



When Yesterday Haunts Tomorrow

The Ineffective Anxiety-Buffering Mechanisms on Well-Being and Psychological Disorders in Traumatized Individuals

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INTRODUCTION

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction are strongly linked to poor psychological well-being later in life.
- Studies show that people who have experienced more ACEs tend to report higher levels of depression, lower life satisfaction, and reduced self-esteem. Unresolved trauma from these early experiences can also make it harder to manage emotions and may disrupt a person's sense of meaning, safety, and identity.
- Terror Management Theory (TMT) helps explain how people handle the awareness of their own mortality. According to TMT, people use psychological defenses, like believing in cultural values and maintaining self-esteem, to protect themselves from anxiety about death. However, trauma can weaken these defenses. For example, when someone experiences something overwhelming like childhood abuse or violence, it may shake their sense of meaning and control, making it harder to rely on those usual coping strategies.
- This study will explore how ACEs relate to fear of death, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Understanding these relationships can help identify how early trauma impacts long-term psychological well-being and highlight ways to support people who have experienced trauma.
- It is hypothesized that participants with higher levels of ACEs will:
 - Report greater fear of death.
 - Report lower self-esteem and life satisfaction.
 - Show more symptoms of depression.

METHOD

Procedure:

- MTurk Participants ($N = 323$; $n = 134$ male; 85.8% Caucasian; $M_{\text{Age}} = 40.48$, $SD = 11.75$).
- The study used a remote, cross-sectional, correlational design based on a self-report survey.

Measures:

- Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire – to assess childhood trauma.
- Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale – to measure fear of death.
- Satisfaction with Life Scale – to measure life satisfaction.
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale – to assess self-esteem.
- Beck Depression Inventory – to assess depressive symptoms.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Results demonstrated that ACEs was no significantly related to a higher fear of mortality, $p = .355$.

Hypotheses 2 & 3: Higher ACEs was associated with lower life satisfaction, self-esteem, and higher depression, $ps \leq .007$.

Greater fear of death was also related to reduced self-esteem and more depression, $ps \leq .029$.

Correlations		ACES	Fear of Death	Life Sat.	Self Esteem	Depression
ACES	Pearson Correlation	1	.052	-.150**	-.184**	.385**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.355	.007	<.001	<.001
	N	322	322	322	322	322
Fear of Death	Pearson Correlation	.052	1	-.051	-.145**	.122*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.355		.364	.009	.029
	N	322	322	322	322	322
Life Sat.	Pearson Correlation	-.150**	-.051	1	.661**	-.566**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.364		<.001	<.001
	N	322	322	322	322	322
Self Esteem	Pearson Correlation	-.184**	-.145**	.661**	1	-.621**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.009	<.001		<.001
	N	322	322	322	322	322
Depression	Pearson Correlation	.385**	.122*	-.566**	-.621**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.029	<.001	<.001	
	N	322	322	322	322	322

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Questionnaire Items:

- ACEs Questionnaire (Meinck et al., 2017); 10 items; "Prior to your 18th birthday, did a parent or other adult swear at you or make you afraid you might be hurt?" (Yes/No).
- Fear of Death (Collett & Lester, 1969); 1 item; "I am very much afraid to die" (1 [Strongly disagree] to 7 [Strongly agree] Likert-type scale).
- Self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965); 1 item; "I have high self-esteem" (1 [Strongly disagree] to 7 [Strongly agree] Likert-type scale).
- Satisfaction with Life (Diener et al., 1985); 5 items; "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" (1 [Strongly disagree] to 7 [Strongly agree] Likert-type scale).
- Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961); 21 items; "I feel I am a complete failure as a person" (1 [Strongly disagree] to 4 [Strongly agree] Likert-type scale).

CONCLUSION

- Our findings support the idea that ACEs are related to lower life satisfaction and self-esteem, and higher depression.
 - However, ACEs were not significantly related to fear of death. This suggests that fear of death may not always be how people respond to early trauma.

Potential Limitations:

- This study used a self-report survey with MTurk participants. MTurk made it possible to gather a large and diverse sample quickly and at a low cost, but the results may not fully apply to the general population.
- All data came from self-report measures, which can lead to biased or inaccurate responses.
- This research does not show a causal relationship between ACEs and fear of death.
- Fear of death may not have been accurately measured. We used a single-item measure to reduce participant fatigue and keep the overall survey short. While this approach made the survey more manageable, it may have missed important aspects of fear of death that a full scale would capture.

Future Directions:

- Future research should address current limitations by using broader samples and more detailed, validated scales.
- We also plan to explore whether ACEs increase fear of death, and whether that, in turn, lowers well-being. This could be tested using a mediation model to better understand how these factors are connected.

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