

Thinking of a loved one eases painful memories

June 26 2012, By Susan Kelley

(Medical Xpress) -- Here's another reason to keep a photo of a loved one on your desk. After recalling an upsetting event, thinking about your mother or romantic partner can make you feel better and reduce your negative thinking, according to a new Cornell study. Perhaps most important, it also may result in fewer psychological and physical health problems at least a month afterward.

"Our own memories can often be a significant source of stress. For example, thinking about a recent breakup or underperforming on an exam usually decreases positive mood and increases negative thinking," said co-author Vivian Zayas, assistant professor of psychology.

"However, simply thinking about an attachment figure, whether it is one's mother or partner, by either recalling a supportive interaction with them or just viewing their photograph, helps people restore their mood and decreases the tendency to engage in negative thinking."

The research is the first to explore the benefits of thinking about a loved one when a person experiences stress they generate themselves. Previous research has focused on the benefits when a person experiences externally generated stress, such as physical pain.

"We're showing the effectiveness of a new technique to cope with negative memories," said co-author Emre Selcuk, a Ph.D. candidate in the graduate field of human development. "As compared to prior work, it is a much less effortful, automatic and spontaneous strategy."

Past research has also focused on [emotion regulation](#) strategies that can be employed before encountering an upsetting event. "This approach is similar to wearing a raincoat to prevent oneself from getting wet," Zayas said. "But, in [everyday life](#), it is not always possible to pre-emptively deal with upsetting events. Our work shows that one way to regulate emotion after thinking about an upsetting event is by simply thinking about an attachment figure. It is akin to getting caught in a thunder shower and using a towel to dry yourself off after you are already wet."

The paper appears online and in a forthcoming edition of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

To arrive at their conclusions, the authors designed a series of experiments in which they asked study participants to recall a negative memory and then think of a loved one. In the first experiment, participants were asked to think about a time when their mothers had been supportive. In the second, they looked at a photograph of their mothers, and in the third, they looked at a photograph of a [romantic partner](#). In the control condition, participants were asked to think about an interaction with an acquaintance or look at a photograph of someone they didn't know.

After being reminded of their loved ones, people recovered faster and were less susceptible to [negative thinking](#). At least one month after the experiment, those who benefited the most from being reminded of the loved ones reported fewer physical or psychological health problems.

The research has implications for mental and physical health, the authors say, because an inability to cope with negative memories -- that is, recalling them repeatedly -- is a major predictor of psychological and [physical health](#) problems from depression and general anxiety disorders to cardiovascular disease.

And the technique is easy to integrate into daily life, Selcuk said. "If you're moving to a new city, put a picture of your loved ones on the fridge. If you get a supportive text message from a loved one, just store it in your cell phone so you can retrieve it later."

The other authors are Cornell's Gül Günaydin, a Ph.D. candidate in the field of psychology, and Cindy Hazan, associate professor of human development, and Ethan Kross, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Michigan.

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