

# HOW TO TURN COUNTERFACTUAL FANTASIES INTO ENERGY AND EFFORT: MENTAL CONTRASTING OF THE POSITIVE PAST WITH THE IMPEDING REALITY

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## COUNTERFACTUAL FANTASIES

Positive counterfactuals about an alternative past are “if only” reconstructions of the factual past (Roese, 1994, 1997). Positive counterfactuals have traditionally been defined as conditionals, evaluating the imagined alternative against the present reality (Byrne, 2007). However, in some cases people might solely refer to the desired alternative without considering the present reality and experience the counterfactuals as if they were real (“as if” thinking, Markman & McMullen, 2007). 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.

## FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL COUNTERFACTUALS

Positive counterfactuals can prepare people for the future when opportunities to restore the desired counterfactual past are likely to arise (Epstude & Roese, 2008; Markman & McMullen, 2003). However, when opportunities to restore the desired counterfactual past are unlikely or impossible to still arise, counterfactuals do not prepare people for the future but are associated with difficulties to cope with everyday life (e.g., Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver, & Thompson, 1995; Markman, Karadogan, Lindberg, & Zell, 2009).

## MENTAL CONTRASTING

The self-regulation strategy of mentally contrasting (MC) positive fantasies about a desired future with the obstacles of current reality helps people utilize their expectations of attaining the desired future. When the obstacles of current reality are surmountable (expectations of attaining the desired future are high), people commit to the desired future and strive to attain it. When the obstacles of current reality are difficult or impossible to overcome (expectations of attaining the desired future are low), people let go of attaining the desired future and are free to commit to other endeavors (review by Oettingen, 2012).

## MENTAL CONTRASTING INSTIGATES ENERGIZATION

Energization is a variable that fosters goal commitment (Locke & Latham, 1990), and a key variable affected by mental contrasting (Sevincer & Oettingen, 2015). When expectations of attaining the desired future are high, mental contrasting leads to a mobilization of energy in order to attain the desired future. When expectations of attaining the desired future are low, mental contrasting lowers people’s mobilization of energy, so that they can invest their energy in other, more promising endeavors (Oettingen et al., 2009).

## MENTAL CONTRASTING OF COUNTERFACTUAL FANTASIES

Mental contrasting helps people let go of a desired future when expectations of attaining this desired future are low. Extrapolating those findings to positive fantasies about a counterfactual past, mental contrasting should help people realize that the obstacles of current reality are difficult or impossible to overcome and that expectations of attaining the desired counterfactual past are low. Thus, mental contrasting should help people let go of their counterfactual past.

## THE PRESENT RESEARCH

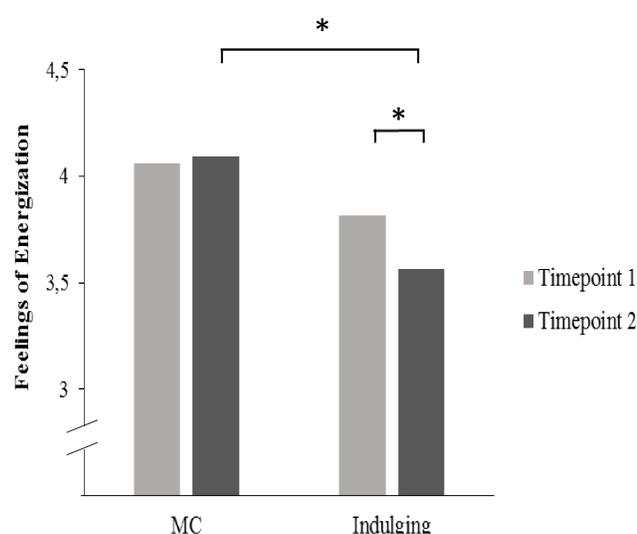
In fact, Krott and Oettingen (2017) could show that mental contrasting of positive fantasies about a counterfactual past helped people to let go of their counterfactual past, indicated by reduced commitment to the counterfactual past. Mental contrasting has been shown to help people let go of their counterfactual past (Krott & Oettingen, 2017). In the present research, we aimed to build on these findings and to investigate whether mentally contrasting positive fantasies about a counterfactual past leads people to feel energized regarding their present life. We hypothesized that by letting go of the counterfactual past, people who mentally contrast should feel energized regarding their present life.

## STUDY 1: FEELING ENERGIZED: MENTAL CONTRASTING VS. INDULGING

**Procedure.** Mturk users (N = 166) mentally contrasted their positive counterfactual fantasies (e.g., “If only I had gotten accepted to college”) with the obstacle of current reality (e.g., “It’s too late”), or indulged in their positive counterfactual fantasies.

**DV.** We assessed participants’ feelings of energization regarding their present life (“Regarding your present life, how *active/energized/enthusiastic/motivated* do you feel?” High scores indicate strong feelings of energization regarding present life. We assessed feelings of energization before the mental exercise (Timepoint 1), and after the mental exercise (Timepoint 2).

## STUDY 1: RESULTS

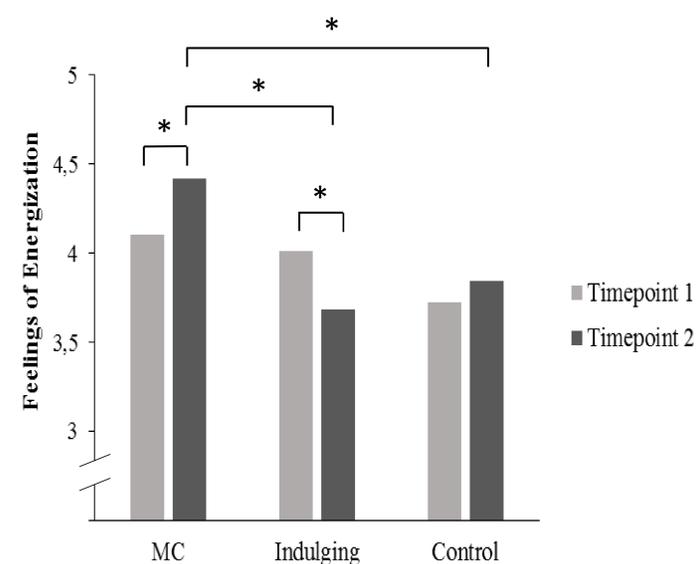


## STUDY 2: FEELING ENERGIZED: MENTAL CONTRASTING VS. INDULGING, CONTROL

**Procedure.** Mturk users (N = 183) mentally contrasted their positive counterfactual fantasies (e.g., “If only I had become a mother”) with the obstacle of current reality (e.g., “No time”), indulged in their positive counterfactual fantasies, or elaborated on irrelevant content (control condition).

**DV.** We assessed participants’ feelings of energization regarding their present life (“Regarding your present life, how *active/energized/enthusiastic/motivated* do you feel?” High scores indicate strong feelings of energization regarding present life.

## STUDY 2: RESULTS



## CONCLUSION

In two experimental studies, mental contrasting (vs. relevant control conditions) led people to feel energized regarding their present life. The results suggest that mental contrasting can be used to help people let go of their counterfactual past and invest their energy and effort in promising endeavors that arise in their present life.

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