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Positive affect and parasympathetic activity: Evidence for a quadratic relationship between  
feeling safe and content and heart rate variability

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Abstract

There has been an increased interest in the study of underlying autonomic correlates of  
emotions. This study tests the hypothesis that high levels of high-frequency heart rate  
variability (HF HRV) are associated with positive emotions. In addition, we hypothesize that  
this association will differ according to the type of positive emotion. Also, based on recent  
findings, we tested the hypothesis that this relationship would be nonlinear.

Resting-state HRV was collected and self-report measures of different positive emotions were  
administered to a sample of 124 volunteers.

Results:

Results suggested that there was a quadratic relationship between high-frequency heart rate  
variability and positive emotions associated with safeness and contentment, but not with  
positive emotions associated with excitement or lack of arousal.

Our data suggests that different positive emotions may be characterized by qualitatively  
distinct profiles of autonomic activation. Also, given the role of positive emotions in social  
affiliation, and particularly positive emotions associated with a quiescence motivational state,  
results are interpreted in light of theoretical accounts that highlight the importance of vagal  
regulation for social behavior.

Keywords:

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