

An Unusual Positive Affective Regime: A Phenomenological Report

The state at height months post-transition

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A Regime Theory of Joy
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Context

In December 2025, I tried to come up with ideas about Positive Affect (PA). I hypothesized that “optimization” was preventing to some degree PA from emerging.

To test this idea, I downloaded a first-person shooter and deliberately played in a sub-optimal way. Instead of trying to win, I intentionally spent approximately two minutes per day performing actions with no instrumental purpose.

For example, I clicked without a purpose, hesitated between two paths, or changed direction arbitrarily, alongside various exercises designed to disrupt meaning attribution and item valuation. I did not expect more than a few minutes of PA, followed by an irreversible tolerance.

After five daily attempts, I experienced an intense episode of joy lasting approximately 48 hours. The intensity of this experience was far beyond what I would normally associate with enjoyment. Since then, this state re-emerges shortly after I perform even a very small non-instrumental action, such as an arbitrary click, movement, or gesture. This observation has remained consistent across months.

Joy as a Problem of Causal Rigidity

A Regime Theory of Joy is a theoretical framework developed to explain the mechanisms underlying these observations. It proposes that joy is not merely a reward state but a distinct access regime. According to this framework, the emergence of joy depends on the temporary suspension of premature cognitive closure. When evaluative and action-guiding processes, collectively represented as Z , are sufficiently reduced, the state undergoes a threshold-like transition into a more monitoring-resistant configuration.

Accordingly, the principal obstacle to the emergence of joy is neither a lack of reward nor a dopaminergic deficit, but the progressive rigidification of acquired causal chains. Through learning, the brain accumulates countless cause-and-effect relationships

that organize perception and behavior. This cumulative rigidity is represented by the variable **Z**.

As **Z** increases, it progressively recruits a control regime specialized for prediction and optimization. This regime is incompatible with the *ease regime* associated with joy.

Result

Phenomenology of the Ease Regime

Consistently observed features	Occasionally observed features
Heightened olfactory sensitivity	Stable and vivid mental imagery
Heightened visual vividness	Realistic, involuntary completion of positive autobiographical memories
Pleasant chest-centered sensation	Spontaneous recruitment of odors, colors, and tastes from minimal cues.
Distinct feeling of joy	
Increased reaction to moody stimuli (e.g., music), "being moved"	

The Feeling of Joy

This feature is distinct from ordinary contentment, happiness, satisfaction, or pleasure. Instead, it is experienced as an immediate and unambiguous feeling of joy. The experience is simply identified as "joy."

During these episodes, smiling faces become particularly easy to imagine, while other forms of imagery appear less natural. The feeling is highly distinctive and difficult to describe.

The distinct feeling of joy itself typically occurs in episodes lasting minutes rather than hours, even when the broader state persists much longer. The state can be prolonged by sustained exposure to childlike content, such as cartoons or children's music.

Subjective Recognition: "This is obviously joy." Almost immediately, this is

followed by the thought, "I am not able to communicate it," and then, "Wow, that's amazing."

The experience often leaves a lingering sense of astonishment. A recurring impression is: "This is joy. I can't believe it. This feels like a gift".

Being-Moved Mode

This mode combines joy with a sadness-like emotional quality. In this mode, music can become emotionally overwhelming, particularly lower-toned material such as children's songs, light-themed but slightly melancholic older songs, or emotionally simple melodies. Muted visual environments, including Christmas decorations and jewel-like imagery, also appear to intensify the state. Phenomenologically, the experience is often accompanied by thoughts such as: "It is interesting," or "It is fabulous."

Subjectively, this mode is consistently moving because it closely resembles a type of emotional experience commonly associated with childhood joy. It is experienced as aesthetically beautiful, emotionally intense, and deeply moving, while remaining distinctly non-sad.

What does it compare to? Subjectively, I would say that it bears some resemblance to the effects of alcohol. However, alcohol's effects vary substantially across individuals.

Energetic Mode

Chest-centered pleasure in this mode is amplified by higher-energy music, highly salient imagery, and bright visual stimuli. Sensory experiences, including odors and sounds, appear noticeably enhanced. It is euphoric in the sense that intense chest-centered pleasure is present, yet it remains unusually quiet and tranquil rather than agitated.

Images or videos depicting strong bodily confidence appear to increase the intensity of the thoracic pleasure state. In addition, stimuli involving improbable events, exaggerated timing, unexpected perceptual transitions, or simple movements are associated with increases in intensity. One possible interpretation is that these stimuli generate unusually frequent or salient prediction errors.

What does it compare to? Subjectively, it bears some resemblance to the early experiential phase of tramadol before tolerance develops, although without the sedative component. The principal difference is that the state feels remarkably clean and coherent, with emotional responses remaining tied to salient and unexpected features of the environment rather than becoming diffuse.

This is intense chest-centered pleasure. At times it feels 'full bandwidth,' a subjective impression that the experience is operating at unusually high intensity and richness. It is strongly modulated by simple visual stimuli. The experience is highly resistant to boredom and remains engaging even during prolonged exposure. For this reason, intense chest-centered pleasure constitutes the central and most distinctive feature of the Energetic mode.

Golden Tint (visual)

Within the "being moved" mode, scenes often appear to acquire a subtle warm golden tint, contributing to a richer and more aesthetically significant perceptual quality. The intensity of this effect is variable and can range from barely noticeable to highly pronounced. This phenomenon has only been observed within the "being moved" mode and not within the "energetic" mode.



The energetic mode is characterized by a subtle increase in vividness, brightness, and impact.

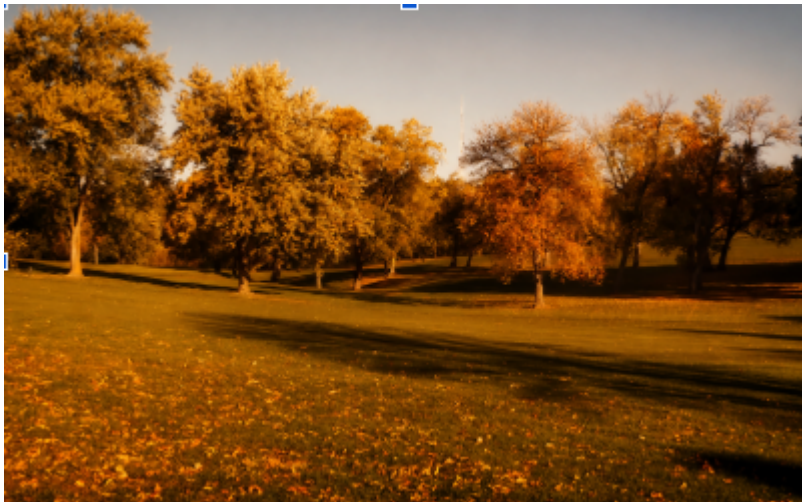


Illustration of the ease regime "being moved" mode at maximal subjective intensity. The characteristic warm golden tint is variable in magnitude across episodes. In addition, white elements are frequently associated with a snow-like perceptual texture. This aspect is not represented in the image.

Subjective Recognition: "Yes, this is joy." The feeling serves primarily as an indicator that the state has emerged. Although highly pleasant, it does not produce a strong sense of wanting, seeking, or reward.

Jewels Raining

One particularly unusual feature is the spontaneous appearance of jewel-related imagery. During some episodes, emeralds, rubies, gemstones, or jewel-like objects can be effortlessly imagined as moving or falling through an internally generated visual scene. The experience is natural, mildly pleasant, and requires little or no intentional effort.

Similar to the warm golden tint, it primarily functions as an indicator that the state is present rather than as a major source of pleasure.

The imagery appears constrained in its spatial dynamics. The jewels are typically experienced as flowing in a single direction, resembling rainfall or a downward stream. Voluntary modifications of the pattern appear limited.

Subjective Recognition: Its appearance often produces an immediate recognition: “I like that,” followed by, “Yes, the state is here.” Although striking and somewhat unusual, the phenomenon is not among the most important experiential features of the state itself.

Stable and Vivid Imagination

Stable imagery frequently appears following openness exercises. Its defining feature is not necessarily greater vividness, but unusual persistence and stability. Internally generated scenes can remain available for extended periods and can sometimes be incorporated into the surrounding environment without immediately fading.

Sense of Arrival

Sometimes, the state carries a subtle sense of presence. It feels less like something I am actively producing and more like something that has arrived on its own. Although slightly uncanny, the sensation is generally reassuring. **Subjective Recognition:** “Joy is competent.”

Spontaneous Internal Selection

Stored songs, melodies, or video fragments sometimes come to mind spontaneously. The experience is not one of deliberate selection, but rather of being spontaneously drawn toward a particular item. The selected material often feels unusually appropriate to the current state and frequently increases its intensity.

Realistic Completion of Positive Autobiographical Memories

This is nowhere near nostalgia. Nostalgia often carries a sense of loss and remains relatively controllable. Here, the state is intense, not controllable, and completely lacks the feeling of loss.

What is striking is that when I look at a tiny object resembling childhood objects, the exact same feeling returns immediately, often with very high intensity. It concerns images of treasure, gold, intense light, saturated colors, gems, and shiny objects: It is not experienced as a vague autobiographical memory, but as the sudden reappearance of a fully familiar perceptual texture. The sensation feels exact, abrupt, and flashback-like, and involuntary.

Different objects, colors, and odors appear capable of triggering distinct familiar textures of experience. For example, while walking through a shopping mall, multiple objects and odors may spontaneously trigger distinct familiar textures within seconds, often unexpectedly, because the process does not feel voluntarily controlled. The recognition emerges on its own.

Colors can also become unusually intense and almost consumable, as if I were 'eating a candy', again with a strong sense of familiarity. Importantly, the experience is not: 'I remember this.' It is closer to: 'Oh damn, this is it.' The state feels like direct re-access to a specific mode of experience rather than recollection about the past.

Paradoxical Effects

A paradoxical effect was repeatedly observed. Attempts to suppress the state, for example when an important task required immediate attention, did not reliably reduce its intensity. In some cases, such attempts appeared to be followed by a temporary increase in intensity. The reasons for this effect remain unclear.

Migraine episodes were also consistently associated with stronger state intensity. This association was sufficiently noticeable to be repeatedly observed, although its significance remains uncertain. **Possible interpretation.** One possibility is that attempts at suppression alter the balance between inhibitory control and the processes supporting the state. Another possibility is that the apparent increase reflects attentional or perceptual changes rather than an increase in the underlying state itself.

Conclusion

The Minimal Z-Reduction Task (M-ZRT) introduces brief perturbations intended to reduce or interrupt the progressive accumulation of next action pressure while allowing normal behavior to continue. Within the M-ZRT framework, these perturbations are hypothesized to increase the probability of entering the ease regime, a permissive control configuration associated with access to high-intensity PA (joy).

The present report should not be interpreted as definitive evidence for the existence of a distinct affective regime. Its primary limitation is methodological: the observations are based on a single self-report, without external validation, independent measurements, replication, control conditions, or objective temporal tracking. As such, alternative interpretations, including idiosyncratic altered-state phenomena, remain possible.

However, the consistency of the phenomenology, the apparent reproducibility of some features across sessions, and the reported emergence of the transition during a brief and structured procedure may justify cautious experimental investigation. At minimum, the present observations suggest that unusually intense and distinctive affective configurations may exist that are difficult to capture within standard evaluative or laboratory contexts.

The aim of this report is therefore not to establish the existence of the proposed ease regime, but to document a coherent and apparently reproducible

experiential pattern, describe the conditions under which it emerged, and provide a set of observations that can be tested under controlled conditions.

References:

Morin, F. (2026). A Regime Theory of Joy: Ease as a Permissive Control Configuration. *SSRN*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6711318>

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