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Positive future-oriented fantasies and depressive symptoms: Indirect relationship through brooding



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ABSTRACT

Although a positive future outlook is generally associated with psychological well-being, indulging in positive fantasies about the future has been found to exacerbate negative mood-related outcomes such as depressive symptoms. We examined rumination as a cognitive mechanism in this relationship, using an objectively coded measure of future-oriented fantasies, among 261 young adults assessed twice. Engaging in a positive fantasy about the future was associated with the brooding subtype of rumination but not with reflection at baseline. There was an indirect relationship between fantasies at baseline and depressive symptoms at six-week follow-up through brooding at average and high levels of fantasy positivity when fantasizing was consistent or increased over time but not when it decreased. Engaging in fantasies was indirectly associated with perceived difficulty anticipating likely positive future outcomes through brooding. These findings extend previous research on positive fantasies by suggesting brooding as a mechanism to explain when they are maladaptive.

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1. Introduction

Positive future-oriented thinking is generally considered adaptive. Positive expectations about the future are associated with greater resilience to stress (Brisette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Souri & Hasanirad, 2011), improved physical health outcomes (Ironson et al., 2005; Rasmussen, Carver, & Greenhouse, 2009), and protection against depressive symptoms (Giltay, Zitman, & Kromhout, 2006; Sergeant & Mongrain, 2014). However, increasing evidence suggests that not all types of positive future-oriented thinking are beneficial. One form, in particular – indulging in positive fantasies about a desired future outcome – has been linked to lower motivation, thwarted goal attainment (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Pham & Taylor, 1999), and most recently, increased depressive symptoms over time (Oettingen, Mayer, & Portnow, 2016). The present study seeks to extend recent literature by examining the relation of positive future-oriented fantasies to cognitions known to be associated with depressive symptoms.

1.1. When positive fantasies become maladaptive

Studies suggest that future-oriented thoughts and fantasies play a large role in human cognition. People appear to spend as much time thinking about the future as the past (Finnbogadottir & Bernsten, 2013), with many of those thoughts being

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visual (D'Argembeau, Renaud, & Van Der Linden, 2011; Klinger & Cox, 1987). One study found that one future-oriented thought occurred every 16 min among young adults (D'Argembeau et al., 2011). Engaging in a conscious fantasy involves a shift of attention inward, away from external stimuli. This process has been described as consisting of “pictures in the mind's eye” and “the unrolling of a sequence of events, memories, or creatively constructed images of future events which have varying degrees of probability of taking place” (Singer, 2014, p. 3). The ability to envision both a desired goal and the steps needed to get there can help with many important aspects of cognition, including planning, decision-making, and emotion regulation (D'Argembeau et al., 2011; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). However, fantasies that arise naturally in daily life instead of being induced experimentally often do not occur as accurate or complete visualizations of both the process and the outcome of attaining a desired goal. On the contrary, fantasies tend to capture the most salient rather than the most likely aspects of a potential future experience, and they tend to have a positivity bias, zeroing in on positive details while leaving out negative ones (Finnbogadottir & Bernsten, 2013; Bertsen & Jacobsen, 2008; Dunning, 2007; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). By presenting an idealized view of the goal and any steps it may take to get there, fantasies may distort one's estimation of the amount of work required to reach the goal.

Indeed, in the act of repeatedly imagining a positive future outcome, the subjective likelihood of such an event occurring has been shown to increase (Szpunar & Schacter, 2013), potentially luring those who consistently fantasize into thinking that less effort is needed to attain the goal. Further, envisioning the desired future outcome as if it has already been attained may lower the drive to take action and attain the goal (Oettingen, 2012; Oettingen & Hagenah, 2005; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). In a series of studies, Oettingen and Mayer (2002) found that while participants with positive expectations about the future displayed higher motivation and achieved greater success in attaining their goal over time, those who indulged in positive fantasies about a desired future outcome exerted less effort and were less likely to achieve their goal. Oettingen and colleagues suggest that the pleasure gained from simulating a positive, idealized vision of a future outcome as if it has already been attained reduces energy mobilization toward goal pursuit (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011; Oettingen, 2012; Oettingen & Hagenah, 2005; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). Consistent with this idea, in multiple studies, positive fantasies about a desired future outcome have been found to reduce participants' energy, as assessed by physiological, self-report, and behavioral measures of effort exerted toward a goal (Kappes & Oettingen, 2011; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002).

1.2. Positive fantasies, mood, and rumination

Few studies have examined the impact of future-oriented fantasies on mood. Daydreaming about successful goal attainment was previously found to be associated with increased depressive symptoms and reduced goal commitment among individuals high in fear of failure (Langens & Schmalt, 2002). Oettingen et al. (2016) found that positive fantasies, while associated concurrently with lower symptoms of depression, were associated with increases in depressive symptoms over time in four studies involving adults and schoolchildren and time periods ranging from six weeks to seven months. The researchers speculated that the link between fantasies and mood may be related to the use of avoidance coping. This self-regulation strategy is characterized by cognitive and behavioral attempts to avoid thinking about a problem realistically, and it predicts increases in depressive symptoms over time (Holahan, Moos, Holahan, Brennan, & Schutte, 2005).

Rumination may be one form of avoidance through which positive fantasies may lead to increased depressive symptoms. Rumination involves passive, perseverative thinking about the causes and consequences of low mood with little effort in engaging with direct experiential states, and it predicts the onset and maintenance of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Importantly, rumination is seen as an involuntary behavior, characterized by persistent intrusive thoughts that may keep an individual from moving on from these cognitions (Martin & Tesser, 1996; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Self-focused rumination has been found to consist of two factors: *brooding*, which involves passive dwelling on a negative mood, and *reflection*, which is marked by purposeful contemplation that may lead to solutions. Brooding – but not reflection – has been found to be associated with increased symptoms of depression over time (Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Studies suggest that when individuals respond to negative emotions with ruminative self-focus, they experience more disengagement from problems, increased depressive symptoms, and less confidence and plan commitment (Ehring, Frank, & Ehlers, 2008; Hong, 2007; Lavender & Watkins, 2004; Ward, Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000).

Since engaging in positive fantasies about a desired future outcome is characterized by similar features as rumination (i.e., involuntary, avoidant) and has been found to predict similar negative outcomes as rumination (i.e., lower plan commitment, problem disengagement, depressive symptoms), it may be a maladaptive cognitive process that impacts mood through a similar mechanism as rumination. Because involuntary positive fantasies often occur in a form that doesn't involve purposeful contemplation (i.e., outcome vs. process fantasy), they may resemble brooding, rather than reflection, and through brooding may lead to increases in depressive symptoms.

The positive rumination literature so far has not addressed prospecting, but findings from this literature hint at an alternative explanation for how positive future fantasies may influence mood through rumination in some cases: Instead of resembling brooding, consistently engaging in positive future-oriented fantasies may *trigger* brooding, which may then lead to an increase in depressive symptoms. For instance, one form of positive rumination known as dampening (i.e., attempts to engage in cognitive responses to counter positive affect) has been found to predict depressive symptoms over time (Feldman, Joormann, & Johnson, 2008; Gilbert, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Gruber, 2013; Raes, Smets, Nelis, & Schoofs, 2012). Further, Feldman et al. (2008) found that individuals who reported dampening positive affect also reported higher rumination

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