THE DOUBLE DIVIDEND OF SAFETY: REDUCING RISKS BEYOND INDIVIDUAL CONTROL MAY LEAD TO INCREASED HEALTHY BEHAVIOUR

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THE HYPOTHESIS
People who perceive a greater portion of their mortality risk to be beyond their personal control should be less motivated to look after their health. This is because uncontrollable risks reduce their likelihood of living to see rewards from healthy behaviour.

THE PREDICTION
People should make healthier choices when they believe that the predominant mortality risks they face are within their personal control. They should make less-healthy choices when they perceive a higher portion of their mortality risk to be beyond their personal control.

METHODS
Three experiments tested whether altering the apparent controllability of prevailing mortality risks influenced a simple health behaviour: participants’ choices between fruit and chocolate.

In experiment 1, a fake life expectancy calculator told participants that people like them were dying due to either circumstances beyond individual control, or individual behaviours.

Experiment 2 replicated this with a control condition and separated the effects of expecting a long, or short, life from those of the controllability of cause of death.

Experiment 3 used polling cards in a shopping centre to surreptitiously prime participants, mitigating demand characteristics.

KEY IMPLICATION
Tackling sources of mortality risk that people perceive to be beyond their control would not only reduce those risks, but could also lead to the additional benefit of improved health behaviours.