

Can positive memories help treat mental health problems?

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Researchers from the University of Liverpool have published a study highlighting the effectiveness of using positive memories and images to help generate positive emotions.

It has been suggested that savouring [positive memories](#) can generate [positive emotions](#). Increasing positive emotion can have a range of

benefits including reducing attention to and experiences of threat.

The study, supervised by Dr Peter Taylor from the University's Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, investigated individuals' emotional reactions to a guided mental imagery task focussing on positive [social memory](#) called the 'social Broad Minded Affective Coping (BMAC)' technique.

Positive affect

BMAC is an intervention that aims to elicit positive affect or emotion through the use of mental imagery of a positive memory. The study aimed to investigate individuals' [emotional reactions](#) to the [mental imagery](#) of a positive social memory using this technique.

A secondary aim was to examine possible predictors of individuals' responses to this intervention. It was expected that the results would help to indicate when the social BMAC may be used most effectively in clinical settings.

As part of the study 123 participants, recruited online, completed self-report measures of self-attacking (thinking mean, diminishing, insulting, and shaming thoughts about oneself), social safeness (feelings of warmth and connectedness) and pleasure.

Social memory

Participants were then asked to recall a recent positive memory of being with another person and to complete the social BMAC prompt sheet. Following this, they followed auditory instructions, which guided them through an initial relaxation exercise and the social BMAC. The aim of the relaxation exercise was to focus individuals' attention to themselves

and the present moment.

The social BMAC guided the person through a positive social memory. Participants were encouraged to engage all the senses, think about the meaning of the memory to them, savour the positive feelings they experienced, and consider the positive feelings in the mind of another before reflecting upon the feelings they experience as well as what this means to them. It then asks the person to savour that feeling.

Participants completed state measures of positive and negative affect and social safeness/pleasure before and after the intervention.

Social safeness increased

The study found that that safe/warm positive affect, relaxed positive affect and feelings of social safeness increased following the social BMAC, whilst negative affect decreased.

Of the research Dr Taylor, said: "The results provide preliminary support for the effectiveness of the social BMAC in activating specific types of emotion.

"These results suggest that the BMAC has the potential to be a practical and effective method for boosting mood amongst individuals with specific mental health problems such as anxiety or depression."

The research was undertaken in collaboration with clinicians from Lancashire Care NHS Foundation Trust and the Compassion in Mind company.

More information: The study, entitled 'Emotional Response to a Therapeutic Technique: The social Broad Minded Affective Coping (BMAC)', has been published today (20 April 2016) in the journal

Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice.

Provided by University of Liverpool

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