



SYSTEMS ARCHITECTURE FOR THE HUMAN MIND

LOG ID	BOOK REFERENCE	RCT FILTER	CONFIDENCE TIER
SEC D.5	DIRECTORY D: THEORETICAL SANDBOX - END-OF-LIFECYCLE THEORIES (Receiver Hypothesis)	OFF	CONSENSUS

AUDITED CLAIM

SILICON LOG (MORTALITY SALIENCE)

SYSTEMS MODEL — AS STATED IN THE BOOK

Clinically, chronic death anxiety and **mortality salience** act as a persistent **cognitive load** that depletes self-regulatory resources; this existential stress reliably triggers **defensive responding**, which frequently manifests as materialistic resource hoarding and heightened vigilance toward interpersonal threats.

VALIDATION QUERY

Does chronic death anxiety or mortality salience increase cognitive load, defensive resource hoarding, and perceived interpersonal threats?

EMPIRICAL FINDING

Existential psychology and Terror Management Theory establish that chronic death anxiety and mortality salience act as a persistent **cognitive load**, actively depleting the brain's self-regulatory resources. According to Terror Management Theory, this existential background stress reliably triggers **defensive psychological responding**, which frequently manifests as materialistic resource hoarding, worldview defense, and heightened vigilance toward interpersonal social threats.

PRIMARY ANCHORS

- Burke et al., 2010, Personality and Social Psychology Review
- Kasser & Sheldon, 2000, Psychological Science

ABOUT THIS RECORD

Each claim in the book is decompiled from its IT metaphor into a naked, falsifiable scientific claim, then anchored to a **primary peer-reviewed source**. Claim and anchor are queried against the Consensus academic database (200M+ papers) under a fixed protocol — top-tier **Q1/Q2 journals only**, preprints excluded, human studies only. If a hypothesis fails the audit, the build is rejected: the AI generates the syntax; the peer-reviewed grid validates the physics.

CONFIDENCE TIERS

- CONSENSUS** ◀ **this log** — broadly established, highly replicated mechanics.
- EMERGING** — plausible, actively researched; no universal consensus yet.
- EXPERIMENTAL** — contested, extrapolated, or purely theoretical.

RCT FILTER — Controlled Studies is ON for interventions (a forced action must beat a control) and OFF for mechanisms (so foundational neuroscience isn't blocked).

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Yes, mortality salience and death anxiety generally increase defensive responses, but evidence is mixed across outcomes.

1. Introduction

Chronic death anxiety and mortality salience do not produce one uniform response. Across this corpus, the strongest and most replicated effect is increased defensive responding: reminders of death reliably increase worldview defense and self-esteem-protective behavior, with a moderate meta-analytic effect size, and these responses often generalize into control-seeking, materialism, ingroup defense, and threat-focused attention (Burke et al., 2010; Fritzsche et al., 2008). Evidence for increased cognitive burden is also substantial: coping with death-related thoughts draws on self-regulation, high cognitive load disrupts suppression of death thoughts, and mortality reminders can impair later self-control performance (Arndt et al., 1997; Gailliot et al., 2006; Greenberg et al., 2000).

The other two parts of the question are less uniform. Resource-hoarding and materialistic acquisition often increase after mortality reminders, including greedier harvesting and stronger materialism, and death anxiety predicts panic buying during COVID-19, but some studies also find more prosocial spending and donation under mortality salience (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Bentall et al., 2020; Arendsen et al., 2025). Perceived interpersonal threat also tends to increase in vulnerable groups, especially as heightened vigilance to threatening social cues and greater aggression toward worldview dissenters, but some mortality-threat studies instead report reduced competition or stronger affiliation motives (Finch et al., 2015; Plusnin et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2021).

Does chronic death anxiety or mortality salience increase cognitive load, defensive resource hoarding, and perceived interpersonal threats?

Requires at least 5 papers that directly answer your question. Try adjusting your query to find more papers.

FIGURE 1 Research consensus on death anxiety defensive responses

The literature supports a yes for defensive responding overall, a moderate yes for cognitive load, and more mixed yeses for hoarding and interpersonal threat (Burke et al., 2010; Menzies et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2025).

2. Methods

This Deep Search ran over more than 170 million research papers indexed in Consensus, drawing from Semantic Scholar, PubMed, and other sources. The workflow began from the user's question, expanded it into six search groups covering foundational theory, the three focal outcomes, adjacent constructs, critiques and replications, and contextual moderators, then crawled citations from seed papers to identify additional relevant work.

A total of 4,166 papers were initially identified from direct searches, with 1,678 more discovered through citation crawling. Machine-learned relevance filtering screened 240 papers, retained 160 as eligible, and selected the top 50 for inclusion in this synthesis.

Search Strategy

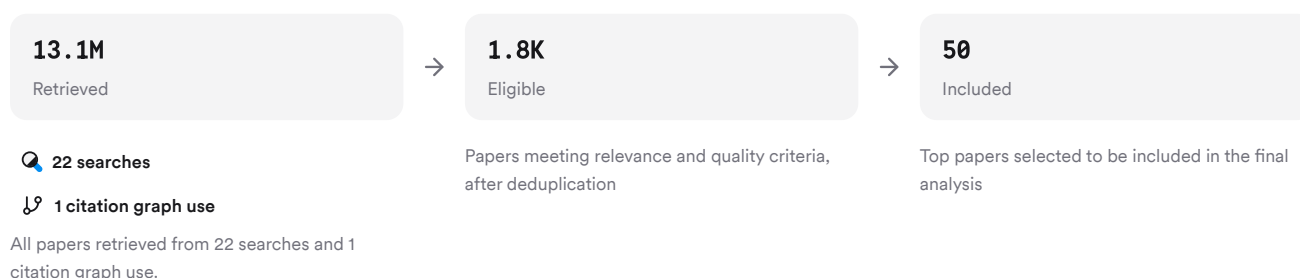


FIGURE 2 Deep search screening and inclusion flow

Searches combined mortality salience, death anxiety, cognitive load, hoarding, social threat, replication, and cultural moderation across human studies.

3. Results

3.1 Key Papers

Three papers anchor this literature because they establish the overall mortality-salience effect, its cognitive mechanism, and its resource-hoarding extension. Burke et al. provides the foundational meta-analysis, Arndt et al. tests the cognitive-load mechanism directly, and Kasser and Sheldon shows mortality salience spilling into greed and resource consumption (Burke et al., 2010; Arndt et al., 1997; Kasser & Sheldon, 2000).

Paper	Summary
(Fritzsche et al., 2008)	Moderate overall defensive effect, $r = .35$ (Burke et al., 2010)
(Gailliot et al., 2006)	High load triggers immediate death-defense activation (Arndt et al., 1997)
(Nia et al., 2016)	Mortality cues increased greed and resource harvesting (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000)

FIGURE 3 Foundational papers anchoring this literature

3.2 Cognitive Load

Mortality-related cognition appears to consume regulatory resources rather than simply co-occur with distress. High cognitive load causes death-thought suppression to fail, producing immediate death-thought accessibility and worldview defense instead of the usual delayed pattern (Arndt et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2000). More broadly, managing mortality threat requires self-regulation: people lower in trait or state self-control show more death-related thoughts and anxiety, and writing about death worsens later performance on unrelated self-regulation tasks (Gailliot et al., 2006). Similar load-sensitive suppression appears outside standard mortality primes: thinking about cancer increased death-thought accessibility under high cognitive load and reduced self-exam intentions when suppression was disrupted (Arndt et al., 2007). Protective traits such as mindfulness and humility blunt these resource costs by reducing suppression and preventing self-control depletion after death reminders (Niemic et al., 2010; Kesebir, 2014).

3.3 Resource Hoarding

Dimension	Evidence For Increase	Counterpattern	Citations
Materialism	Higher after death reminders	Some intrinsic-goal findings	(Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Arendsen et al., 2025)
Greed/resource extraction	Greedier, more harvesting	Not tested in many replications	(Kasser & Sheldon, 2000)
Panic buying	Death anxiety predicts over-purchasing	Mostly crisis-context data	(Bentall et al., 2020)
Hoarding vs sharing	Anxiety linked to more hoarding	Positive attitudes reduce hoarding	(Mishra et al., 2022)

Dimension	Evidence For Increase	Counterpattern	Citations
Consumer responses overall	Small positive pooled effect	Heterogeneous outcomes	(Arendsen et al., 2025)

Resource hoarding is supported, but less cleanly than worldview defense. Experimental work shows mortality salience can increase greed, financial striving, and resource extraction (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000). In naturalistic pandemic data, death anxiety and threat perception both predict over-purchasing and hoarding (Bentall et al., 2020; Tse et al., 2021). But the consumer meta-analysis finds only a small overall effect and emphasizes inconsistent outcomes, including prosocial spending and donations in some studies (Arendsen et al., 2025).

3.4 Interpersonal Threat

Perceived interpersonal threat tends to rise most clearly when the outcome is vigilance toward threatening people or defense against worldview violators. Socially anxious participants exposed to mortality salience showed stronger initial attention to threatening faces, indicating heightened early vigilance to social threat (Finch et al., 2015). Reviews of TMT research also summarize more aggression toward worldview dissenters, harsher moral judgments, and stronger ingroup defense after mortality salience (Plusnin et al., 2018; Chew & Yap, 2021). Mortality salience effects are especially large on people-related attitudes and can operate through control-restoration motives (Burke et al., 2010; Fritzsche et al., 2008).

The interpersonal picture is not uniformly hostile, however. Close relationships often buffer death-related anxiety, and mortality salience can intensify affiliative or conformity motives rather than antagonism (Plusnin et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2025). One dyadic EEG study even found attenuated competition and slightly increased cooperation under mortality threat (Zhou et al., 2021).

Results Timeline

Mortality-salience research shows early mechanistic work, later domain expansion, and recent replication debate.

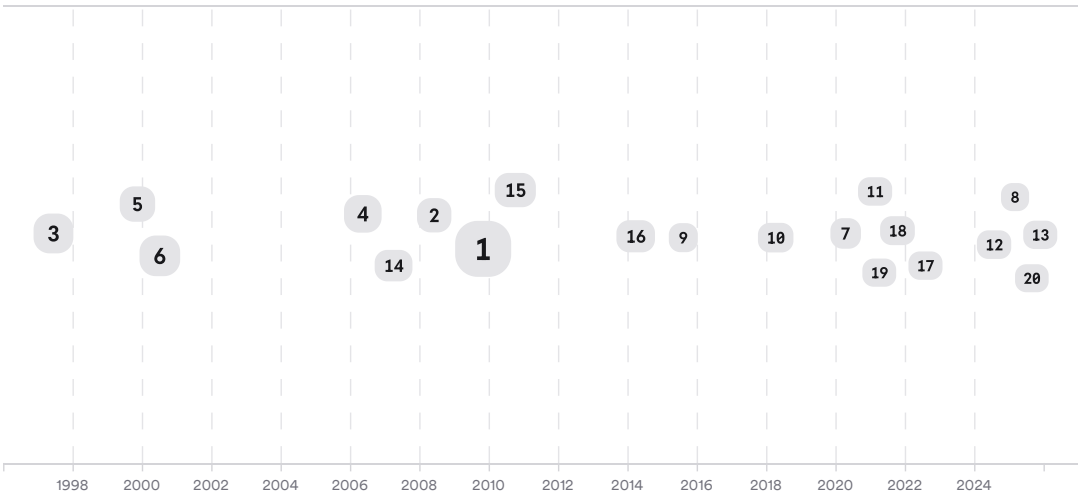


FIGURE 4 Timeline of mortality-salience findings; larger markers indicate more citations

The arc runs from classic terror-management experiments on worldview defense and suppression, through applications to consumer behavior, health anxiety, and relationships, to a newer phase emphasizing heterogeneity, bias correction, and failed replications (Burke et al., 2010; Menzies et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2025).

Top Contributors

Type	Name	Papers
Author	J. Greenberg	[616a3317a2965dd288e443c2b6ddb140][6a6e062a2a305ff0b066fe5889ad54d6] [a56dc5d765b256a09070a62ef5f5ad00][2b75e604f14f5f2fa2a21605f746e220] [ed6119dd372658b5be0b744b21b4f041]

Type	Name	Papers
Author	S. Solomon	[616a3317a2965dd288e443c2b6ddb140][6a6e062a2a305ff0b066fe5889ad54d6] [a56dc5d765b256a09070a62ef5f5ad00][2b75e604f14f5f2fa2a21605f746e220] [ed6119dd372658b5be0b744b21b4f041]
Author	A. Martens	[fad1863ee74456b1a676805909995cd7][71413d480edb5e2394fc3b3d730e93f7] [a56dc5d765b256a09070a62ef5f5ad00][f9ddc6378e375aff93b56753c638a46f]
Journal	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>	[616a3317a2965dd288e443c2b6ddb140][2b75e604f14f5f2fa2a21605f746e220] [ed6119dd372658b5be0b744b21b4f041][5b7f8e5fbad5583c87163c3225bac228] [fee728421619560792bfff0e2f1c73a][bb4c87f0e0e055a8ae86b0ffbce514cf]
Journal	<i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i>	[fad1863ee74456b1a676805909995cd7][34734596cb7457c8b7a47e49220a8a67] [8ca78b13544d54748ec86c24d63ec60b]
Journal	<i>Death Studies</i>	[93c7bfb7983b5cfab07b57e0d9a35d42][4ccc350051775ce6a4047c8776264b92] [38bd999c615f5106847f1286e89bcf52]

FIGURE 5 Authors and journals appearing most in corpus

4. Discussion

The best-supported part of the question is defensive responding. Across hundreds of experiments, mortality salience reliably increases worldview and self-esteem defense, though recent re-analyses argue the average effect is smaller and more heterogeneous than the classic literature implied (Burke et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2025). That pattern fits the cognitive mechanism literature: death reminders trigger suppression, and suppression depends on cognitive resources, self-control, and buffering traits such as self-esteem, intrinsic religiosity, mindfulness, and humility (Arndt et al., 1997; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997; Jonas & Fischer, 2006).

The cognitive-load claim is stronger than it first appears because it is supported by converging process evidence, not just by self-report anxiety. Mortality reminders impair later self-regulation, and high load unmasks immediate death-thought accessibility and defense (Gailliot et al., 2006; Greenberg et al., 2000). But this is not the same as saying chronic death anxiety always produces objective cognitive impairment; some clinical work finds links to perceived cognitive problems but not objective deficits (Brown et al., 2024; Eggen et al., 2020).

The resource-hoarding and interpersonal-threat claims are real but more conditional. Hoarding rises in crisis surveys and greed increases in lab paradigms, yet some mortality cues elicit prosocial giving instead, likely depending on available cultural scripts and buffers (Bentall et al., 2020; Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Jin & Ryu, 2021). Likewise, mortality salience can heighten vigilance to social threat and aggression toward dissenters, but it can also increase affiliation, conformity, or even reduce competition (Finch et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2021).

Many limitations remain. Null results have appeared in online, non-Western, and replication-focused studies, and recent reviews warn of publication bias, underpowered designs, and unstable moderators (Treger et al., 2021; Chew & Yap, 2021; Schindler et al., 2022).

Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Papers
Mortality salience increases defensive worldview and self-esteem responses	 Strong	Large cumulative literature and meta-analytic support, though heterogeneous	(Burke et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2025)

Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Papers
Coping with mortality reminders consumes cognitive/self-regulatory resources	 Strong	Multiple experiments show suppression depends on load and later self-control worsens	(Arndt et al., 1997; Gailliot et al., 2006)
Mortality salience can increase greed, materialism, and hoarding-related behavior	 Moderate	Supported by experiments and crisis surveys, but pooled consumer effects are small	(Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Arendsen et al., 2025)
Mortality salience heightens perceived interpersonal threat in vulnerable contexts	 Moderate	Clear for threat vigilance and worldview-dissent aggression, mixed for broader social behavior	(Finch et al., 2015; Plusnin et al., 2018)
Mortality salience uniformly increases hostility and hoarding across populations	 Weak	Contradicted by affiliation, prosociality, and replication failures	(Zhou et al., 2021; Treger et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2025)

FIGURE 6 Key claims and supporting evidence strength

5. Conclusion

Chronic death anxiety and mortality salience generally do increase defensive responding, and that includes stronger self-regulatory burden, more materialistic or hoarding-like behavior in some settings, and greater vigilance to interpersonal threat in susceptible groups. But the effects are not uniform: buffering resources, culture, clinical vulnerability, and situational framing often determine whether death awareness turns into greed, affiliation, hostility, or prosociality (Juhl & Routledge, 2016; Tse et al., 2021; Zeng & Tse, 2018).

Research Gaps

The clearest gap is that the three outcomes in the question are rarely tested together in the same study. The field is strongest on classic worldview defense, thinner on objective cognitive outcomes, and uneven on real-world hoarding and interpersonal threat perception (Arendsen et al., 2025; Brown et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2025).

Topic/Outcome	Experimental evidence	Longitudinal data	Clinical samples	Cross-cultural replication
Cognitive load/self-regulation	10	1	3	2
Resource hoarding/materialism	8	1	GAP	4
Interpersonal threat vigilance	5	GAP	3	2
Affiliation/prosocial alternatives	7	1	1	4

Open Research Questions

The most useful next studies would test boundary conditions directly rather than asking whether mortality salience “works” in general.

Question	Why
When do mortality reminders shift people toward hoarding versus prosocial sharing?	Competing findings suggest the same existential threat can produce opposite consumer responses depending on culture, norms, and buffering resources.
Does chronic death anxiety impair objective cognition, or mainly perceived cognitive functioning and self-regulation?	Clinical studies link death anxiety to perceived impairment, while experimental work shows regulatory depletion, leaving objective cognitive effects unresolved.
Which individuals convert mortality salience into interpersonal hostility versus affiliation?	Social anxiety, attachment, meaning, and cultural orientation all appear to moderate whether death awareness heightens threat vigilance or connection-seeking.

Overall, chronic death anxiety and mortality salience do tend to increase cognitive burden and defensive behavior, but hoarding and interpersonal threat effects are conditional rather than universal.

These search results were found and analyzed using Consensus, an AI-powered search engine for research. Try it at <https://consensus.app>. © 2026 Consensus NLP, Inc. Personal, non-commercial use only; redistribution requires copyright holders' consent.

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