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THE RED TRAIN TECHNIQUE: A CUE-BASED APPROACH TO CULTIVATING POSITIVE EMOTIONS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Abstract. The Red Train Technique combines a cue, an expression of joy, and attention to one's emotional state. This paper outlines its research foundations, practice stages, partner support, and limitations, and proposes hypotheses and directions for empirical investigation.

Keywords: Positive emotions, joy, emotion regulation, cue, positive psychology, emotional awareness.

Introduction

The ability to experience joy is relevant to subjective well-being. However, a pleasant event does not always produce a pronounced positive emotional experience. People may take their achievements for granted, quickly move on to the next task, or pay more attention to difficulties than to favorable circumstances. They may recognize that they are minimizing the significance of positive events and their own accomplishments and describe this tendency as discounting the positive. Yet understanding what is happening does not necessarily help them feel joy. In everyday language, such experiences are sometimes described as having "forgotten how to enjoy life." This expression conveys a subjective experience but is not, in itself, a psychological diagnosis.

One relevant concept is negativity bias: the greater influence of negative information on certain processes of attention, evaluation, and behavior. Its potential adaptive significance has been associated with the need to detect possible threats [1]. Nevertheless, this tendency should not be treated as a universal characteristic of every person in every situation.

The significance of positive emotions extends beyond the pleasantness of the experience itself. S. Lyubomirsky, L. King, and E. Diener synthesized findings from cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies examining the relationship between positive affect and outcomes in work, relationships, income, and health. Their findings suggest that positive emotions may be not only a consequence of favorable events but also one of the factors contributing to successful functioning [2]. This provides a rationale for studying practices that cultivate positive emotions, although it does not establish the effectiveness of any particular technique.

Positive psychology examines the conditions of well-being, positive experiences, and personal resources. D. A. Leontiev describes it as a developing scientific field encompassing different perspectives on positive human functioning [3]. This approach makes it possible to investigate joy without assuming that a fulfilling life must consist exclusively of pleasant emotions.

The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical description of the Red Train Technique, which is intended to help people practice accessing positive emotions through a chosen cue and an expression of joy. The paper presents a conceptual proposal based on the integration of selected research perspectives. No original empirical data are reported.

Psychological Foundations of Cultivating Positive Emotions

A distinction should be made between momentary joy, optimism, and well-being. In this paper, joy is understood as an emotional experience that arises and changes within a particular situation. Optimism concerns expectations about the future and ways of explaining events. T. O. Gordeeva considers optimism within the framework of personal potential [4]. The proposed technique directly targets the experience of joy; its possible effects on enduring optimism and well-being require separate investigation.

In M. Seligman's framework, positive emotion is one component of well-being, alongside engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment [5]. A short-term increase in joy should therefore not be equated with a change in overall well-being.

Seligman and colleagues investigated the deliberate cultivation of positive experiences in a randomized study of positive psychology exercises. Some of the practices tested increased happiness and reduced depressive symptoms [6]. These findings support interest in developing specific exercises, but they do not justify assuming that every practice intended to promote positive emotions will be effective.

A Russian-language review by A. A. Fevzieva examines the Best Possible Self intervention, which involves imagining a favorable future. The review discusses studies of different exercise formats and conditions of use [7]. Although this intervention differs from the proposed technique, it provides an example of scientific investigation into deliberate activities intended to promote positive experiences.

Emotional Expression and Subjective Experience

One foundation of the proposed technique is the facial feedback hypothesis, according to which facial activity can influence subjective emotional experience. In the international Many Smiles Collaboration study, involving 3,878 participants from 19 countries, voluntary facial actions and facial mimicry could amplify and initiate feelings of happiness. The findings depended on the experimental procedure [8].

In an empirical study by O. V. Balueva, Yu. E. Kravchenko, and S. I. Kartashov, subjective bodily sensations corresponded more closely to participants' emotional evaluations of stimuli than to objective measures of physiological arousal [9]. This highlights the need to distinguish subjective experience from recorded physiological changes.

Research on facial feedback suggests that emotional expression may contribute to changes in emotional experience under certain conditions [8]. However, findings concerning smiling cannot automatically be generalized to all gestures, movements, and vocal expressions. In the proposed technique, the outward expression of joy, the subjective feeling of joy, and physiological indicators should be assessed separately.

Attention to Positive Experience and the Cue

Savoring involves deliberately attending to pleasant experiences, deepening them, and prolonging them. In an experiment by K. A. Wilson and A. MacNamara, 49 participants either enhanced their positive emotional responses while viewing images or simply viewed them. Savoring was accompanied by changes in subjective ratings and electrophysiological measures. When the images were presented again approximately 20 minutes later, some differences persisted without renewed instructions to enhance emotion [10].

The principle of attending to an emerging emotional experience is relevant to the proposed technique. However, this image-viewing experiment does not demonstrate that an arbitrary verbal cue can independently elicit joy.

Organizing the exercise around a cue is consistent with implementation intentions, or "if–then" plans. Such plans connect a specified situation with a predetermined action. In a study by G. P. Hallam and colleagues, implementation intentions were used to reduce negative responses to unpleasant images [11]. These findings suggest that a cue may facilitate the initiation of a chosen emotion-regulation strategy. Whether this principle can be used to elicit joy requires separate investigation.

Inner Experience and External Circumstances

V. Frankl's account is relevant to the question of people's capacity to influence their emotional state. In describing his imprisonment in a concentration camp, he recounts mentally turning to the image of his wife and engaging in an inner dialogue with her [12, pp. 79–81]. He also describes memories of ordinary life and encounters with natural beauty that evoked admiration even under conditions of severe deprivation [12, pp. 82–84].

These accounts illustrate that inner experience may include love, meaning, and admiration alongside ongoing suffering. In the context of this paper, they raise questions about the role of attention and personally meaningful imagery in emotional experience.

Frankl's account is not treated as evidence of the effectiveness of an exercise or of complete voluntary control over feelings. Rather, it provides a basis for considering people as active participants in shaping their relationship to events. The possibility of deliberately influencing one's emotional state should be distinguished from a requirement to experience positive emotions.

Origins of the Idea

The starting point was an anecdote recounted by Tony Robbins, which the author heard at Unleash the Power Within seminars in 2025 and 2026. As the author recalls, Robbins described a workshop disrupted by passing trains. Participants were invited to express joy whenever a train passed, associating a recurring disturbance with a deliberately chosen response.

The anecdote is treated as a source of inspiration rather than scientific evidence of the exercise's effectiveness. The idea of expressing joy in response to a passing train, and of extending this practice to other situations, is not claimed as the present author's invention.

The contribution proposed here consists of describing an individual version of the practice, relating its components to psychological research, and formulating testable hypotheses. The name "Red Train" serves as a memorable metaphor. No special psychological effect is attributed to the color red or to the image of a train.

Description of the Technique

The technique involves repeatedly combining a chosen cue, an individual expression of joy, and attention to the resulting emotional state. In this paper, emotional awareness means noticing one's current emotional state and deliberately choosing how to respond next.

The cue has two hypothesized functions: it reminds the person of the possibility of accessing positive emotions and helps them notice their current response so that they can deliberately choose a subsequent course of action. The initial emotion may arise involuntarily; choice concerns subsequent actions and attempts to influence one's state.

The first stage is selecting a response. The person identifies a comfortable way of expressing joy, such as smiling, exclaiming "Hooray!", raising their arms, clapping, or performing another action. A natural response to a favorite team's victory, a reunion with a loved one, or a personal achievement can provide a reference point. Recalling such an event may help establish the action, but recollection is not required during every subsequent repetition.

The second stage is selecting a cue. This may be the phrase "Red Train," an image, an object, or a recurring event. The person formulates an intention: "When I notice this cue, I will use my chosen expression of joy."

The third stage is practice. In a safe setting, the person produces the cue and performs the chosen action. They then attend to the outcome: whether joy has emerged and whether tension, a sense of lightness, or energy has changed. An absence of change or the emergence of discomfort is also noted.

The fourth stage is application in everyday life. Following a pleasant event, the cue may serve as a reminder to notice and express joy. For example, after completing an important task, the person takes time to experience the accomplishment before moving on to the next task. Smaller events may also provide an opportunity: catching a bus, receiving kind words, or overcoming an everyday difficulty.

In a neutral situation, the person can explore whether their emotional state changes without a separate pleasant event. Following a minor setback, the technique may be used as an attempt to shift their response and regain readiness to act.

For example, after breaking a favorite cup, a person may feel upset and then use the cue and their chosen expression of joy. The aim is to attempt to influence their emotional state and return to

the actions required by the situation. They are not required to deny the cup's value or regard its loss as a pleasant event.

The frequency and duration of practice have not yet been established. These parameters need to be determined and tested empirically.

Partner-Assisted Practice and Habit Formation

In everyday life, people do not always remember to use a new practice. A familiar response may unfold before an intention to act differently arises. Familiarity with the technique therefore does not necessarily translate into independent use at an appropriate moment.

An additional version involves a practice partner, or buddy, who may be a spouse, friend, or colleague. By prior agreement, the partner's role is to provide reminders in different everyday circumstances. These reminders can be reciprocal.

Partner support is relevant not only after unpleasant events. For example, after completing a project, a person may immediately move on to other tasks without acknowledging the result. A colleague's phrase "Red Train" invites them to pause, recognize the accomplishment, and express joy. It is hypothesized that such a reminder may help the person give a positive event more attention and experience it more fully.

Following an unpleasant situation, the same cue serves as a reminder to notice one's state and deliberately choose the next action. For example, after a tense conversation with a client, a person may continue to feel irritated or upset. The agreed cue invites them to remember the practice and decide whether it is appropriate at that moment.

The partner does not determine what the person should feel. A reminder is an invitation rather than a demand to change an emotion. The person may decline the exercise. The cue should not be used to dismiss someone's feelings or stop discussion of a problem.

Repeated use of the cue is hypothesized to facilitate independent use of the practice over time. Whether such a skill develops, and how long this takes, requires investigation. The aim is to make a chosen action more accessible, rather than to require joy in response to every event.

Hypothesized Mechanisms and Limitations

Several possible mechanisms are proposed: facilitating the initiation of a chosen action through a cue, influencing emotional experience through expression, and directing attention toward positive experience. Partner-assisted practice adds an external reminder to use the technique. All these mechanisms remain hypothetical in relation to the proposed practice.

The cue may also remind people that they can participate in regulating their emotional state. It is necessary to distinguish the initial involuntary emotion from subsequent action. People cannot always feel joy immediately, but they can try different responses and observe their consequences.

The automatization of a gesture or exclamation does not imply the automatization of a feeling. Outward expressions of joy alone are therefore insufficient indicators of the technique's success.

Use of the exercise is intended to be voluntary and appropriate to the circumstances. It should not replace problem-solving, acknowledgment of loss, or action in response to danger. The technique is not proposed as a treatment for depression or a persistent loss of the capacity to experience pleasure.

Directions for Future Investigation

The main hypothesis is that regularly pairing a cue with an individual expression of joy may increase momentary positive emotions.

The technique should be compared with a neutral action performed in response to a cue and with an expression of joy performed without a specifically established cue. This would help determine whether combining the components offers an advantage over using them separately.

Assessment should include subjective joy before and after the exercise, ease of use, possible discomfort, and the persistence of any changes. Transfer to pleasant, neutral, and mildly unpleasant

situations requires separate investigation. Positive outcomes, an absence of effects, and increased irritation should all be considered.

Partner-assisted practice also requires evaluation. Comparing independent practice with reciprocal reminders would be informative. Relevant outcomes include frequency of use, perceived helpfulness of support, awareness of the possibility of choosing a response, and any feelings of pressure or emotional invalidation.

Digital support is another potential direction, including self-recorded significant events, application reminders, and, where suitable equipment is available, physiological measurements used to prompt consideration of the practice. Within this proposal, changes in heart rate and heart rate variability would not be treated as unambiguous indicators of a particular emotion. Physical activity and the person's own assessment of the situation would need to be considered. Whether digital reminders facilitate timely use of the technique and alter its effectiveness remains to be investigated.

Conclusion

The Red Train Technique is proposed as a way of practicing access to positive emotions through a cue and an individual expression of joy. Its theoretical description draws on research into positive psychology exercises, facial feedback, savoring, and implementation intentions. Its practical interest lies in helping people notice opportunities for joy, recognize the possibility of choosing their subsequent response, and explore ways of deliberately influencing their emotional state. Partner-assisted practice and digital reminders are considered possible ways to support learning and using the technique.

The effectiveness of the Red Train Technique remains a subject for future empirical investigation.

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