Emotional future-oriented thoughts in daily life

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Important progress has recently been made in understanding the representations and processes underlying our ability to mentally explore possible futures [Schacter et al., 2012, Neuron, 76(4), 677-694]. While many thoughts and mental images that we form about our personal future refer to emotionally significant events, either positive situations that we strive to achieve or negative situations that we would rather avoid [D’Argembeau et al., 2011, Applied Cognitive Psychology, 25(1), 96-103], little is known about the frequency and nature of emotional future-oriented thoughts (EFTs) that occur in natural settings. Hence, the main goal of the present study was to examine thoroughly the conditions of occurrence, characteristics, and perceived functions of EFTs arising in daily life. In the first part of the study, participants recorded the number of EFTs that they experienced during three typical days of their lives. In the second part of the study, they recorded 10 EFTs as they occurred during their daily activities, and rated their characteristics, context of occurrence, associated emotional states, and perceived functions. Results show that EFTs are frequent in daily life, occur in various contexts, and take on different representational formats. Investigating the affective dimension of EFTs, two emotional components of EFTs were distinguished: anticipatory emotions, which refer to the emotions experienced in the present in response to the prospect of future events, and anticipated emotions, which refer to the emotions that are expected to be experienced in the future, if and when imagined events occur [Bauergartner et al., 2008, European Journal of Social Psychology, 38(4), 68-696]. A positivity bias in the frequency of reported EFTs was found to be restricted to anticipated emotions. The representational format and perceived functions of EFTs varied according to the valence of both anticipatory and anticipated emotions, whose intensities were influenced by the personal importance and amount of visual imagery of EFTs. Furthermore, anticipatory and anticipated emotions impacted significantly on post-EFT mood states. Finally, EFTs were perceived as serving a range of important functions related to goal pursuit (i.e., planning, intention formation, and decision making) and emotion regulation. In sum, these results shed further light on the emotional properties of EFTs that are experienced in daily life.