Memory and emotion regulation

Simon Norby (2017)

Can people control their memories and thereby regulate their emotions? Traditionally, emotion regulation has been conceived of as proactive (e.g., situation selection) or reactive (e.g., attentional distraction; Gross, 2015), but I propose that it may also be retroactive and target memory. Mnemonic emotion regulation may involve increasing or decreasing access to a memory or changing the memory itself in order to influence the experience or expression of emotions. Mnemonic emotion regulation likely depends on a working self (see Conway, 2005) and on executive functions (see Levy & Anderson, 2008). Also, it may typically be motivated by hedonic goals (see Gross et al., 2006).

Increasing access
A person may increase access to an emotional memory and make it more likely that it will be retrieved in the future and in many situations.

Increasing access may involve rehearsing (Werner-Seidler & Dalgleish, 2016) or elaborating on (see Rubin & Berntsen, 2003) a pleasant memory, for example.

Decreasing access
A person may decrease access to an emotional memory and make it less likely that unwanted intrusions will be experienced in the future.

Decreasing access may involve suppressing (Anderson & Hanslmayr, 2014) or focusing on a positive substitute to interfere with (Joorman et al., 2009) a negative memory, for example.

Altering content
A person may alter the content of an emotional memory and re-store it. The result may be that the memory becomes better in line with current beliefs, values and wishes. Altering content may involve reconstructing (Bartlett, 1932/1964) and re-appraisal (Ross, 1989) a negative memory, for example.

Effects of mnemonic emotion
Mnemonic emotion regulation may lead to a focus on preferred memories in the present moment (e.g., mood-repair; see Josephson et al., 1996) or more permanently skewed activation of memories (e.g., a positively biased memory system; see Werner-Seidler & Dalgleish, 2016). This may in turn affect subjective well-being, important beliefs and the extent and the direction of approach versus avoidance behaviour. For example, positive memories often evoke positive emotions that signal safety and prevent. If such memories are salient and prevalent for an extended period of time it may be associated with self-confidence and hopefulness, and lead a person to mostly engage with the world and build personal and social resources (see Biondolillo & Pillemer, 2015; Fredrickson, 2004; Norris et al., 2010).

Future research questions

- Which mnemonic emotion regulation strategies are the most effective (e.g., memory suppression rather than interference)?
- When does mnemonic emotion regulation have lasting consequences (e.g., when suppression is repeatedly attempted)?
- What are individual differences in regulation (e.g., a preference for suppressing rather than re-appraising negative memories)?
- How does regulation relate to mental health and affective disorders (e.g., upregulating positive memories maintains mental health)?
- Can mnemonic emotion regulation be trained and improved (e.g., via exercises that target executive functions)?

Simon Norby
Danish School of Education
Aarhus University
Tuborgvej 164
2400 Copenhagen NV.
Denmark
E-mail: sno@edu.au.dk