

Traumatized elephants

A recent report in the British journal *Nature* provides vivid evidence that other animal species suffer from the psychological symptoms of traumatic stress that we like to think of as human disorders.

Elephants, like humans, are a highly intelligent, long-lived mammalian species with strong family ties, a complex social life, and long memories. They grow up in extended families headed mainly by grandmothers (older females). Human violence and habitat destruction have been breaking up those families for a century or more. It's estimated that in 1900, there were more than 10 million elephants in Africa; today, after a century of ivory poaching, habitat loss, and legal culling, about a half million are left.

It's well known that early traumatic experiences can have long-lasting effects, raising the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and violence. Today, in increasing numbers, elephants are showing signs of abnormal startle responses, unpredictable aggression, and antisocial behavior. The loss of older family members is especially devastating for adolescent males. Often they have only young unexperienced mothers, or no mothers, to raise them, and there are few older males to mentor them during adolescence.

Young males killing other young males account for 90% of male elephant deaths in some areas. In one incident, a group of orphaned adolescents went on a killing rampage

against rhinoceroses 10 years after their mothers and grandmothers were slaughtered.

These consequences of trauma are easy to observe—examples of what psychiatrists and psychologists call “externalizing” behavior. The underlying feelings can only be imagined, but human analogies are obvious.

Present methods of conservation do not preserve elephant families and social systems because not enough older animals are allowed to survive. Here any analogy with human beings fails. In the face of current ravages, elephants can do little to help themselves or one other. The animal that would have to change is *Homo sapiens*.

Bradshaw GA, et al. “Elephant Breakdown,” *Nature* (February 24, 2005): Vol. 433, p. 807.

Death and the candidates

An ingenious experiment suggests that people reminded of their own deaths are attracted to visionary, charismatic leaders who promise them a form of symbolic immortality.

About 200 students were divided into two groups. In the first group, they were asked to describe the emotions aroused by the thought of their own deaths and to write what they thought would happen to them when they died. The second group responded to similar questions with reference to taking examinations rather than dying. Then all read campaign statements from imaginary candidates for governor of the state.

The statements were designed to represent three types of leadership. The charismatic candidate proclaimed an overarching vision, said he would “take chances,” and suggested that the voters belonged to “a special state and

a special nation.” The “task-oriented” candidate emphasized realistic goals, detailed blueprints, efficiency, and providing the resources needed to get the job done. The “relationship-oriented” candidate spoke of the need to inform everyone, recognize everyone's contributions, and encourage all citizens to take an active role in government.

After reading these statements, students were asked a series of questions, including how much they admired or agreed with each candidate; how much they would like to live in a state governed by the candidate; and how good a governor he or she would make. Then they were asked which one they would vote for.

The task-oriented leader had the highest overall popularity. Students who had been thinking about examinations rated that candidate highest and the charismatic leader lowest.

But students who had been thinking about death showed a different voting pattern. “Mortality salience” raised the vote for the charismatic leader from 4% to 31%—almost as high as the task-oriented vote—while lowering the vote for the relationship-oriented candidate from 43% to 21%.

The authors conclude that thoughts of death led the students to seek a confident person who suggested a way to transcend mortality by participating in something larger than themselves. The authors note other studies showing that thoughts of death also heighten identification with one's own ethnic group, nation, and religion—even local sports teams—while increasing hostility to outsiders.

Cohen F, et al. “Fatal Attraction: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Evaluations of Charismatic, Task-Oriented, and Relationship-Oriented Leaders,” *Psychological Science* (December 2004): Vol. 15, No. 12, pp. 846–51.

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