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Imagining a brighter future: the effect of positive imagery training on mood, prospective mental imagery and emotional bias in older adults

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ABSTRACT

Positive affect and optimism play an important role in healthy ageing and are associated with improved physical and cognitive health outcomes. This study investigated whether it is possible to boost positive affect and associated positive biases in this age group using cognitive training. The effect of computerized imagery-based cognitive bias modification on positive affect, vividness of positive prospective imagery and interpretation biases in older adults was measured. 77 older adults received 4 weeks (12 sessions) of imagery cognitive bias modification or a control condition. They were assessed at baseline, post-training and at a one-month follow-up. Both groups reported decreased negative affect and trait anxiety, and increased optimism across the three assessments. Imagery cognitive bias modification significantly increased the vividness of positive prospective imagery post-training, compared with the control training. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no difference between the training groups in negative interpretation bias. This is a useful demonstration that it is possible to successfully engage older adults in computer-based cognitive training and to enhance the vividness of positive imagery about the future in this group. Future studies are needed to assess the longer-term consequences of such training and the impact on affect and wellbeing in more vulnerable groups.

Key words: Cognitive Bias Modification; emotion bias; optimism; positive affect; ageing; mental imagery; vividness; cognitive training

1. INTRODUCTION

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