

MENTAL CONTRASTING OF COUNTERFACTUAL FANTASIES ATTENUATES REGRET AND RESENTMENT

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COUNTERFACTUAL FANTASIES

Mental representations of how our lives could have been better are termed *counterfactual*, representing alternative scenarios to the factual past (Roese, 1997). Idealized counterfactuals lead to negative affect, because the reality seems worse in contrast to the idealized counterfactual (Roese, 1994). In response to immutable life events, counterfactuals are dysfunctional and lead to negative emotions which are harmful when expectations of attaining the desired alternative are low (e.g. Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver, & Thompson, 1995). Counterfactuals may represent simulation-based scenarios. Similar to fantasies about a desired future (free images of desired events that might happen in the future; Oettingen, 2012), we define counterfactual fantasies as free images of desired events that might have happened in the past.

MENTAL CONTRASTING

The self-regulation strategy of mentally contrasting positive fantasies about a desired future with obstacles of current reality helps people to utilize their expectations of attaining a desired future. In case of high expectations of success, people strive to attain the desired future, whereas in case of low expectations of success, people let go of attaining the desired future (review by Oettingen, 2012).

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Because mental contrasting helps people to let go of their positive future fantasies in case of low expectations of success, we investigated whether mental contrasting also helps people to let go from fantasies about idealized alternative pasts. We hypothesized that mental contrasting should help people to realize that obstacles of current reality are difficult to overcome and help them to let go of negative emotions that accompany longings for the alternative past.

STUDY 1: COUNTERFACTUAL EMOTIONS

Procedure. MTurk users ($N = 97$) mentally contrasted their positive counterfactual fantasies (e.g. “If only my partner would have stayed with me”) with the obstacle of current reality (e.g. “It’s too late”) or to indulge in their counterfactual fantasies.

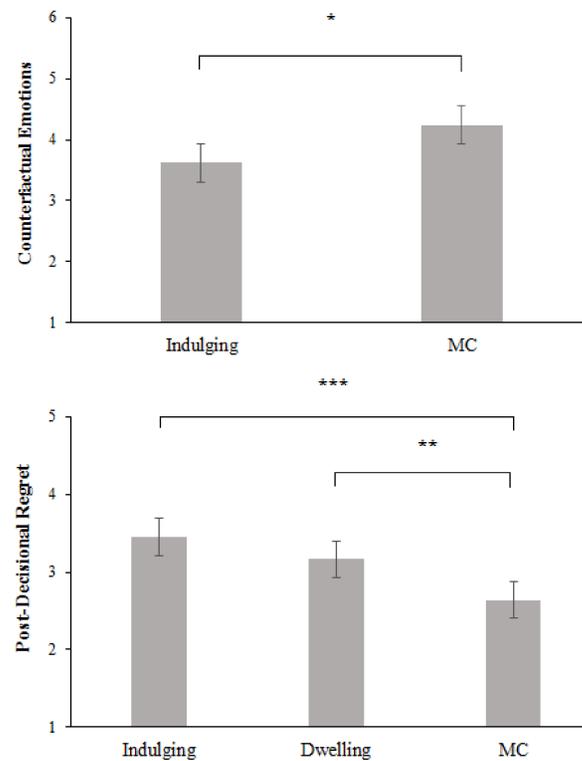
DV. Counterfactual emotions (e.g. *disappointed, hostile*; Roese, 1994). High scores indicate less negative counterfactual emotions.

STUDY 2: POST-DECISIONAL REGRET

Procedure. MTurk users ($N = 130$) mentally contrasted their positive counterfactual fantasies about an alternative to a decision (e.g. “If I had attended a different university”) with current reality (e.g. “No money anymore”), indulged in their positive counterfactual fantasies, or dwelled on their current reality.

DV. Post-decisional regret (Decision Regret Scale; Brehaut et al., 2003). High scores indicate high levels of post-decisional regret.

RESULTS STUDIES 1 & 2

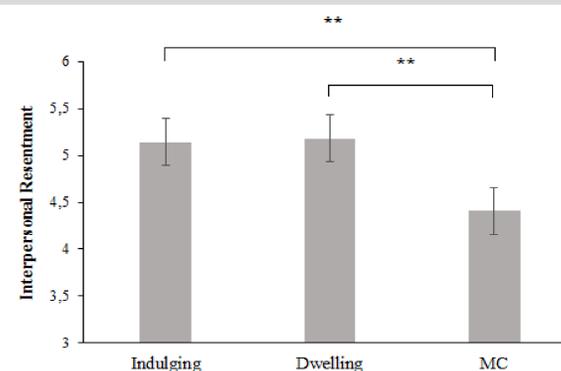


STUDY 3: INTERPERSONAL RESENTMENT

Procedure. MTurk users ($N = 116$) mentally contrasted their positive counterfactual fantasies about an alternative to a negative event caused by another person (e.g. “If only this person hadn’t wasted my time”) with the obstacle of current reality (e.g. “Too late”), vs. indulged or dwelled.

DV. Interpersonal resentment (GRAT-R; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). High scores indicate high levels of interpersonal resentment.

RESULTS STUDY 3

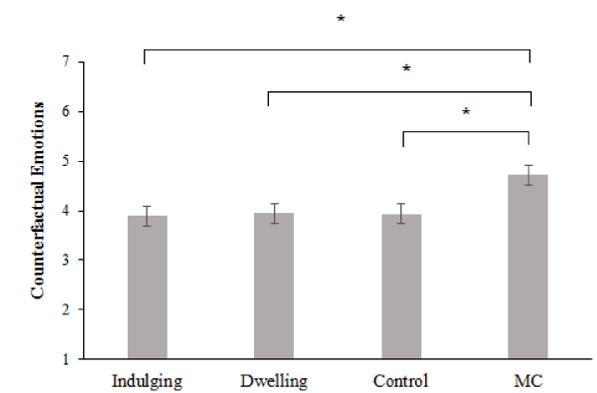


STUDY 4: COUNTERFACTUAL EMOTIONS & UNCONTROLLABLE EVENTS

Procedure. MTurk users ($N = 218$) mentally contrasted their positive counterfactual fantasies about an alternative to a negative event for which no one was to blame (e.g. “If only my dad hadn’t died”) with the obstacle of current reality (e.g. “You can’t undo death”), vs. indulged, dwelled or elaborated on irrelevant content (control condition).

DV. Counterfactual emotions. High scores indicate less negative counterfactual emotions.

RESULTS STUDY 4



CONCLUSION

Across four studies, mental contrasting helped to attenuate negative emotions resulting from counterfactual fantasies. These results appeared for counterfactual alternatives to various life events (past decisions, events caused by another person, uncontrollable events), and for various measures of counterfactual emotions (counterfactual emotions, post-decisional regret, resentment).

Those findings might be relevant for building interventions to help people to come to terms with their idealized counterfactual past.

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