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## CHAPTER

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# Transcending the Self: A Terror Management Perspective on Successful Aging

*It is true that the statement 'All men are mortal' is paraded in textbooks of logic as an example of a general proposition; but no human being really grasps it, and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality.*

—Sigmund Freud (1919, p. 242)

*... for the aging person death is no longer a general abstract fate, it is a personal event, an event that is near at hand.*

—Simone de Beauvoir (1948; p. 440)

The first signs that we are getting older are usually small, minor things noticeable only to ourselves—but they are monumental in their portent. It might be a slight stiffness when getting up after sitting for a long while, or perhaps the hint of a wrinkle off the corner of the eye, an eye having increasing difficulty deciphering menus. These subtle changes seem to increase exponentially as the body begins the slow road to deterioration. How frightening to discover the increasing limitations of the physical body—that which ties us to life. Not only are our own bodies bearing constant witness to the inevitability of our demise, but our experience with death, through the deaths of those we have known and loved, increases. For the aged, death is no longer an abstract concept for the future, but a concrete crisis of the present. The cord is weakening and we can feel it . . . we can watch it.

What role does this nearness to death play in the psychology of the elderly individual? How do the elderly come to grips with the inescapable reality that their days are numbered? Terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) posits that the knowledge of the inevitability of death is the underlying source from which all other fears are ultimately derived. From this perspective, the fear of death lies at the root

of a diverse array of seemingly unrelated behaviors that all function to provide the anxiety-assuaging meaning and value which people need to face life in spite of their awareness of their inevitable fate. Unfortunately, the latter years of life are not a time when meaning and value are particularly easy to come by, at least for members of contemporary Western societies. How, then, do the elderly cope with the undeniable fact that, for them, death lies just around the corner?

The present chapter attempts to address this issue. The growing literature on the psychology of aging makes it clear that people vary widely in how, and how well, they cope with their later years. Whereas for some, their final decades truly are the "golden years," a time marked by clear signs of increased psychological well-being, others lapse into hopelessness and depression. This suggests that, at least in some cases, wisdom may indeed come with age. There may be lessons to be learned from the elderly from which even the young can benefit.

Our goal is to bring our general perspective as social psychologists, and our unique perspective as researchers of terror management theory, to the role of awareness of the inevitability of death in aging. While we are novices in the area of aging, as we are not developmental psychologists by training, it is our belief that important insights into the psychology of aging and the processes underlying terror management theory can be achieved via this preliminary synthesis of these two approaches. We will start by providing a brief overview of terror management theory and research. We will then discuss how the structure and content of contemporary Western cultures conspire to reduce the usefulness of the strategies for coping with the inevitability of death that sustain people through the early and middle years of life. Finally, we will use terror management theory to develop a model of the psychological adjustments that can lead to both successful and less successful aging.

## Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1991), inspired by the work of the late cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1962, 1971, 1973), proposes that the human fear of death results from our uniquely human ability to self-reflect. We are able to conceive of ourselves in the past, present, and future, which inevitably thrusts upon us the knowledge of our own inescapable demise. This knowledge is terrifying because it exists simultaneously with the instinctual drive for continued survival that we share with all animals. This paradox, the knowledge of our own mortality coupled with a primal desire for continued life, creates the potential for paralyzing terror. The management of this terror becomes our lifelong vocation.

How might this paralyzing terror be managed? Clearly, we are skilled death-deniers, adept at certain defensive strategies that protect us from this terror. We do not, on the whole, dwell on the infinite variety of ways we could "buy the farm" or ruminate that at any moment it might be our time to "check out." In fact, we label those who do obsess on such morbid thoughts with various forms of psychopathology. However, given that we profoundly desire to survive, and realistically

could "go" at any moment, isn't it a wonder that we don't spend more time obsessing about this rather unpleasant reality?

Terror management theory proposes that we use our shared systems of value and beliefs, our cultural worldviews, to imbue our random, chaotic world with order and meaning. These worldviews provide predictable systems of rewards and punishments that enable us to perceive the world as controllable, fair, and just. Cultural constructions (e.g., calendars, laws, religion, mores, values, and roles) contribute to our efforts to command and rule our universe. As such, we use the cultural worldview to instill order in the chaos: to give our world meaning and to define our place in that world.

The cultural worldview also provides the recipe for immortality. Some form of promise of symbolic or literal immortality is a universal feature of all cultural belief systems. By following the guidelines set forth by the worldview, we can be assured of remembrance in the history books, academic journals, or the Fortune 500. These concrete symbols of the self remind others, and remind ourselves, of our existence and life's worth. They provide us with a sense that the self will continue long after our physical body has withered and turned to dust. We are also often promised literal immortality by our worldviews. Success in meeting the standards of the worldview over a lifetime is rewarded with entrance and exaltation in heaven or reincarnation as a more enlightened being; failure in this regard results in damnation to the inferno, or perhaps reincarnation as a cockroach. The pervading theme in these cultural conceptions of reality is that there is a way to continue to *be*. This existence might be in an altered form, as in the Buddhist conception of becoming one with the universe, but it is existence nonetheless. For this reason we cling fiercely and defensively to our belief systems; they provide the formula for immortality, for continued being, both literal and symbolic.

These cultural worldviews contain the standards for good, appropriate, and valued behavior, the prerequisites for immortality. By successfully meeting these standards, by fulfilling our role in this socially orchestrated world, we feel of value and are able to derive self-esteem. It is this self-esteem that provides our primary barrier against the paralyzing fear of non-being. It is an interesting paradox: the valued "self" is created as a defense against the fear of death, yet it is the loss of this "self" that makes death especially terrifying. According to TMT, self-esteem, therefore, is an indirect result of the fear of death; without the knowledge of our own impending nonbeing we would not be driven to establish meaning in life and value in ourselves. Our views of the world, our value systems, and our successes in meeting the standards that follow from these values are essential defenses against the knowledge of our own mortality. It follows, then, that threats to these vital defenses, our worldview, or our valued place in it, would be especially threatening and would result in vigorous attempts to bolster or affirm our view of ourselves and the world.

## Two Distinct Modes of Defense Against the Fear of Death

Terror management research has consistently shown that reminders of our mortality make us especially defensive of our cultural worldviews and our self-esteem

(for a review, see Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). This defensiveness may take the form of seeking support, consensus, and inclusion from others who share our beliefs, but it can also lead to derogating and aggressing against those whose beliefs differ. That death would exaggerate intergroup conflict, and may be ultimately responsible for it, seems like quite a theoretical leap. Wouldn't one defend against death anxiety in more "death-focused" ways?

The inevitability of death is certainly not a thought upon which people enjoy dwelling. Individuals who report high levels of death anxiety are more distressed and less satisfied with life than those who report lower levels of death anxiety (White & Handal, 1991). People defend against their knowledge of death in a variety of direct threat-focused ways, by suppressing death-related thoughts, overestimating the amount of time they have left, and underestimating their susceptibility to disease and disaster. (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). They also tend to distance themselves from those who are ill by describing themselves as not like "those people who get cancer" (Pyszczynski et al., 1995). These defenses are proximal; they occur when thoughts of death are in current focal consciousness and they have a direct and logical connection to the problem of death. However, defenses of this sort have clear limitations in that it is impossible to successfully deny the inevitability of death. Although good genes, proper nutrition, and a healthy lifestyle might buy us an additional decade or two of life, they do nothing to undermine the inescapable reality that death is inevitable. Just as we know our names regardless of whether we are currently thinking of them or not, we *know* that death is an inevitable fact of life, regardless of what thoughts we might be currently entertaining in focal consciousness.

The terror management defenses of finding meaning in the cultural worldview and value in ourselves function to assuage the potential for terror, which this knowledge creates. These are distal defenses, in the sense that they bear no direct semantic or logical connection to the problem of death. (They help us cope with our unconscious knowledge of the inevitability of death by enabling us to view ourselves as valuable contributors to an eternal meaningful reality. By maintaining faith in our cultural worldviews and the valuable roles that we play within this context, we are able to keep thoughts of death safely outside of consciousness. Indeed, recent research has shown that defending one's cultural worldview reduces the accessibility of death-related thoughts. The pursuit of self-esteem and faith in our cultural worldviews increase as the accessibility of death-related thoughts increases (even if such thoughts have been made accessible without the individual's awareness using subliminal death primes; Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997), and function to keep the accessibility of such thoughts as low as possible. Once such thoughts enter consciousness, these distal defenses are discontinued in favor of the more proximal defenses that attack the problem of death in a more head-on fashion.

### **Empirical Support for Terror Management Theory**

To date, well over 80 separate experiments conducted in 5 countries have provided empirical support for TMT. This research has been focused on two major

hypotheses and their corollaries.

The anxiety-buffer hypothesis states that, to the extent that a psychological structure provides protection against anxiety, then strengthening that structure should reduce one's proneness to exhibit anxiety and anxiety-related thoughts and behavior in response to reminders of what one is afraid of. Research has shown that high self-esteem, both dispositional and situationally induced, leads to lower levels of physiological arousal and self-reported anxiety while watching a death-related video or anticipating a painful electric shock (Greenberg, Solomon et al., 1992) and reduces cognitive distortions designed to deny one's vulnerability to an early death (Greenberg et al., 1993). High self-esteem has also been shown to eliminate the effects that reminders of one's mortality otherwise produce on the tendency to defend one's cultural worldview (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Other studies have shown that both boosts to self-esteem and defense of one's cultural worldview reduce the increase in the accessibility of death-related thoughts produced by priming thoughts of death (Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Simon, 1997; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997).

The vast majority of terror management research has been focused on the mortality salience hypothesis, which states that, to the extent that a psychological structure provides protection against anxiety, then reminding people of the source of their anxiety should lead to increased need for that structure and increased tendencies to defend it against threats. These studies have operationalized reminders of death in a variety of ways, including open-ended questions about death, death anxiety scales, graphic videos of fatal auto accidents, proximity to a funeral home, and subliminally presented death-related words. They have consistently shown that mortality salience leads to more favorable evaluations of people and ideas that support one's worldview and more unfavorable evaluations of people and ideas that threaten one's worldview.

To cite just a few examples, mortality salience has been shown to lead to increased liking for those who praise their worldview and decreased liking for those who criticize it (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990), increased liking for and behavioral approach toward ingroup members and decreased liking for and behavioral avoidance of outgroup members (e.g., Ochsman & Mathy, 1993), harsher punishments for moral transgressors and higher reward recommendations for those who uphold moral principles (e.g., Florian & Mikulincer, 1998a; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), and increased aggression against attitudinally dissimilar others (McGregor et al., 1998). Research has also shown that mortality salience increases consensus estimates for important attitudes (Pyszczynski et al., 1996), optimal distinctiveness striving (Simon et al., 1997), and discomfort when treating a culturally valued object with disrespect (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995). More recent research has shown that mortality salience also increases self-esteem striving, in the form of increased risk-taking among those who value risk (Ben-Ari, Florian, & Mikulincer, 1999), increased identification with the physical body among those high in body self-esteem (Goldenberg, McCoy, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), and increased tolerance among those committed to this value (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992).

The effects of mortality salience appear to be specific to the problem of death. Parallel conditions in which subjects are induced to think about other aversive events, such as failing a test in an important class, giving a speech in front of a large audience, being socially ostracized, being paralyzed, or experiencing intense physical pain, do not produce parallel effects on worldview defense and self-esteem striving (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Solomon et al., 1997; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994; Greenberg, Porteus et al., 1995; Schimel et al., 1999).

In sum, the evidence available to date provides strong and consistent evidence that people are protected against death-related concerns by maintaining faith in their cultural worldviews and a sense of personal value within the context of their worldviews. High levels of self-esteem and faith in one's cultural worldview have been shown to lead to lower levels of anxiety, anxiety-related behavior, and access to death-related thoughts. Reminders of one's mortality have been shown to lead to increased commitment to and defense of one's cultural worldview and increased self-esteem striving. Taken as a whole, the empirical evidence provides compelling support for the TMT view that people need self-esteem and faith in their cultural worldviews because of the protection against death-related concerns that these psychological structures provide.

## Developmental Changes in the Cultural Anxiety Buffer

It would be naïve to presume that terror management processes are the same at every stage of life. Unfortunately, very little research has attempted to address the effect of development on terror management processes or on the terror itself. In fact, most studies to date have utilized the subject pool of convenience: undergraduates. Thus, the exploration of TMT processes has been focused primarily on the 18-24 age range. A few notable exceptions, in the lab and field, with broader age ranges have allowed us to comfortably conclude that these processes are not age specific and do in fact occur from childhood to old age. For example, the very first published terror management study demonstrated the effect of mortality salience on the amount of bond recommended for a woman accused of prostitution, in a sample of middle-aged municipal court judges (Rosenblatt et al., 1989, Study 1). In addition, the field experiments in which participants were interviewed either in front of or 100 meters away from a funeral home used participants ranging in age from 13 to 80 (Pyszczynski et al., 1996).

Nonetheless, we know that cognitive abilities change over the course of the life span (e.g., Piaget, 1952; Salthouse, 1998). It is also obvious that the proximity to death increases over the life span. It seems reasonable to suggest, then, that to the extent that TMT processes are influenced by underlying cognitive abilities and mortality salience, these processes might be differentially manifested across the life span.

A recent investigation of TMT processes in children illustrates the importance of sophisticated cognitive abilities in the use of the distal defenses (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998b). Ingroup preference and outgroup derogation in response to mortality salience was found in children as young as 11 years old. As in research with adult samples (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996), this

effect was particularly strong among children with lower self-esteem. However, younger children (7-year-olds), did not respond with differential preference for an ingroup over an outgroup child. These children responded to mortality salience by rejecting the other child—regardless of ingroup or outgroup membership. Clearly both age groups were affected by thoughts of death; however only the older children, perhaps because of their cognitive maturity, sought refuge in the cultural worldview. (For an excellent developmental account of cultural worldview defense see Florian and Mikulincer, 1998b.)

That worldview defenses develop and change over the course of life is intriguing, and leads us to examine the form such processes might take in the aged; preliminary evidence indicates that age does indeed influence how people respond. McCoy, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (1999) had elderly participants ranging in age from 57–87 report their subjective life expectancy following a mortality salience or dental pain control induction. As neurotics have been shown to be a group especially defensive following reminders of death (Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, McCoy, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), our elderly participants also completed a scale measuring neuroticism before the manipulation of mortality salience. Based on Erikson's (e.g., 1985) notion that the very end of life is fundamentally different than other stages, we were inclined to expect differences in young-old and old-old participants. However we had no a priori expectations about the specific pattern of differences that might be obtained. Our general prediction was that in highly neurotic individuals, who tend to have weak anxiety-buffers, mortality salience should lead to especially high life expectancy estimates. This prediction was partially supported. Among younger participants (ages 57–72), those high in neuroticism exaggerated their subjective life expectancy following mortality salience, whereas those low in neuroticism actually exhibited decreased subjective life expectancy. However, the older (ages 73–87) participants reported significantly lower subjective life expectancies following mortality salience regardless of level of neuroticism. These findings suggest that, whereas the young-old high in neuroticism need to perceive that death is far in the future, the low neurotic young-elderly and the old-old in general may have achieved greater acceptance of death. Therefore, following mortality salience, they become particularly unlikely to perceive death as far off. Although extensive theoretical and empirical inquiry into the influence of mortality salience on aging and the aged has yet to be undertaken, these findings will hopefully serve as a first step in this direction.

What role does the nearness to death play in the ability to suppress thoughts of death, and death anxiety, by clinging to a worldview from which we derive self-esteem? Will these processes be affected by the salience of our own declining bodies and the deaths of our peers and loved ones? In terror management terms, what effect does this increased mortality salience have on the defensive processes that we use to cope with the inevitability of death?

### **The Plight of the Elderly: A Grim Picture?**

The defensive buffers used in early and mid-life seem likely to become less effective in managing our fear of death as we grow older. Our cultural worldviews are

effective because we believe them to be right and true and we believe that others do, or should, agree with this assessment. However, as we age, the correctness and consensual nature of our cultural worldviews are inevitably challenged. As Esposito (1987) put it, the elderly are "... a dying breed, the remainder of a dwindling cohort. They represent a specific period of history and a worldview that is dying with them" (p. 69). The world is constantly changing, and as new worldviews emerge, it may be difficult for the elderly to find protection and solace in a worldview that seems to be fading with them. Furthermore, many standards of value, easily achieved in youth, may now be beyond reach. The body may simply be too slow or too weak to successfully perform its previous role. Although the elderly do not decline in intellectual ability or memory as drastically as was once believed, explicit memory is compromised with age and reaction time is increased (Salthouse, 1998). These declines may make achieving past standards more difficult.

Inability to achieve these standards is but one facet of the diminution of the defensive structures that served one well earlier in life. The present youthful majority may no longer value the role for which the elderly person was lauded in their youth. This may be especially true for contemporary elderly who have witnessed a century of such rapid technological advancement that their roles may have become outdated even before they lost the ability to achieve them. Most observers seem to think that the pace of changes in science, technology, and cultural beliefs will only continue to accelerate in the years to come. In the past, the elderly could make use of the cultural worldview for its protective function up to the point of inability to achieve the standards for the role. This may hold true today for those elderly who reside in less technologically dependent parts of the world. Rural elderly have the advantage of a community that continues to value them because of their knowledge and close emotional attachments (Rowles, 1984). However it is becoming increasingly probable in this advancing technological age that many of the roles the elderly pursued earlier in life are on their way to obsolescence, making it increasingly difficult for the elderly to derive self-esteem from their cultural worldviews.

In this way, both sources of protection from the fear of nonbeing are compromised. How then is the elderly person to cope? The reality of one's own impending death is readily apparent; it is much less easily repressed or denied. Simultaneously, the changing times and a lack of ability to attain past standards have weakened the defenses, those that would repress and help us to deny death—the cultural worldview and self-esteem. The prognosis appears bleak; exposure to the "... Dread of ultimate nonbeing" seems certain (Erikson, 1985). A spiral into despair, neurosis, depression, and bitterness could all be predicted.

In experiments where these conditions—mortality salience and/or threats to self-esteem or the worldview—have been manipulated with relatively youthful participants, we have seen increases in defensiveness. This defensiveness has most often been linked to the cultural worldview, with threatened participants bolstering the worldview through derogation or aggression toward attitudinally dissimilar others. Does this imply that the elderly are likely to become increasingly defensive, bitter, and hostile as they grow older? This may indeed happen in some individuals. However, the difference for the elderly is that these threats are not an acute



state easily dealt with through defensive fortification of the worldview or self-esteem. On the contrary, the elderly face a chronic state of mortality salience coupled with a possibly lessened capacity to use the cultural worldview or resultant self-esteem to maximally protect the self. However, one has only to look to studies of the psychological well being of the elderly to know that the true prognosis is far from the grim picture we have just painted.

## The Psychological Resilience of Older Adults

Empirical support for increased psychological well-being among older adults is plentiful. The deterioration of the body and the increased exposure to the realities of death through the loss of loved ones does not appear to be linked to an increase in death anxiety. In fact, there is evidence that experience of death anxiety decreases over the course of the life span (Rasmussen & Brems, 1996). Older adults do not express more death anxiety than younger adults (Templer, Ruff, & Franks, 1971; Tate, 1982), and in some studies have been shown to exhibit lower death anxiety than younger adults (Devins, 1979; Cole, 1979). Thus the elderly do not appear to be living in a state of constant existential anxiety as one might expect from the age-associated increase in mortality salience.

Nor does chronically low self-esteem appear to be any more a problem for the elderly than for younger adults, as the grim picture painted above might predict. In fact, some studies suggest that the elderly may have higher self-esteem than the young (Dietz, 1996). For a group that might be expected to be spiraling into despair under the weight of increased mortality salience without the protective comfort of the cultural worldview, the elderly appear to be faring quite well. They report themselves as more content (Lawton, Kleban, & Dean, 1993) and as having better psychological well-being than the young (Blazer, Crowell, George, & Landerman, 1986). Despite the loss of significant correlates of life satisfaction, the elderly report no decline in life satisfaction (Diener & Suh, 1998), and have reported more satisfaction with present life than the young in some studies (Heckhausen, 1997). Clearly the elderly are not suffering from the combination of increased mortality salience and decreased effectiveness of the cultural worldview. How could this be?

One possibility is that, as with other abilities and skills, we simply get better at managing our death-related anxieties as we age. After all, the older one is, the more time one has had to perfect one's anxiety-buffering tactics. It is also possible, however, that the elderly have found alternative routes for self-esteem maintenance other than through the consensual worldview employed by younger adults. It may be that the elderly are not unaffected by the increase in mortality salience associated with aging, but rather, that this combination of increased mortality salience and decreased effectiveness of the typical modes of buffering anxiety leads to psychological transformations that leave the elderly better defended than they were in their youth. It is entirely conceivable that the elderly, in their accumulated wisdom, have found means of shielding themselves from terror that are more effective than the contingent sense of value provided by the worldview. Clearly this

would be adaptive. If terror management processes follow a developmental track, what would the end goal of such a track be? The end of the line should be the station that provides the best possible defense against the fear of nonbeing.

## □ Transcending the Self

"The greatest limitation for man is the self."

—Carl Jung (1961, p. 325)

Stepping back from our current focus on aging and simply attempting to imagine a better, more effective defense against the terror of death returns us to the original paradox that gave rise to the human existential dilemma in the first place. Terror management theory posits that the fear of death results from the conflict between the desire for continued life and the simultaneous knowledge that we will inevitably die. For most of our lives, we struggle valiantly to deny this terrifying reality. Successful aging may require a different approach to this paradox.

Clearly the elderly have not found effective means of escaping the inevitability of death. In fact, this inevitability becomes only more apparent as we age. As denial becomes increasingly difficult due to advancing age, this may force us to try new ways of coming to grips with the problem. What of acceptance, then? Several theorists have argued that acceptance of the inevitable is a form of exerting control over the uncontrollable (Aldwin, 1994; Brandtstaedter & Greve, 1994; Thome, 1992). Death is inevitable, yes, but one may be able to control one's psychological reaction to it. This form of control has been termed "secondary control" (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982) and there is evidence that the elderly are particularly adept at exerting this form of control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993). Perhaps the elderly are able to discover new means of coping that are more effective than denial and that enable them to accept the reality of their own impending death. Indeed, if one were able to eliminate the desire for continued existence of the self, the inevitable reality of death would no longer be threatening. This suggests that a better defense against the terror associated with nonbeing is to eliminate the desire to be a "being" . . . to come closer to accepting the inevitability of death.

The central point of our analysis is that the decreasing effectiveness of one's earlier means of coping, coupled with the increased salience of death that comes with advancing age, provide an impetus to psychological reorganization that ultimately functions to help the older adult cope with the nearness to death that is an inherent part of the later years of life. The reduced effectiveness of one's old modes of coping leave the elderly individual little choice other than to either change or suffer the consequences of facing death with an anxiety-buffer that is rapidly losing its effectiveness. Of course not everyone makes this transition, and those who do, make it to varying degrees of effectiveness. Although research shows that the average elderly individual is no worse off and perhaps even better off than his or her younger counterparts, there is great variability in how and how well people cope with the problems of advanc-

ing age and proximity to death. Depression, anxiety, and despair, and the problems that go with them, such as alcoholism, destructive anger, and health problems, are widespread among the elderly population. Successful aging requires a transformation of self to make one better able to cope with the different realities with which one is faced in later years.

Accepting the inevitability of death requires a fairly radical transformation of the self. One way to accomplish this is to loosen the connections between the self and aspects of life; after all, the tragedy of death is the loss of life. The gradual physical changes that accompany aging may contribute significantly to this process. Although not inevitable, the tendency for eyesight, hearing, smell, taste, and physical abilities in general to deteriorate may gradually reduce one's attachment to these components of life, thereby facilitating the process of letting go of life and accepting death.

Another aid in this process may be the gradual letting go of the self, for in death, along with life, the self is presumably lost. Of course this would not often entail literally losing the self. As we have argued elsewhere (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1998; see also Becker, 1969), the self is the mechanism through which humans achieve some measure of self-determination and control over their own fate. Without a self, we would be unable to engage in coherent purposeful behavior. What needs to be accomplished is a freeing of the self from dependence on social consensus and the social conception of reality put forth by the mainstream consensual cultural worldview. This is no simple task to accomplish. However, the difficulties that many elderly people have maintaining a sense of meaning and self-worth within the context of the mainstream worldview provides an impetus for such disengagement and reinvestment.

## □ The Process of Reinventing the Self

Like all developmental changes, the transformation of self that is needed to facilitate successful aging occurs slowly over an extended period of time. As the individual experiences difficulties maintaining security from his or her previously established defenses, s/he alternates between increasingly vigorous attempts to maintain the old structures and tentative forays into new ways of viewing the world and oneself. Whereas the early stages of this transformation are probably dominated by attempts to cling to one's old defenses, the latter stages reflect the emergence of new modes of construing self and reality that are used, tentatively at first, and later with greater confidence, to cope with the problem of approaching mortality. This is undoubtedly a highly individualized process, which proceeds differently for different individuals. As we noted above, many people may persist in clinging to their longstanding defenses and exhibit little in the way of meaningful psychological change. In the following paragraphs, we outline some of the tactics the maturing adult is likely to employ, with no implication of a rigid or universal developmental sequence that applies to all. These tactics feed on each other, in the sense that successful deployment of one often paves the way for more effective use of others.

## Defending One's Pre-existing Worldview

As suggested above, with advancing age, one's pre-existing conception of self and reality are likely to become less effective as buffers against anxiety, either because the aging individual is less able to meet the standards for the roles from which they had previously derived their value, or because, due to changing times, the cultural worldview they subscribe to is no longer the norm, and the role they fulfill is no longer valued. Most people are likely to initially respond to this threat with attempts to protect the existing anxiety buffer, perhaps by derogating the new order ("What's wrong with kids these days? Things were better back in my day") or striving harder than ever to demonstrate one's competence ("I'll show those young whippersnappers how to . . ."). We suspect that such behavior is especially prevalent among middle-aged and relatively young elderly individuals. These strategies might include various tactics for minimizing threats to the worldview, downward adjustment of the standards of the worldview to the realm of the attainable, and cognitive reframing of events to emphasize the positive aspects of one's competencies and situation.

## Minimizing Threat to the Cultural Worldview

By minimizing exposure to alternative viewpoints the aging individual is able to protect his or her worldview from the threat of dissenting opinion. If contact is limited to familiar others, and, within those familiar others, to those who agree with one's worldview, the elderly individual may continue to utilize their pre-existing shield and avoid protracted assaults to his or her worldview. Consistent with this possibility is evidence that people, increasingly, narrow their social networks as they get older (Carstensen, 1992). One perspective on this limiting of social contact is that the elderly are simply less mobile, that they are unable to sustain relationships due to inability to visit or receive visits. However, more recent research suggests that there may be a more strategic and motivational impetus for this limiting of the social network.

Socio-emotional selectivity theory, as proposed by Carstensen (1992), posits that the elderly "prune" their social network to keep rewarding relationships and discard less rewarding ones. From this perspective, the elderly select relationship partners based on the potential of the relationship to maximize positive affect and minimize negative affect (Carstensen, Gross, & Fung, 1998). To the extent that such affective consequences of relationships with others often reflect how the others impinge on one's worldview and self-esteem, this implies that the aging individual may be selectively narrowing his or her social network so as to maximize contact with those who support their anxiety-buffering conceptions of self and world and to minimize contact with those who threaten these conceptions. Research shows that older adults place more importance on anticipated affect when selecting relationship partners, whereas the young place more importance on information availability and reward potential of future contact (Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990). Research also shows that older adults, in contrast with the young, choose less confrontational responses to threat (Blanchard-Fields, Jahnke,

& Camp, 1995). This may be an active response calculated to reduce challenges to their worldview. It may be that the elderly are selecting their social relationships to maintain the validity of their worldview, simply choosing not to associate with those who disagree. When such contact does occur they avoid active confrontations.

This approach, pruning the social network, is a viable defense only to the extent that one no longer requires interaction with a wide range of other people. In the first half of life it is through our relationships with others that we are able to gather information needed to form and consolidate a self to protect us from terror. Without immersion in a large social network this process would be difficult. The older adult, on the other hand, is likely to have sufficient experience, both direct and through reflected appraisals from others, to have developed a reasonably confident conception of self and the world. Thus, as we age we are likely to require less and less information from others. For this reason, the elderly may be especially able to choose their social relationships not on the basis of the information they provide and their potential for future gain, but on the emotional support they offer in the present. Consequently, the use of this strategy of limiting one's social network and minimizing threat to the cultural worldview and self may be more viable for older adults than for younger ones.

### ***Downward Adjustment of Standards***

At all ages it is possible to adjust the standards of the cultural worldview to facilitate their attainment. Decreasing the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves has been shown to be a desirable and effective goal in psychotherapy (Horney, 1950; Rogers, 1954). Rogers used a Q-sort technique to demonstrate that people not only think better of themselves after therapy; they also reduce their ideal standards to more humanly attainable aspirations. Horney denounced unrealistically high standards for the self ideal as the "tyranny of the should" in the "search for glory" and urged movement to more attainable but nevertheless laudable standards for the self. By changing the expectations for a given role and thus rendering them more attainable, the older adult may be able to continue to derive self-esteem despite dwindling abilities. For example, for a young person, fulfillment of the role of 'teacher' may mean long hours spent on one's feet and endless grading of papers. However for an elderly person this role may be fulfilled by one-on-one tutoring. What it means to be a good teacher has changed; no longer is success based on the achievements of a classroom of students, but rather on the achievement of a single student. The role has been adjusted to meet the present capacities of the individual, thus facilitating the experience of success in meeting the role expectations. This approach, resetting goals to the realm of the attainable (Brandstaedter & Greve, 1994), is a strategy well documented in the elderly (Brandstaedter & Rothermund, 1994). As age increases, the individual may strategically choose goals that are more age appropriate and reduce the importance of goals that are no longer feasible (Heckhausen, 1997; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). These adjustments in goals may result in less discrepancy between the ideal self and the actual self (Ryff, 1991). As we age, and increasingly utilize this strategy, the discrepancy between our actual and ideal self continues to diminish.

Recall that our sense of value results from our comparison of the self to the contingencies of the worldview. To the extent that we are able to adjust the standards and, thereby, preserve our ability to meet these standards, we may continue to derive self-esteem from our long-held worldview. The clear implication of a decreasing discrepancy between our selves and our standards is a gradual rise in self-esteem. Why not use this strategy in youth? In youth, objective standards of success have real consequence. They determine our rate of pay and societal acceptance: both required commodities in youth. As we age, due to retirement we may no longer be paid for our role; we also may have pruned our social networks such that we no longer have to prove ourselves to earn acceptance as we did in youth. This strategy, too, becomes more viable as we age.

### ***Cognitive Reframing of Events***

Other strategies available to the elderly person to maintain and protect self-esteem are less dependent on one's social position and are used by individuals of all ages. However there is some evidence that the elderly make more use of certain strategies. The elderly are particularly adept at "downward social comparison" (Festinger, 1954; Wills, 1987), a process through which they compare themselves to those who are worse off, thus making their own situation, the happy lucky one. An unfortunate side effect of this outlook is the coincident tendency to hold those less fortunate responsible for their plight and thus avoid guilt for one's lucky position. Nevertheless, this process of comparing to those who are worse off can effectively serve self-evaluation needs (Hegelson & Taylor, 1993), and when utilized in response to threat, downward comparison has been shown to increase self-esteem (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). The elderly are more likely than the young to believe that they are "better off" than others of the same age (Heckhausen & Brim, 1997; Rickabaugh & Tomlinson-Keasey, 1997). This type of reframing seems particularly effective in maintaining psychological well-being and self-esteem in the face of aging (Heidrich & Ryff, 1993; Kleinke & Miller, 1998; Robinson-Whelen & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997). As long as the elderly individual believes they have it better than most, and that decline is inescapable, they can take comfort in their position of relative well-being.

A general tendency toward optimism is another defensive strategy commonly used by the elderly. The elderly report fewer negative emotional experiences (Gross, Carstensen, Pasupathi, & Tsai, 1997), are more likely to view situations from a positive angle (Heckhausen & Krueger, 1993), and are more likely to cognitively reinterpret an event to emphasize the positive aspects than the young (Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996). As a general defensive strategy, this propensity to "see the glass as half full" in even the most dire of circumstances must be of great comfort to the aging individual. However, prerequisites to such cognitive reinterpretation are both the acceptance that the event itself is unchangeable and the choice to interpret the event in a positive light. In younger years, the individual may react to such negative events with more of a confrontational style and be less prone to accept and consequently reinterpret the event. Vigilance for negative events and active confrontation with those who might be threatening may be adaptive in youth

because it increases one's ability to escape such threats when they occur or prevent them from happening altogether. Therefore, optimistic interpretations may be more commonly utilized by the elderly as a powerful and efficient strategy.

The strategies outlined above are just a few examples of the many ways the aging adult might struggle to maintain the protective function of self-esteem despite the age-related changes that he or she is experiencing. By minimizing exposure to dissenting opinions, redefining the standards for achieving the self-ideal, adjusting goals to the realm of the achievable, and reinterpreting events to emphasize their positive aspects, the elderly person is able to maintain, and perhaps increase self-esteem without relinquishing his/her hold on the cultural worldview. These strategies provide the foundation for further exploration of alternative defensive strategies against the fear of non-being. Armed with this protected self-esteem, the ability to accept and positively reinterpret inevitable events, and less reliance on the social world at large through trimmed social networks, the elderly individual may embark on the journey toward reconstructing the self.

### Attaining Independence from Social Validation

A critical transition in this journey involves attaining increasing independence from the need for social validation of one's self and worldview. Much of the anxiety and heartache of everyday life results from our dependence on the validation (or lack thereof) that we receive from others for maintenance of our conceptions of self and reality. Although most young people like to think of themselves as independent and free from needs for validation and approval from others, it is not until the later years of life that something approximating this ideal is possible for most people. Whereas it is essential for young people, who are building their identities, struggling to fulfill social roles, and striving to generally "make it" in society, to rely on others for feedback about the appropriateness of their attitudes and behaviors, this may be less necessary for older adults who have already established who they are, fulfilled a successful niche in life, and who may, in fact, be gradually becoming less essential for the day-to-day operation of social institutions. The defensive responses, discussed above, of distancing from the current vision of social reality, becoming more selective in one's social contacts, and reframing one's experience may be the first step in this gradual reduction in dependence on the opinions of others. These defensive tactics may set the stage for a more independent mode of functioning that leaves one's anxiety-buffering psychological structures more secure and less susceptible to threat—and therefore less in need of defense.

Of course *complete* independence from social validation is probably not attainable for most people at any point in life, nor would it be particularly desirable or adaptive. Social opinion is a powerful motivating force that helps keep individuals in line with the requirements of orderly group living. Reliance on social consensus for validation of self and worldview should be thought of as operating on a continuum, with most people falling somewhere in the middle, and those who occupy either extreme as likely to suffer negative psychological and social consequences. We are simply suggesting that with advancing age, many adults reduce their de-

pendence on others for such validation and move toward the independent end of the spectrum. This may be why some elderly individuals are seen as eccentric and idiosyncratic. Indeed, this reduced need for social consensus may help explain some behavior that might be labeled as senile. The point here is that although increasing independence from social validation can be a sign of successful adaptation to one's later years, taking this independence too far can be maladaptive and lead to social ostracism and perhaps institutionalization. Nonetheless, up to a point, decreased reliance on the opinions of others is likely to be associated with a more resilient buffer against anxiety, and consequently lessened defensiveness and better overall psychological functioning.

### Increased Individualization of One's Worldview

TMT assumes that each individual creates his or her individualized version of the cultural worldview by integrating the multitude of experiences to which they have been exposed. Thus, at least in theory, our worldviews have the potential for constant change as we integrate new experiences with existing structures. Of course, a constantly changing conception of self and reality would hardly be adaptive in most circumstances (cf., Swann, 1987) and, consequently, such flexibility and openness is relatively rare. Because of the defensive anxiety-buffering functions that these structures serve, people are highly committed to them and struggle valiantly to defend them against threats. Indeed, the bulk of the terror management literature documents the many ways in which reminders of our mortality increase our efforts to defend our conceptions of self and world against information that might change them.

However, with advancing age and decreased reliance on social consensus for validation, it may be possible to increase this flexibility and openness, and create a more individualized idiosyncratic conception of self and the world. One such individualized conception may be one of religion. Intrinsic religiousness and spirituality have been shown to become both more important as we age, and to be protective against the anxiety associated with thoughts of death (Wong, 1989; see Tomer & Eliason, Chapter 9, in this volume).

Although in our younger years conformity to social norms and acceptance of the consensually shared group vision of reality may be adaptive, in that it helps us establish social relationships, fulfill social roles, and generally maximize our potential for social and occupational success, this may be less necessary as we age because these things are already established and society's need for our services may be lessened. The decreased reliance on others for validation of our worldviews further facilitates the individualized construction of our own unique vision of reality that is more responsive to experience and less vulnerable to threat.

Humanistic psychologists, such as Maslow (1968), Rogers (1954), and more recently, Deci and Ryan (1980), have argued that the more an individual actively processes and integrates external values, norms, or other sources of information, and thus transforms them into their own unique conceptions, the greater his or her sense of freedom, self-determination, and general psychological well-being.



From these perspectives, a sense of self-determination and freedom is required for optimal psychological functioning, and people will go to great lengths to restore this sense of freedom when it is threatened (cf., Brehm, 1966). The literature on reactance documents the many ways in which people rebel against threats to their freedom (for a review, see Brehm & Brehm, 1981) which provides further support for the view that a subjective sense of self-determination is a highly valued and psychologically useful commodity.

## Self-Complexity, Integration, and the Life Review

Many developmental theorists have proposed that one of the tasks of aging is to undertake a "Life Review" wherein one evaluates the successes and failures of the past and attempts to integrate these experiences and derive a sense of meaning (Wong, 1989). From a terror management perspective, one would expect this increased meaning to provide added protection against anxiety. Consistent with this reasoning, research suggests that life review activity is indeed associated with lower death anxiety among the elderly (Fishman, 1992). In what specific ways might a review of one's past experiences protect the self from death anxiety?

The life review proposed by many theorists can be understood as an opportunity to increase self-knowledge and enhance self-understanding (Quackenbush & Barnett, 1995). This review entails a re-visiting of past selves, roles that were pursued in youth, increasing the complexity of the self and illustrating one's ability to derive self-esteem from a number of past roles. It may remind aging individuals that they have survived and prospered after many changes in the past, which may increase their hope that they can successfully adapt to the many changes with which aging faces them. It may also remind them of how truly varied people are, which should further reduce their dependence on social consensus for maintenance of their essential anxiety-buffering structures. Put simply, the life review may help one gain perspective on one's life and how it relates to other people and the world at large.

This self-understanding can be viewed as providing increased clarity and complexity of self-concept (Campbell, 1990; Linville, 1985), both of which have been shown to be associated with higher levels of psychological well-being. Clarity of self-concept is positively correlated with self-esteem (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallee, & Lehman, 1996); a review of the past may provide the information necessary for constructing a more stable, well-defined self-concept. Cognitive complexity has been shown to lead to more stable and higher self-esteem and provide protection against depression (Linville, 1985, 1987; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). The complexity of self made apparent by the life review allows the elderly person to derive self-esteem from a number of possible selves, and, therefore, to compensate for a loss of esteem from one role by focusing on achievement in another (Cross & Markus, 1991; Kling & Ryff, 1997). Indeed, those elderly individuals with more complex self-representations have been found to have lower rates of depression than elderly with less complex self-representations (Labouvie-Vief, Chiodo, Goguen, & Diehl, 1995).

## Self-efficacy

One of the most basic differences between the old and the young is that the elderly simply have had more experience with life—and their role in it—than the young. They have had more time to accumulate knowledge, successes, and a broader variety of experiences. Because they have a lifetime of self-related information to consult, their need for social consensus and specific group identities is lessened. The elderly can look back at the past as a “stockpile” of self-understanding (Gurin & Brim, 1984). The elderly have the unique ability to derive self-esteem from the *experienced* rather than the *experiencing*:

It is true that the old have no opportunities, no possibilities for the future. But they have more than that. Instead of possibilities for the future, they have realities they have realized—and nothing and nobody can ever remove these assets from the past. (Frankl, 1959, p. 151)

In this regard the elderly are truly enviable. In addition to the self-esteem looking back on past accomplishments may offer, the true jewel in all this wealth of knowledge is the feeling of self-efficacy that awareness of such experiences provide. The elderly person who is able to pull a global sense of mastery and efficacy from the experiences of the past, rather than simply reveling in specific instances of heroism of the present, has a kind of freedom from the limitations of deriving self-esteem from specific prescriptions of the worldview. Research suggests that this kind of reminiscence is indeed associated with greater well-being in the elderly (Gurin & Brimm, 1984; Wong & Watt, 1991). To the extent that this reminiscence leads to feelings of mastery and self-efficacy, the elderly person no longer requires validation of the “self” and is able to let go of the contingent self-esteem of the cultural worldview.

In a world of growing loss, the elderly have at hand a valuable and comforting resource—their stockpile of self-understanding (Gurin & Brim, 1984). They are in a position to draw upon this resource and derive esteem from recollection of past success, to utilize their self-complexity to compensate for failures by recalling other roles, and most importantly, to derive a sense of mastery, competence, and self-efficacy. To the extent that reviewing one’s life creates these valuable assets, one is able to detach that much more from reliance on the cultural worldview for derivation of self-esteem and protection from terror.

## Broadening Social Identity: Generativity

To this point, we have depicted the process of transcending the self as involving primarily a lessened dependence on social consensus and a disengagement from the mainstream cultural worldview. This is only part of the picture, however, and without a vital addition, would likely leave the elderly person happy but largely useless to those around him. There is a paradox inherent in creating a more idiosyncratic individualized worldview. The more idiosyncratic one’s worldview be-

comes, the more out of step with the rest of the world it becomes, and the more other existing conceptions inevitably contradict it. Thus far we have emphasized the positive aspects of such idiosyncratic conceptions and the reduction in potential for threat that results from decreased need for social validation. We have also noted, however, that, if taken too far, these changes can leave the elderly individual alone and alienated, without the vital sense of connection to ongoing human life necessary to provide the symbolic immortality needed for continued equanimity. How is this paradox resolved?

Erick Erikson (1985) proposed that the final development crisis that must be resolved is one of ego-integrity vs. despair, which is successfully resolved by acting on a desire to "give something" to future generations, to help the next generation better adapt to the realities of life. In Erikson's view, human development in later life entails "widening circles of identification" from family and peers, to the culture, and finally to the human community at large and a shift from "I am \_\_\_\_\_" to "I am what survives me." Alfred Adler's (1929) theorizing emphasized the importance of a similar construct, social interest, for optimal psychological functioning and well-being throughout the lifespan. Similarly, Otto Rank (e.g., Rank, 1932) posited that the fear of death produced by human consciousness engenders a simultaneous need to distinguish ourselves as individuals and to be securely embedded in a collective social order.

Robert Jay Lifton (1983) suggests that psychological well-being in old age requires a sense of self in the context of time and an acknowledgment of those that have come before us and those who will come ahead. Lifton proposed that there are a number of ways to attain a sense of death transcendence through generativity. Perhaps most pertinent to the elderly are the passing on into the future traces of one's self through children and grandchildren, spiritual beliefs in the soul or oneness with the universe, contributions to groups and causes, and one's teachings, guidance, and positive effects on others. Of course the life review can reinforce one's faith that one has made these types of contributions to the continuity of life.

More recently, McAdams suggests that we should adjust our autobiographical narrative or "stories we live by" to "generate" legacies of self concerned with "establishing and guiding the next generation" (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Indeed, the value of caring for others as a pathway to self-transcendence and improved well-being is central to a wide range of religious and ideological systems, from Buddhism to Christianity to Marxism. By identifying with large groups that encompass a variety of more limited worldviews, the individual can create a broad overarching cultural worldview. If sufficiently broad, it would be near impossible to be exposed to threat in the form of opposing viewpoints.

The little empirical research available on this broadening of identity is generally consistent with the above arguments. Elderly individuals who focus more on others tend to have better psychological and physical well-being than those focused more narrowly on their own self-preservation (Lapierre, Bouffard, & Bastin, 1997). The elderly themselves indicate that goals describing a "mature well adjusted fulfilled person" involve having an orientation towards others and not the self (Ryff, 1989). Also, goals involving transcendence become more important with age

(Lapierre, Bouffard, & Bastin, 1993). The elderly have been shown to increase in perceptions of control and to show a decrease in depression following giving assistance to others (Krause, Herzog, & Baker, 1992). Generativity, operationalized as concern for others, has been shown to be positively correlated with well-being in the elderly (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Thus, transforming one's concern for self into a broader concern for others appears to have positive mental health effects.

In younger years, this strategy is less viable of a defense, primarily due to the lack of experience and development of the self. Specific group memberships provide validation and information about the self, which is needed to form the self-concept. The paradox continues: to lose the self, one must first have created the self. Jung (1963; p. 343) comments on this task of losing the self:

All collective identities such as membership in organizations, support of 'isms' and so on, interfere with the fulfillment of this task. Such collective identities are crutches for the lame, shields for the timid, beds for the lazy, nurseries for the irresponsible; but they are equally shelters for the poor and weak, a home port for the shipwrecked, the bosom of a family for orphans, a land of promise for disillusioned vagrants and weary pilgrims, a herd and a safe fold for lost sheep, and a mother providing nourishment and growth. It would therefore be wrong to regard this intermediary stage as a trap; for a long time to come it will represent the only possible form of existence for the individual.

As a consequence of the fear of death, the young seek protection from the worldview and group identities. These identities serve us well when death is a concept for the future. However, in the face of the increasing mortality salience of aging and the devaluing our cultural worldview has been subjected to, expanding our group identification and broadening our worldviews may be a more appropriate defense for the elderly.

## □ In Conclusion

The successful use of the strategies delineated above may have profound effects on the well-being of the aging individual. These strategies are part of a developmental process through which the individual is able to transform the self. This may begin through attempts to minimize threats to the cultural worldview, but as the nearness to death increases and the effectiveness of the existing anxiety-buffering system deteriorates, different strategies must be employed. There is evidence that the aging individual is particularly adept at downward social comparison, adjustment of goals to the range of the feasible, and reinterpretation of events to emphasize their positive aspects. These defenses help to maintain self-esteem within the context of the existing worldview and set the stage for a transition to a more autonomous mode of functioning. The elderly individual may simultaneously broaden their social identity to include others as more integral parts of self, thereby adding further stability to their anxiety buffering system. The life review offers its own assets, with the possibility of self-complexity, esteem for past achievements, and a stable sense of mastery and self-efficacy.

## Does Self-transcendence Really Increase with Age?

Is this depiction of a transformed self a viable explanation for the relative wellbeing observed in the elderly? While mortality salience is increasing and the cultural worldview may be losing effectiveness, is there evidence that the elderly are more accepting of death and are utilizing these strategies for coping with the fear of nonbeing? The elderly have been shown to be lower in self-consciousness (Mueller, & Ross, 1984) and lower in self-monitoring (Reifman, Klein, & Murphy, 1989) than the young, indicating that perhaps the elderly are on the road to "loss of self." The elderly have also been shown to be less influenced by group references and rules while the young are more concerned with norms and convention (Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, DeVoe, & Schoeberlain, 1989). These group references and rules all function to maintain the integrity of the cultural worldview; perhaps less concern with these standards for behavior indicates some detachment of the self from the cultural worldview, a further step toward the loss of self.

While this evidence may support that the elderly are pursuing the ultimate goal of loss of self, it does not indicate how this is achieved. Clearly this would not be an overnight realization. One does not wake up and decide that the self no longer matters. We can't simply choose to be less self-aware or to detach our sense of

### Points to Remember

The central point of our terror management analysis of aging is that the defenses typical of youth, those well documented by previous research, may decrease in effectiveness as we age. This developmental perspective suggests that the use of the cultural worldview to derive self-esteem is compromised through changing or unreachable standards as we move through the decades. This, coupled with the increasing proximity to our own death that necessarily comes with advancing age, creates a need for a more effective coping strategy. We have argued that it is through the weakening of the cultural worldview defenses that the door is opened for the elderly to pursue self-transcendence, perhaps the loftiest and most elusive of human goals. The coping mechanisms presented in this chapter suggest that the elderly may be pursuing this goal through a decreased focus on the self and the standards of the contemporary world view, and an increasing focus on their life accomplishments, connections with the continuity of life, and acceptance of the inevitability of their own mortality. It may be that only by facing death in this way can we free ourselves from terror:

*"... healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death."*

—Erik Erikson (1963, p. 269)

value from the contingencies of the worldview. The disengagement from the anchor may be a long process instigated by the dawning knowledge that we are being dragged down, that our worldview no longer offers the protection of the past. The first step in this process as indicated earlier would be to accept the inevitableness of death. The elderly may focus on the part of the conflict that they can control, not the inevitability of death, but rather their own desire for the continuation of the self.

We have presented these strategies as changes particular to aging. However, we by no means wish to imply that this process is as inevitable and ordered as we have delineated. Individuals will use the most efficient defensive strategy available. Just as the defenses of youth are achieved to varying degrees of success, so too will the defenses of aging be achieved to varying degrees. There will always be those among us who have never been able to successfully deal with thoughts of their own mortality, those whose defenses seem tenuous and unstable, and those who seem well-defended and content. Independence from social consensus, creation of a truly individualized worldview, and a broad concern for all of humankind are difficult to achieve. For this reason, this type of transformation is probably most often implemented in late life when other avenues for defense have lost their utility.

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