

Investigating the impact of positive autobiographical memories on emotions induced by Project Soothe pictures.

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Introduction

Studies have shown that self-compassion is strongly associated with psychological well-being. It is suggested that self-compassion is conducive in activating the soothing emotional system, which gives us a sense of calmness and helps us restore our emotional and physiological balance. While autobiographical memory (AM) recall has been found to be a powerful mood-repair strategy, no previous study investigated on the effect on the soothing system specifically.

Aims and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of positive specific AM retrieval on emotions induced by soothing pictures and whether depressive symptoms would show differential impact. In total, we examined three research questions. First, we hypothesised an increase in positive affect (PA) and a decrease in negative affect (NA) in response to the pictures, and such response would be enhanced by AM recall. Second, we hypothesised that depressed individuals would have impoverished access to positive memories, manifested as reduced number of AM recalled and longer recall latency. This led to the third hypothesis that depressive symptoms would reduce the magnitude of emotional response.

Method

A battery of self-reported measure was completed online by a sample of 127 participants randomised into three conditions. Pictures were collected from Project Soothe (www.projectsoothe.com). In the experimental condition, participants were asked to complete autobiographical memory task and passively attending some soothing pictures. In the distractor condition, participants were asked to memorise digits presented while passively attending to those pictures. In the control condition, participants were to view the pictures only.

Results

There was a significant decrease in PA in participants across all the conditions. Significant NA reduction was observed only in the experimental and control conditions. Depression was a significant predictor of the number of positive specific AM recalled, but not of retrieval latency. PA and NA changes were independent of depressive symptoms.

Conclusion

The intended soothing effect, reflected by reduced NA, was achieved by viewing soothing pictures. Such effect was not weakened by depression, lending support to the potential use of soothing pictures as a tool in psychotherapy. AM recall did not have a boosting effect on the emotional response, suggesting that visual perception and memory retrieval may act independently on emotional processing. More research is required to compare the separate emotional impact of the pictures and AM recall.