

Morbid thoughts make us reach for the cookie jar

SCOFFING cookies provides a sweet escape from contemplating our fate.

Social psychologists have already shown that thoughts about death can spur buying behaviour. For example, in the months following 9/11 shops in the US noted a spike in purchases of luxury products, canned goods and sweets.

To better understand the link between thoughts of mortality and the urge to consume, Naomi Mandel at Arizona State University, Tempe, and Dirk Smeesters at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, asked 746 students to write essays on one of two topics: their death or a visit to the dentist. Each participant also completed a questionnaire designed to evaluate their level of self-esteem.

They found that subjects with low self-esteem who wrote about death ate more cookies, when given the opportunity, and bought more items from a hypothetical shopping list compared to those who wrote about the dentist. In people with high self-esteem, thoughts of death had little effect (*Journal of Consumer Research*, DOI: 10.1086/587626).

The authors believe people with low self-esteem use consuming as a way of subconsciously escaping self-awareness, which is heightened by thoughts of dying. "When you indulge in shopping or eating, it helps you forget yourself," says Smeesters.

Rosellina Ferraro at the University of Maryland, College Park, says the study is interesting in that it suggests a "possible mechanism for dealing with death-related anxiety", adding that triggers for thinking about death are everywhere – for example, a news report on a car accident. In his latest, still unpublished study, Smeesters found that people with low self-esteem shop and eat more after watching death-related news clips.

"One would hope that companies do not exploit this by putting food ads straight after the news," Smeesters says. Nora Schultz ●