-46, $M_{age} = 19.30$) who received course credit for their participation.
- Persons were exposed to a mortality salience manipulation in which they were randomly assigned to complete 15 True/False items relating to their fear of death (e.g., "I am very much afraid to die") or fear of public speaking (e.g., "I am very much afraid to speak in public).
- Everyone took part in a simulated baby paradigm to assess participants' responses to an infant doll that was programmed (wirelessly) to begin crying inconsolably (Rutherford, Goldberg, Luyten, Bridgett, & Mayes, 2013). Crying continued for a total of 3 min (180 seconds).

Results

An independent *t*-test revealed a significant effect of condition on touching behavior, $t(120) = 2.04, p = .04, d = 0.37$, with participants in the death condition engaging in greater touching behaviors while interacting with a simulated crying infant ($M = 172.49, SD = 13.12$) than those in the control condition ($M = 165.07, SD = 25.53$).



The purpose of the present research was to examine whether people display more behaviors associated with responsive caregiving following reminders of mortality. Participants were randomly assigned to complete items relating to their fear of death or public speaking (the control condition). Following this, everyone took part in a simulated baby paradigm to assess participants' responses to a simulated infant doll that was programmed (wirelessly) to begin crying inconsolably. The results revealed that, in comparison to the control condition, reminders of death led participants to engage in a greater degree of caregiver-based touching behaviors while interacting with a simulated crying infant.