

***WHAT TEACHERS NEED TO
KNOW ABOUT TERROR
MANAGEMENT THEORY:
A SUPER SIMPLE ILLUSTRATED GUIDE***

Text content by:
Hannah Tighe

Illustrations by:
Hannah Tighe
Andy Scott
*Free use clipart images
were used in this
document.*

Hi! I'm the Grim Educator!

I'm here to take you through this guide on Terror Management Theory. The guide is split into four parts. Part 1 will introduce you to terror management theory and where it originated. Part 2 will give you some examples of the experiments that have been done in the field of TMT. Part 3 will explain why TMT matters in your classroom. Finally, part 4 will discuss how you can use TMT to make your classrooms better.

Ready? Alright, let's get started!



Part 1:

INTRODUCTION TO TMT

Terror Management Theory, or TMT, is a theory that researchers developed to explain why people need **self-esteem** and why we struggle to get along with people who don't share our worldviews.

When we live up to the values and standards of our culture, we feel good about ourselves. TMT calls this feeling self-esteem and it serves to protect us from our anxiety about death.

Conscious or unconscious fear aroused due to knowing that we are doomed to die.

As far as we know, humans are the only animal that is aware that we are going to die at some point down the road. This awareness creates what is called **death-anxiety**

Death anxiety leads people to do things that allow them to feel as though they will live on after death (in some shape or form).



There are two main ways that people attempt to do this:

1. Symbolic immortality is when people leave a symbolic piece of themselves behind to live on. This can be done by:



I am Bob!
I will live on!



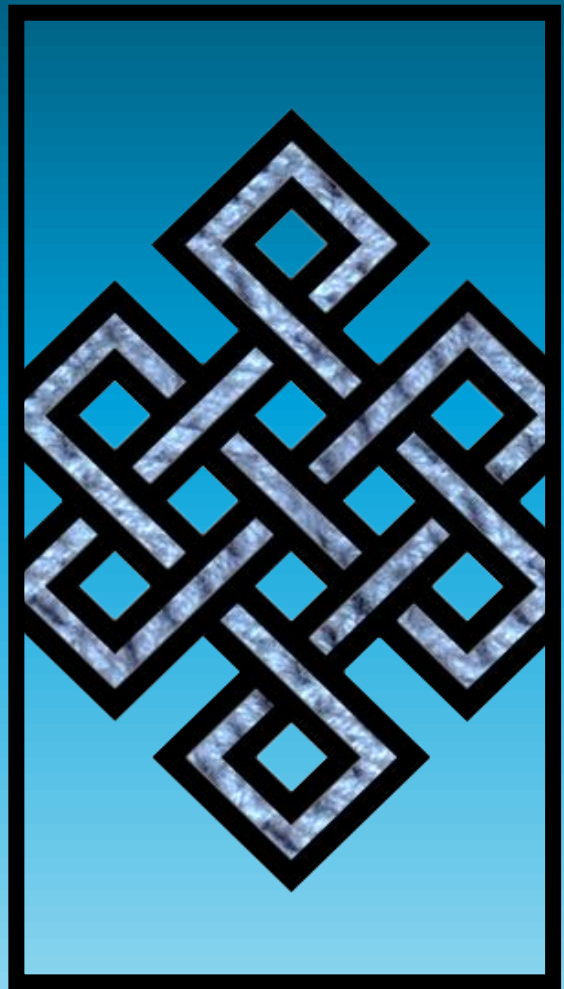
- Having a building named after you
- Writing a book
- Having children
- Leaving a legacy gift
- Contributing to science
- Creating art
- Inventing
- Becoming a leader
- TEACHING!

These things all allow a symbolic representation of ourselves to carry on after our bodies no longer can.

2. Literal immortality is the belief that you will actually live on - either on earth or somewhere else - after death.

For example:

- Heaven
- Jannah
- Reincarnation



Literal immortality allows us to believe that even though our physical bodies will stop existing, our consciousness or essence (e.g., soul) will carry on.

These beliefs about what happens after death are derived from a person's worldview. People develop worldviews - systems of cultural meaning - to deal with their death anxiety. Having a robust worldview allows people to believe that they are contributing to a meaningful world and feel as though they can live on through it.



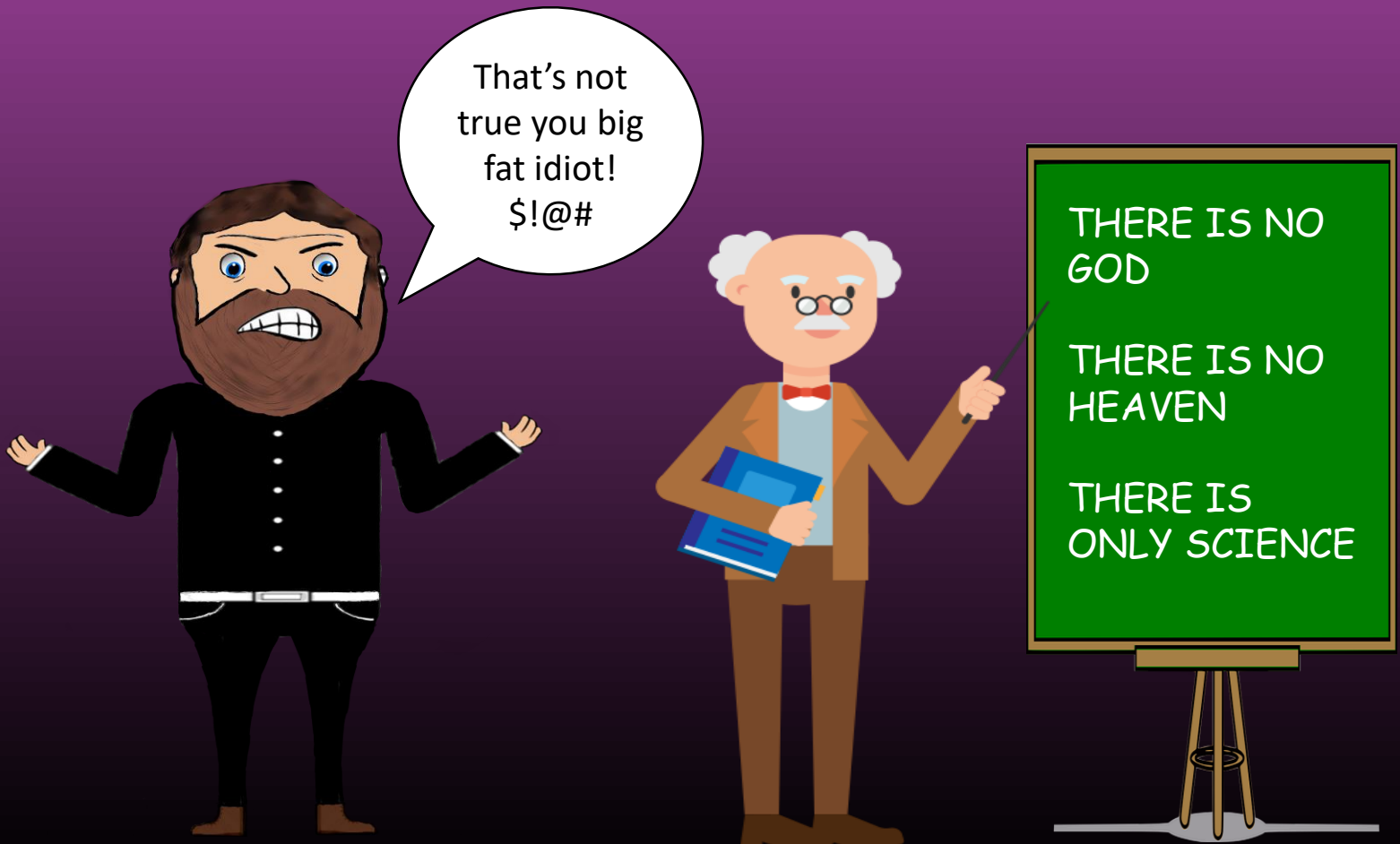
Our worldview offers us different avenues for our immortality projects.

Immortality projects are the things we work on that will last beyond our physical selves. For teachers, teaching can be an immortality project. When we are succeeding in our immortality projects, we gain self-esteem.

This is all great, right? We have found a way to cope with our death-anxiety, we are leading productive lives, and we're feeling pretty good.



The problem is that we hold so tightly to these worldviews that when someone threatens them, or simply has their own worldview, we can react very negatively.



THE ORIGINAL TMT GUYS



TMT was originally proposed by three social psychologists: Jeff Greenberg (center), Sheldon Solomon (left), and Tom Pyszczynski (right). After Sheldon read Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death*, he encouraged his two colleagues Jeff and Tom to read it as well. The three of them thought the book made a lot of sense and did a good job of explaining a) why people need to feel good about themselves and b) why groups of people seem to have a hard time getting along.

They decided to present on Becker's ideas. This didn't go very well at first - people don't like to think about death (shocker). Being that they were experimental social psychologists, they decided to run some experiments to support their theory. They began calling it Terror Management Theory. Since then, TMT has been supported by over 500 experiments in more than 25 countries.

The Denial of Death

The book that Jeff, Sheldon, and Tom based their work on was written by Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist. The book suggests that much of human behavior is aimed at overcoming their fear of death. Humans create a symbolic self through immortality projects, which allow them to live on symbolically after their physical death.

Becker also believed that immortality projects result in conflict when they clash with the immortality projects of others. He claimed that people become defensive when their immortality project is threatened by the presence of immortality projects that are different from their own, because it makes them question whether or not their own immortality projects are valid.



Part 2: TWO EXPERIMENTS TO HELP US UNDERSTAND TMT

Experiment 1

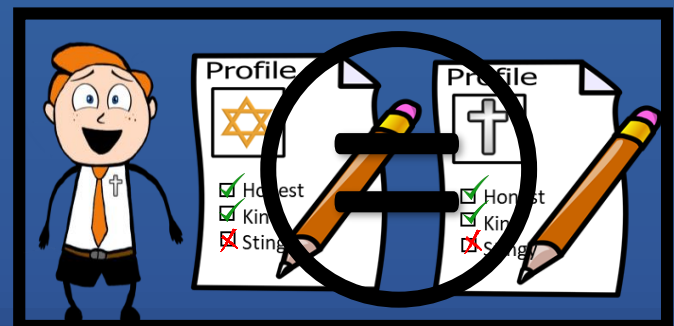
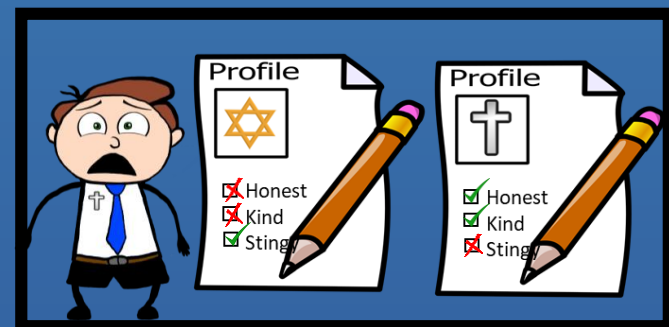
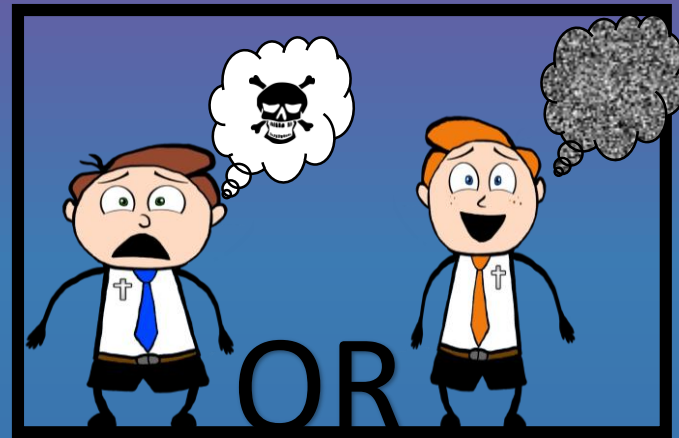
In this study, Christian participants were split into two groups. One group was asked to write about what will happen to them when they physically die. The other group was not given this writing task, and therefore was not provided with a death reminder at the beginning of the study.

Afterwards, participants were asked to rate the profiles of two unknown male subjects, one Christian and one Jewish. They rated them on a total of 20 characteristics, including honesty, trustworthiness, sleaziness, and stinginess.

Participants who had been reminded of death gave the Christian profile more favorable ratings and the Jewish profile more negative ratings. Participants who had not received a death reminder rated the two profiles equally.

Remember, all the participants were Christian. This means that Christians were more likely to think favourably of people like them (other Christians) and more unfavourably of people not like them (Jews) when they were reminded of death.

So, people become meaner towards those who are different than them when they are reminded of death.



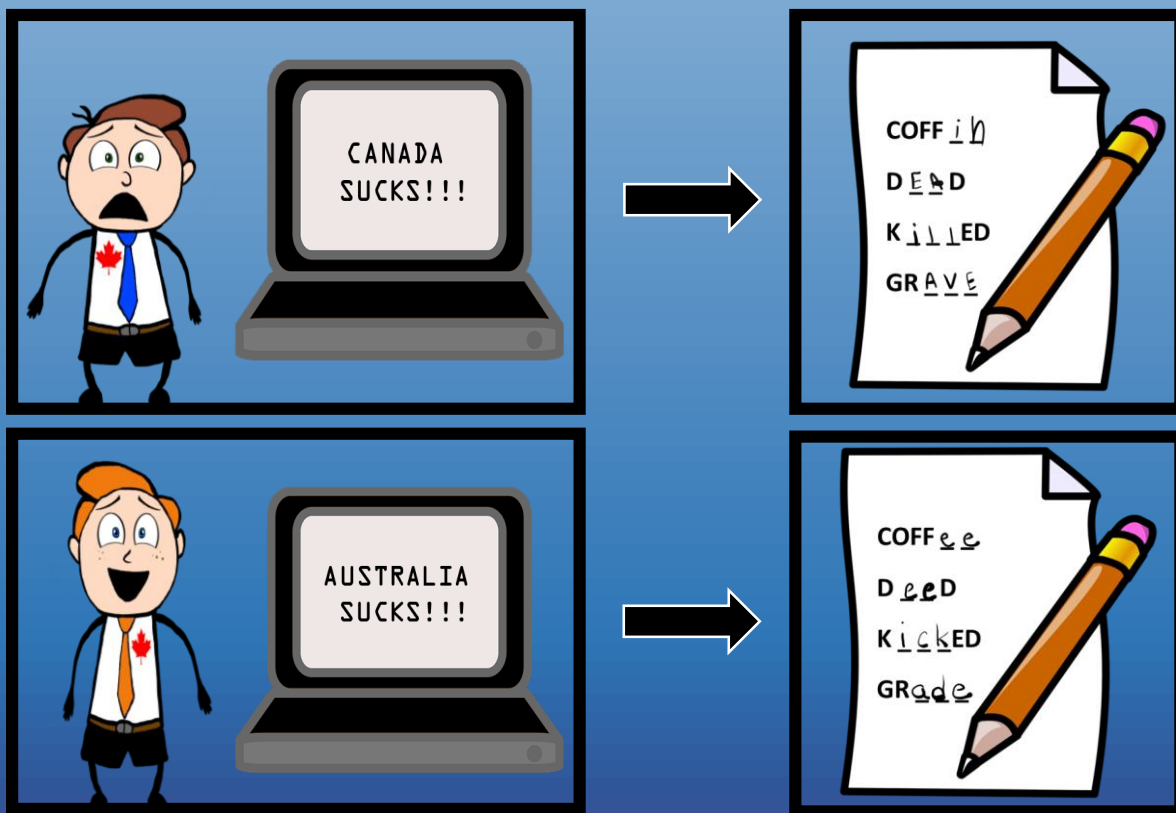
Experiment 2

In this study, Canadian participants were split into two groups and directed to one of two webpages. The first webpage was an essay that threatened Canadian values and the second webpage was an essay that threatened Australian values. The anti-Canadian essay belittled things like poutine, hockey, and socialized healthcare. The anti-Australian essay, which was identical in format and tone, criticized things like kangaroo (as a food) and Aussie-rules-football.

The participants from each group were then asked to do a word completion task. This word completion task was designed so that each of 6 word fragments could be completed as either death related or non-death related words. For example, COFF__ can be completed as COFFEE or COFFIN.

Participants who read the Canadian essay were more likely to complete the words as death related words than those who had read the Australian essay, indicating greater death-thought accessibility in individuals who have had their worldview threatened (as the Canadians reading the Canadian essay did).

This study suggests that when people have their worldview threatened, they are more likely to think about death. Remember, worldviews help us to avoid thinking about our inevitable death, so it makes sense that when our worldview is compromised in some way, we are less able to avoid thinking about death.



Schimmel, J., Hayes, J., Williams, T. & Jahrig, J. (2007). Is death really the worm at the core? Converging evidence that worldview threat increases death-thought accessibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 789-803.

Part 3: WHY TMT MATTERS IN THE CLASSROOM

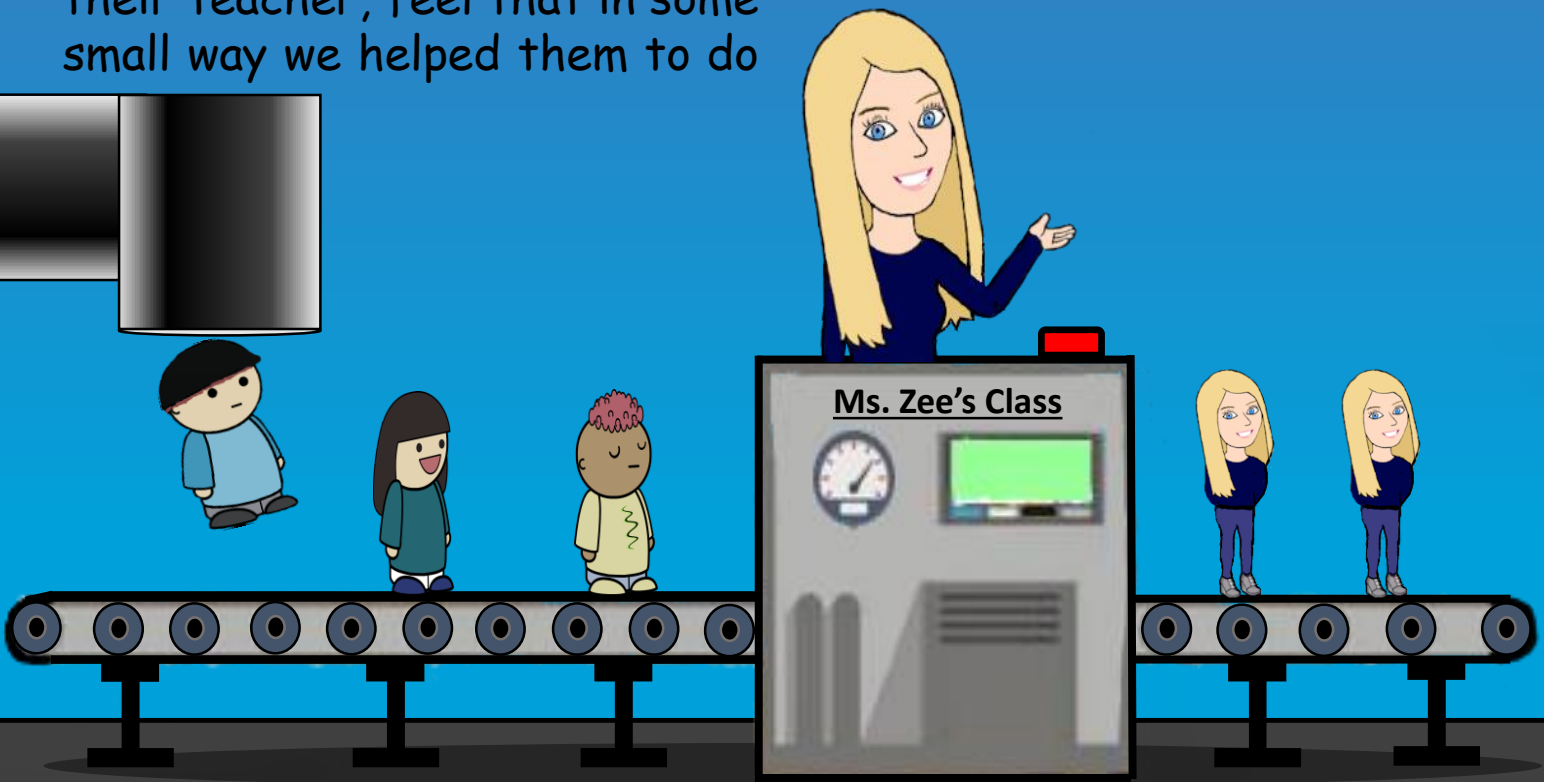
Becoming informed about terror management theory can help you to become a better teacher. Here, we will discuss three of the main reasons why it's important to consider TMT in your classroom. First, whether intentional or not, students are often an immortality project for teachers. Second, viewing conflict through a TMT lens can help us to better understand and address it. Finally, failure to consider TMT can result in fractured relationships within schools.



1 - Students as an Immortality Project

Any good teacher will tell you that they are strongly invested in the success of their students. In staff meetings, teachers will often call the students "our kids" and when talking to friends or spouses, it is common to hear teachers say "my kids" when referring to the students in their class. And, who can blame them? Teachers invest so much into their students: time, money ... sanity. In return, we want our students to be successful. We want them to reach their potential and do great things. Because if they do, can't we, as their teacher, feel that in some small way we helped them to do

that? That all they go on to do can somehow be just ever so slightly attributed back to Mr. X or Ms. Z, their third, or seventh, or twelfth grade teacher. This is how students can be viewed as an immortality project, and with all that teachers do for their students, of course they deserve to feel some small piece of satisfaction at the success of their students. However, when teachers are unable to draw a line between this small satisfaction and a full-fledged immortality project, there can be negative consequences.



When teachers view students as symbolic immortality projects, they can end up trying to insert their worldview into their students as much as possible, so that their worldview gets carried on in each student. Therefore, often without even meaning to, teachers may push their own values and beliefs about the world onto their students. The important part to recognize here is that this is most often a very accidental process; most teachers do not walk around the classroom explicitly trying to create replicas of themselves. If teachers are not aware of the impact that their unconscious fear of death can have on them, they are less likely to be vigilant in ensuring that they are not stifling the diverse worldviews of their students in favor of their own worldview.

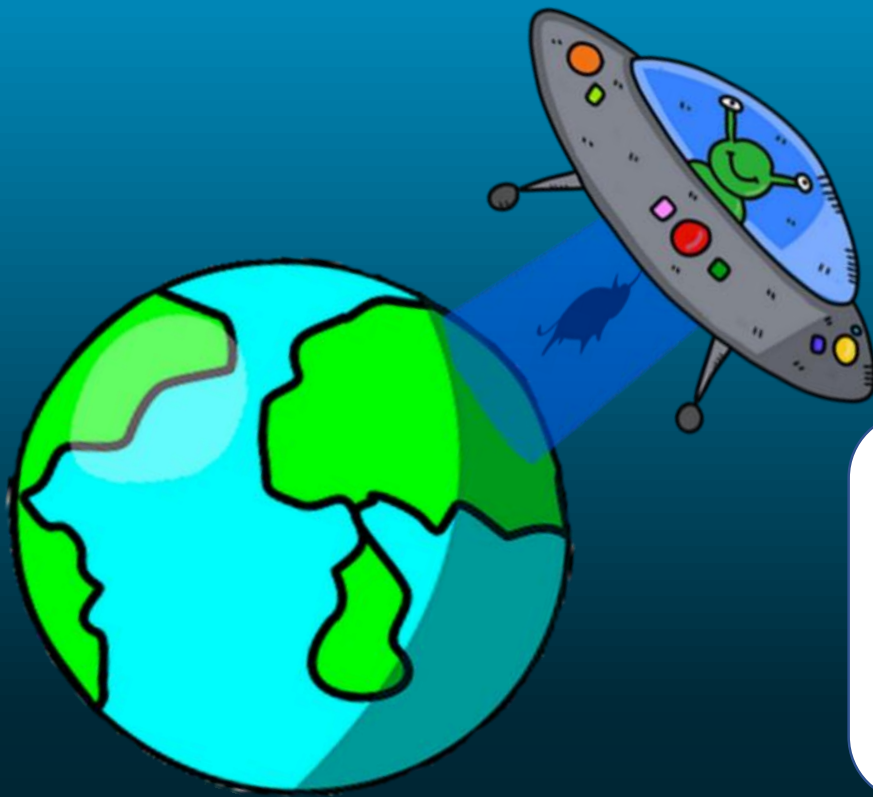
That's an
interesting point....
But...
No.

Wrong!

I know everything!



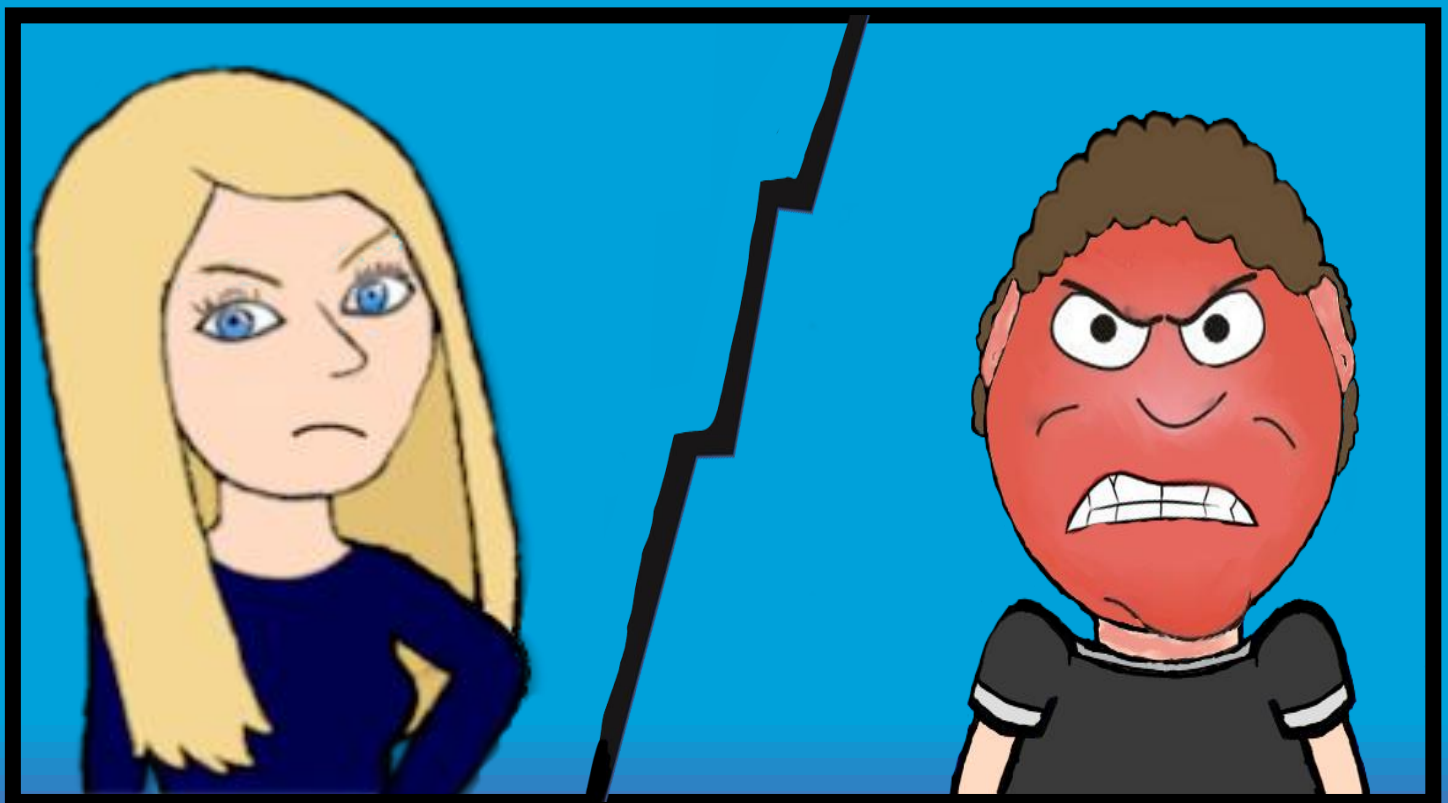
2 - Conflict through a TMT lens



When worldviews clash, conflict arises. In schools, this can happen anywhere: among students, student and teacher, teacher and teacher, administrators and teachers, parents and teachers, and so on. In fact, some of the worst reactions we see in schools, whether by students or teachers, are knee-jerk reactions to worldview threats. As we saw in the experiments discussed, when death anxiety is high, for example when someone's worldview or self-esteem has been threatened, they are more likely to think negatively of people who do not share their worldview. Therefore, when someone's worldview is threatened, whether that's purposefully done by someone insulting them or unintentionally by gaining new information in a lesson, they are likely to begin acting defensive and, perhaps, unfriendly or even hostile towards others. These behaviours, of course, lead to conflict. An awareness of TMT can help both students and teachers to consider the severity of their reactions and how they choose to respond to perceived threats.

3 - Fractured relationships

If the conflict created by worldview clashes is not properly addressed, the relationships that exist between teachers, students, administrators, and parents in schools can suffer. People often don't recognize that the reason for their harsh reaction to a person has been caused by the perceived threat that the person poses to their worldview, and this perceived threat may continue long after the initial incident that caused it has passed. Worldview conflicts may be more difficult to overcome than conflicts that aren't deeply rooted in worldviews (Bob won't stop poking me!). This means that a teacher can inadvertently clash with a student during a lesson, causing a small (or big) conflict to arise. The teacher may believe the conflict has passed and resume as normal. However, weeks after the lesson has ended, the student may still view the teacher as a threat. Their relationship has been fractured because the initial worldview threat was not adequately addressed. The best learning occurs when students feel safe and respected, and have a good relationship with their teacher, so it is important that teachers be mindful of how conflict that stems from worldview clashes may negatively impact their relationships with others in the school.



Part 4: TMT TO CREATE BETTER CLASSROOMS

Better teaching and learning

While we don't want to force our worldviews on students, it is our job to present many different sources of information from many different viewpoints. We want students to be receptive to learning; we don't want them to shut down when lessons are not aligned with their worldview. We can use TMT to help keep students open and engaged, even when lessons and materials may in some way be threatening to them.



I've had enough of this BS. I'm putting my headphones in... For the rest of the year!

Consider a student who believes in intelligent design learning about evolution in science class. The concept of evolution could be extremely threatening to a child whose worldview has only ever consisted of God as the creator and curator of the Earth. In a scenario where a teacher presents evolution and fails to acknowledge how the information might impact different people in different ways, a student may receive this information and immediately disregard it. Worse still, they may begin to view the entire subject and/or the teacher as "bogus" in an attempt to protect themselves from the worldview threat they have faced.

Students can encounter worldview threats in less obvious ways, too. For example, they may read something in a Language Arts or Social Studies class. They might not ever verbalize that a reading has caused a worldview threat, however it could be the reason for extreme disengagement or even resentment towards a text.

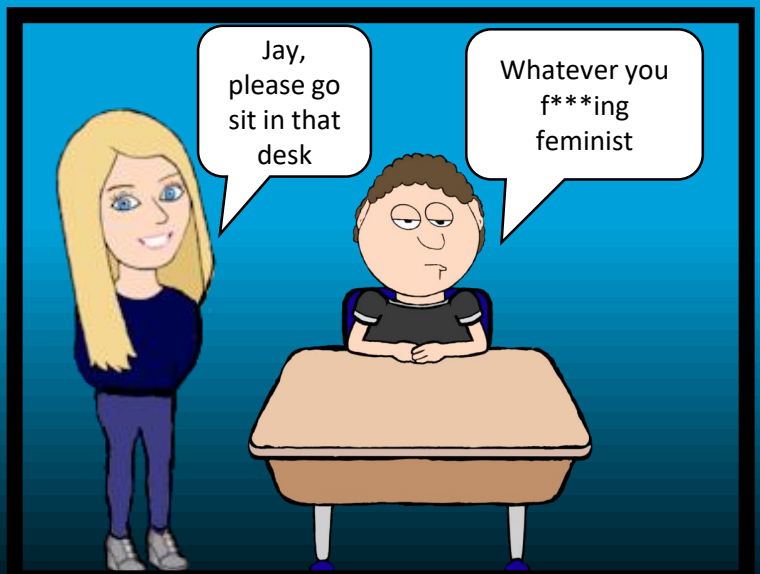
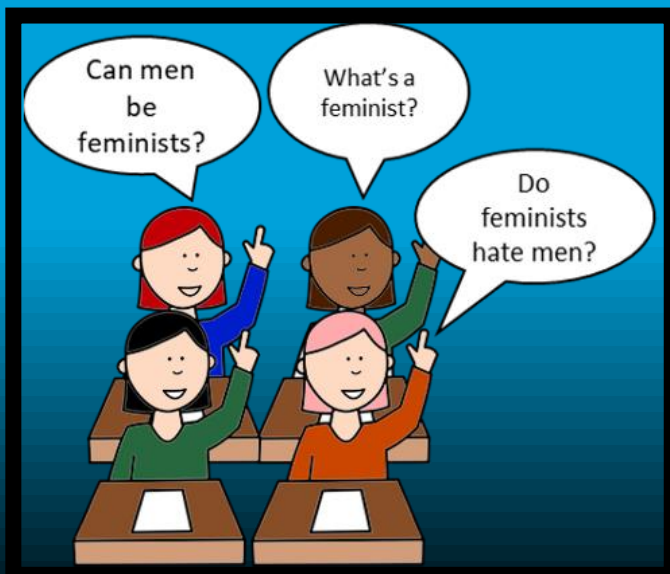
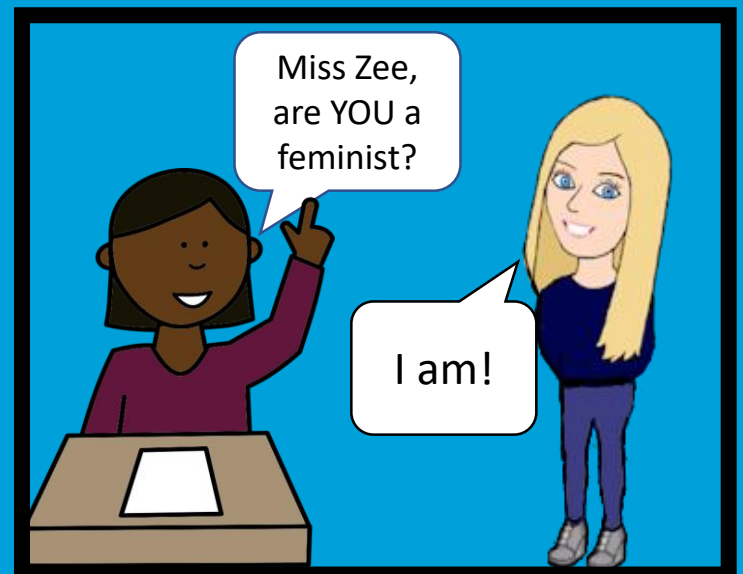
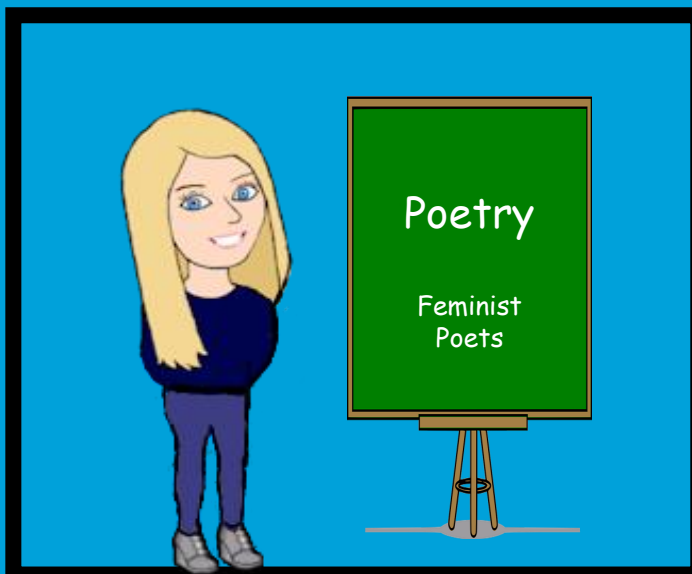


Terror
Management
Theory


A teacher with an understanding of TMT can take several steps to reduce the risk of a complete shutdown by a student in cases like these. It is possible for teachers to provide their students with a basic introduction to TMT, which helps students to reflect on their feelings in worldview threatening situations. If students can become aware of why they might be resisting information, they may be less likely to allow that resistance to take over. Second, teachers can take steps within their lessons to diminish the worldview threat caused. When dealing with sensitive topics, teachers can, whenever possible, present content in a way that is non-contradictory to other worldviews (i.e., in a way that does not diminish any other worldview). When this is not possible, it is important that teachers still present information carefully to avoid harming their relationships with students. Even if students hold worldviews that we perceive as harmful, we will not get anywhere by attacking those views in a classwide lesson.

Better Relationships

While increasing the potential for learning is certainly a benefit of introducing TMT into planning and teaching, the main draw may be that it can help teachers to maintain relationships in difficult circumstances. Introducing students to TMT can help them to better understand their emotions and, hopefully, better control them; more importantly, however, understanding TMT can help teachers to respond appropriately in some of those scenarios where students are more than just a little inappropriate in their choice of words and/or actions. Let's look at the example below. Miss Zee is teaching a unit on poetry and they are learning about some famous poets. They learn that one of them wrote a lot of feminist poetry. The class begins discussing feminism and students overwhelmingly seem open and engaged in the conversation. Eventually they move along in the lesson and continue studying poetry. Not much later, though, Miss Zee asks Jay to move desks when he's off task. He erupts at the request, calling Miss Zee a "f***-ing feminist." Evidently, he found the conversation threatening in some way and is now struggling to regulate his emotions. Knowing this, Miss Zee could choose to send Jay to the office, let him be punished, and never speak of it again, or she could choose to follow up the incident with a conversation that helps him to understand his strong negative reaction and potentially prevent similar reactions in the future.




Here's another example: Miss Zee is teaching about residential schools. Rowa comes from an Indigenous family and is really engaged in the lesson, participating more in the conversation than she has all year because she is happy to have a chance to share insight that many of her non-Indigenous classmates lack. Jay, on the other hand, has a "the past in the past" philosophy and gets frustrated that he has to sit through another class that talks about residential schools. He makes his displeasure known; Rowa and Jay have threatened each other's worldviews and begin arguing non-constructively. Miss Zee has a few options: she can end the conversation and hope it stops there, she can discipline both students for poor behaviour, or she can discipline Jay, since he was the one who caused the conversation to turn sour. However, none of these courses will allow the students to understand why they have come into conflict, and none of them will allow the students to repair the strain placed on this relationship because of this conflict. What Miss Zee should do is give both students time to recover from the threat before discussing the issue with them and taking action.



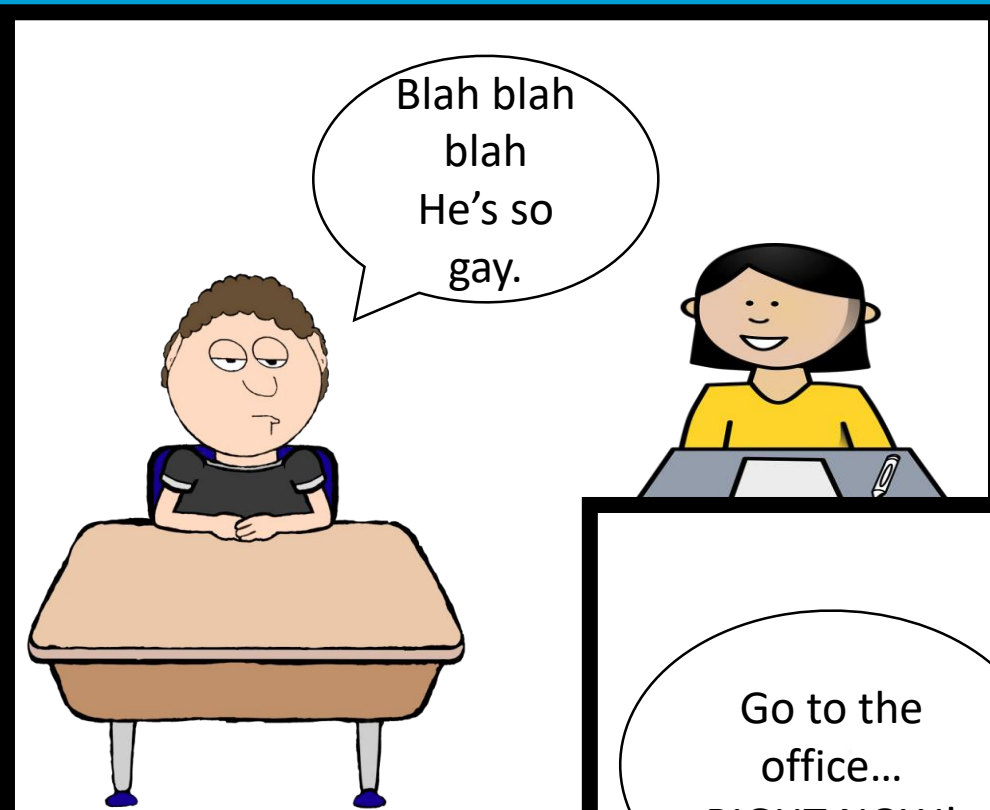
My kokum went to a residential school

Ugh. We get it. But the past is the past. Let it go



Seriously, Jay? You're such a jerk, you don't know anything.

Get bent, Rowa.



And it's not just students who can have their worldview threatened in classrooms; it happens to teachers too and being aware can help us keep our cool when we're about to pop our lids. Take the example of Jay and Miss Zee above. Jay is using language that, while inappropriate, does sometimes get used in schools. This language is threatening to Miss Zee's worldview, and therefore she responds by getting angry

and sending him out of the classroom. While not necessarily an inappropriate reaction on Miss Zee's part, she probably could have dealt with it in a way that would have been less harmful to their student-teacher relationship by recognizing the threat and allowing herself time to cool off before responding so intensely.

In all these examples, we see that the key to preserving relationships is helping people to understand their negative reactions in worldview threat scenarios and teaching them to avoid knee-jerk reactions to the perceived threats. It is also important to note, however, that some of these examples could have possibly been avoided altogether with a bit more forethought in planning.

Using TMT in our teaching does not mean that we can or even that we should avoid being the source of a worldview threat. Students should receive new information and sometimes that information will contradict what they believe to be true. That's okay! What we want is to make sure that we don't have our students become so defensive following worldview threats that they begin to disengage from learning. Our job as teachers is to not just pass along information, but to pass along a stance of openness to it.

Happy
teaching!



References and Further Reading

Terror Management Theory (general knowledge and background)

Becker, E. *The denial of death*. (1973). New York, NY: The Free Press.

Becker, E. *Escape from evil*. (1975). New York, NY: The Free Press.

Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (1986). The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory. In R.F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Public self and private self* (pp. 189-212). New York, NY: Springer.

Museum of Science. [BostonMOS]. (2016, July 14). *Grave matters: The role of death in life - Sheldon Solomon, PhD* [video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7GZrgWKj9o>

O'Brien, R. (n.d.). *Reapy: The littlest harbinger of death*. The Ernest Becker Foundation. Retrieved from <http://ernestbecker.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/05/reapy.pdf>

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. (2015). *The worm at the core: On the role of death in life*. New York, NY: Random House.

Terror Management Theory (interesting experiments)

Greenberg, J., Kosloff, S., Solomon, S., Cohen, F., & Landau, M. (2008). Toward understanding the fame game: The effect of mortality salience on the appeal of fame. *Self and Identity*, 9(1), 1-18.

Zhou, X., Liu, J., Chen, C., & Yu, Z. (2008). Do children transcend death? An examination of the terror management function of offspring. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 49(5), 413-418.

Terror Management Theory (classroom specific)

van Kessel, C. (2019). "Evil, existential terror, and classroom climate." *An education in evil: Implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and beyond*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

van Kessel, C., & Burke, K. (2018). Teaching as immortality project: Positing weakness in response to terror. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 52(2), 216-229.

Teacher Resource Websites

<http://ernestbecker.org/educator-resources/>

<https://omeka-s.library.ualberta.ca/s/Grim-Educator/page/About>

Text content by:
Hannah Tighe

Illustrations by:
Hannah Tighe
Andy Scott
Free use clipart images were used in this document.