The Measurement Paradox in High-Intensity Positive Affect: Observation and Reproducibility Under Access Constraints

Florian Morin
Independent Researcher in Affective Science
florianmorin.com
ORCID: 0009-0004-7301-8524

April 13, 2026

Abstract

High-intensity positive states are rarely observed under controlled conditions and are typically treated as rare. We propose instead that their apparent scarcity reflects methodological inaccessibility. Two constraints jointly limit their study: measurement suppresses the state at the point of observation, and apparent tolerance prevents stable re-induction, which limits reproducibility.

We argue that these states constitute a distinct affective regime, characterized by abrupt onset, high intensity, and incompatibility with evaluative monitoring, in contrast to more stable, measurement-compatible forms such as happiness. As a result, increasing activation alone is insufficient for induction, and access primarily depends on reducing evaluative monitoring.

Across domains, a consistent asymmetry emerges: these states can occur but not be measured, and under pharmacological conditions can be induced without being stably reproducible. While this pattern is commonly attributed to tolerance, we suggest that a substantial portion of this effect may instead reflect a reconfiguration of access conditions. Repeated exposure increases prediction and anticipatory evaluation, which reinstates evaluative monitoring and thereby suppresses access, even when the underlying capacity to generate the state remains intact.

If correct, this framework suggests that affective science is systematically calibrated to observe monitoring-compatible states while excluding its most intense forms. Progress will therefore depend not on amplifying affective signals, but on preserving the conditions that allow access.

1 Introduction

High-intensity positive affect, or joy, appears rare in controlled settings. However, this apparent scarcity may reflect the conditions under which it is observed rather than its true frequency. Standard experimental contexts impose constraints that may prevent the occurrence of such states, thereby limiting their empirical visibility. A central constraint arises from the measurement paradox: the conditions required for these states, namely reduced evaluative monitoring, are disrupted by standard procedures involving introspection, reporting, and task demands [Morin, 2026c].

A second constraint emerges in pharmacological contexts, where reproducibility is limited by rapid tolerance: even when transient induction occurs, it sharply reduces the probability of re-access [Addicott et al., 2007]. Together, these constraints may form a closed system that restricts access to high-intensity positive affect across observation and reproducibility.

The central claim here is that the problem is not insufficient activation, but restricted access. We therefore introduce a class of affective states defined not by valence or arousal, but by access conditions. This distinction is formalized in Table 1, which contrasts happiness with high-intensity positive affect (joy) as structurally distinct regimes.

Dimension	**Happiness**	**Joy**
Developmental trajectory	Tends to increase across the lifespan	Often becomes less accessible after adolescence
Compatibility with optimization	Compatible with goal-directed behavior and optimization	Destabilized by goal-directed optimization
Cognitive coupling	Associated with meaning and narrative structure	Destabilized by meaning-making and narrative capture
Measurement compatibility	Measurable under standard conditions	Degraded under standard measurement conditions
Temporal dynamics	Gradual and stable	Abrupt, event-like, and lock-in prone
Entry conditions	Predictable and broadly stable	Stochastic and metastable
Affective intensity	Moderate, bounded	High to extreme
Structural dependence	Broadly accessible	Access-dependent and regime-gated
Sensitivity to evaluation	Sustained under evaluation	Highly vulnerable to evaluation during entry
Sensitivity to prediction error	Peripheral, with weak influence on intensity	Central, with strong influence on intensity

Table 1: Happiness and Joy May Obey Different Regime Laws

As shown in Table 1, these two regimes differ not only in intensity, but in their structural

compatibility with control, evaluation, and measurement. The ease regime is a control configuration defined by the suspension of evaluative monitoring, under which joy becomes accessible but remains non-instrumental, unstable, and resistant to observation at entry [Morin, 2026c]. Pharmacological activation may produce transient approximations, but does not restore the underlying access conditions.

High-intensity positive affect, or joy, is primarily experienced in terms of intensity rather than valence. It is often described as a diffuse or radiating sensation, sometimes localized in the chest, although this localization is not always explicitly accessible. This phenomenological profile suggests a mode of experience that is not easily captured by standard evaluative or descriptive frameworks.

Joy intensity appears to be modulated by non-instrumental perceptual features, including rapid audiovisual transitions, salience-rich stimuli, and violations of expected physical or causal structure. These features may transiently amplify experiential intensity once access to the state is established. Importantly, they do not determine access itself. Rather, they act as modulators within an already permissive configuration. Increasing stimulus strength or perceptual salience alone is unlikely to reliably increase the probability of entry, which remains constrained by evaluative dynamics.

Consistent with this account, stimuli involving direct and perceptually salient violations of expectation can produce marked increases in intensity. Certain forms of highly variable or absurd audiovisual content, such as older cartoons, may be particularly effective, potentially through sustained prediction error [Morin, 2026b].

Taken together, these observations support a central implication of the framework: high-intensity positive affect may not be rare, but systematically filtered out. By requiring evaluative monitoring, current methods preferentially sample from a restricted subset of affective states, effectively excluding those whose access depends on the suspension of evaluation.

2 Structural Distinction Between Happiness and Joy

A central source of confusion in affective science is the assumption that all forms of positive affect can be reduced to a single continuum. This assumption, embedded in dominant dimensional frameworks that model affective states as continuous variations along shared axes [Russell, 1980; Watson and Tellegen, 1985; Posner et al., 2005], may obscure structurally distinct regimes of positive experience.

Converging observations instead suggest that at least two qualitatively distinct regimes must be distinguished: a stable, goal-compatible form of happiness [Baumeister et al., 2013] and a high-intensity, access-dependent positive affect [Morin, 2026c]. The first regime, referred to here as happiness, is characterized by stability, gradual variation, and compatibility with goal-directed

behavior. It is closely linked to meaning, narrative coherence, and life structure. Empirically, this form of affect exhibits smooth and predictable relationships with major variables such as income, social integration, and age. Increases in income are typically associated with incremental changes in reported well-being rather than abrupt transitions, and lifespan trajectories show gradual modulation rather than discrete shifts (Kahneman and Deaton, 2010; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008; Carstensen et al., 2000; Stone et al., 2010). Importantly, happiness is readily measurable under standard conditions: self-report instruments, longitudinal surveys, and evaluative prompts reliably capture its variation [Baumeister et al., 2013]. Its compatibility with monitoring allows individuals to reflect on and report their state without fundamentally altering it, making entry relatively predictable and structurally supported.

In contrast, joy constitutes a distinct regime with fundamentally different properties. Rather than varying gradually, it emerges abruptly as an event-like transition. Its accessibility appears to decline after adolescence [Morin, 2026b], and is incompatible with instrumental pursuit. Unlike happiness, it is not supported by meaning or narrative structure and may be disrupted by them. Entry into this regime is probabilistic rather than controllable, depending on access to a permissive configuration in which evaluative monitoring is reduced. Here, "joy" refers to a high-intensity, access-dependent affective state defined by these properties.

Within such conditions, affective intensity appears to be modulated by dynamic factors such as prediction error, perceptual novelty, and rapid shifts in salience, rather than by stable life conditions or rewards. Prediction error appears to primarily modulate intensity within the regime, while potentially increasing the likelihood of entry, without constituting a sufficient condition for access. Measurement procedures that require introspection, reporting, or goal-oriented attention reintroduce evaluative control and thereby suppress or alter the state. As a result, this regime is not only difficult to measure, but also difficult to stabilize or reproduce under controlled conditions.

This distinction has direct methodological implications. The apparent robustness of happiness measurements should not be generalized to all forms of positive affect. Standard methodologies may selectively capture monitoring-compatible states while systematically excluding access-dependent regimes. Consequently, the absence or instability of high-intensity positive affect in empirical research may reflect a structural mismatch between access conditions and measurement practices, rather than a lack of underlying phenomena.

3 Measurement Constraint (Paradox)

The distinction between stable happiness and joy leads to a fundamental methodological implication: standard measurement procedures may not fail to capture joy, but may actively prevent its occurrence. This constitutes a measurement paradox in which the act of observation alters the accessibility of the phenomenon under investigation. Importantly, observational difficulty scales

with intensity: the more intense the state, the less likely it is to survive the conditions required for its measurement.

In the case of happiness, measurement is unproblematic. Because this regime is compatible with evaluative monitoring, individuals can reliably report their state without substantially altering it. As a result, standard methodologies such as self-report scales and repeated sampling provide stable, reproducible data. This compatibility has reinforced the implicit assumption that affective states are generally measurable under evaluative conditions.

However, this assumption does not hold for joy. This regime depends on a permissive configuration in which evaluative monitoring is reduced, whereas standard measurement procedures introduce precisely the opposite conditions. Instructions to attend to one's internal state, evaluate it, or report on it in real time recruit cognitive processes associated with control, comparison, and goal-directed tracking. Measurement may therefore not simply attenuate the state, but constrain the system to remain within a monitoring-compatible regime, thereby preventing access altogether.

Under such conditions, pharmacological or neural manipulations may produce changes in arousal or subjective intensity, but the transition into a high-intensity positive state is blocked. This results in a characteristic empirical pattern: modest, graded, and highly variable subjective effects that remain compatible with evaluation. Observations of weak or inconsistent euphoria under pharmacological manipulation, together with transient, dose-dependent, and unstable effects under direct neural stimulation [Beecher, 1959; Eikemo et al., 2016], are consistent with this interpretation.

The paradox is therefore structural. Methods designed to measure affective experience rely on evaluative engagement, yet the very states of interest may require the suspension of such engagement. As a result, the experimental context selectively samples from a restricted subset of affective configurations while systematically excluding those that depend on reduced monitoring. This leads to a systematic underestimation of both the intensity and accessibility of joy. When subjective effects do occur, they are likely to reflect attenuated and lower-probability expressions of the underlying regime rather than its full phenomenological form [Li et al., 2020].

A key prediction follows: the magnitude and stability of high-intensity positive affect should vary inversely with the degree of evaluative monitoring imposed by the measurement context. Conditions that minimize evaluation or reduce task-related control demands should increase the probability of access, whereas conditions that emphasize continuous self-assessment should suppress it. Importantly, this prediction applies across intervention types. Whether modulation is attempted through pharmacological agents, neural stimulation, or behavioral protocols, outcomes will depend not only on the intervention itself but on the evaluative structure within which it is embedded.

The measurement paradox therefore does not imply that high-intensity positive affect is rare or weak, but that current methodologies are misaligned with its access conditions. The more a

state depends on reduced evaluative monitoring, the less compatible it becomes with standard measurement procedures.

4 Limits of Activation-Based Induction

If joy is systematically suppressed under standard evaluative conditions, a critical question arises: can this regime be reliably induced at all? Existing approaches provide incomplete evidence. Across pharmacological, neuro-stimulatory, and naturalistic contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: while system state can be altered, stable access to high-intensity positive affect remains limited or unstable.

Pharmacological interventions offer a direct route to increasing affective intensity through neurochemical modulation. Stimulants and opioids are classically linked to euphoria and reward [Koob and Le Moal, 2001]. Under controlled conditions, these agents often produce only modest or inconsistent increases in positive affect. However, under controlled conditions, these agents often produce only modest or inconsistent increases in positive affect. Participants frequently report altered states without a corresponding increase in well-being, and can report dysphoria despite clear pharmacological effects [Schmidt et al., 2001]. These findings suggest that increased neurochemical activation alone does not reliably produce joy in evaluative contexts, highlighting a dissociation between measurable state change and access to the target regime.

A similar dissociation appears in studies of direct neural stimulation. Deep brain stimulation targeting reward-related circuitry can induce rapid and observable affective changes, including smiles, laughter, and transient euphoria. However, these effects are typically short-lived, sensitive to stimulation parameters, and prone to habituation, including transient euphoria following stimulation of reward circuitry (e.g., nucleus accumbens; [Villard et al., 2023]).

Increasing stimulation intensity does not reliably enhance positive affect and may instead lead to instability or dysregulated states, suggesting that neural activation alone is insufficient to guarantee access to high-intensity positive states.

Naturalistic observations further reinforce this pattern. In early childhood, joy appears more readily accessible during unstructured play or engagement with dynamic stimuli such as cartoons [Morin, 2026c]. These contexts are characterized by low evaluative monitoring and goal-directed structure. Notably, such states are rarely captured under formal measurement and may be disrupted by the introduction of evaluative reporting, consistent with an access-dependent account.

Taken together, these observations suggest a central conclusion: increasing neural activation does not reliably produce joy unless the system is in a permissive configuration. Pharmacological and neuro-stimulatory methods can alter system state but do not guarantee access to the corresponding affective regime. This points to a fundamental asymmetry: activation can occur without access, but access cannot be achieved through activation alone.

5 Temporal Constraint: Rapid Tolerance

A second constraint on access to high-intensity positive states is the rapid development of tolerance to pharmacological agents capable of inducing them. Under low-tolerance conditions, substances such as caffeine and related stimulants can produce measurable enhancements in subjective and behavioral responses, with effects typically strongest at initial exposure. However, repeated administration leads to a rapid attenuation of these effects over a short timescale, consistent with well-documented tolerance dynamics [Lara, 2019, Fredholm et al., 1999].

Rather than reflecting a simple decrease in reward sensitivity, this attenuation may indicate a reduced probability of re-accessing specific system configurations. Repeated exposure is likely to engage predictive and evaluative processes, progressively transforming initially unstructured or low-monitoring states into anticipated and monitored events. In this view, tolerance reflects not a loss of capacity, but a shift in access conditions: the system becomes less able to re-enter the permissive configuration required for high-intensity positive affect.

Naturalistic observations are consistent with this interpretation. At low doses and with low tolerance, such compounds can elicit transient euphoric or "moved" experiences, suggesting access to preexisting affective configurations rather than de novo construction. However, repeated exposure sharply reduces the probability of re-experiencing these states and is described as a loss of the initial experiential quality despite increased dosage. This loss is not necessarily accompanied by a proportional reduction in physiological or subjective activation, reinforcing the dissociation between activation and access.

As tolerance develops, the same interventions fail to produce the state or require doses that alter its qualitative profile. This introduces a fundamental asymmetry: induction may initially occur, but cannot be reliably or sustainably reproduced. This asymmetry mirrors the measurement paradox. In both cases, processes associated with prediction, evaluation, and control appear to interfere with access to the target regime.

This convergence suggests a shared underlying mechanism: access to joy-like affect depends on maintaining a low-monitoring configuration that is disrupted both by external measurement and by internal prediction following repeated exposure. Under this account, tolerance and measurement are not independent constraints, but two expressions of the same access-limiting process.

This has implications for experimental design. If repeated exposure increases monitoring via expectation and prediction, then induction attempts based on repetition or optimization should progressively reduce access probability. Conversely, interventions that reduce prediction, limit evaluative engagement, and prevent procedural stabilization are more likely to preserve access conditions.

The Morin Z-Reduction Task (M-ZRT) can be understood within this framework as a behavioral strategy designed to counteract these dynamics. By limiting repetition, avoiding explicit goals,

and reducing real-time evaluation, the task aims not to induce the state directly but to preserve the conditions under which access remains possible. M-ZRT does not oppose pharmacological or stimulation-based approaches but instead provides a complementary method to isolate the role of evaluative monitoring and prediction in access to joy.

Minimal access law.

- repeated exposure increases prediction,
- increased prediction recruits evaluative monitoring,
- increased monitoring reduces access probability.

This relationship can be approximated as a monotonic dependency:

$$P_{\text{access}} \propto \frac{1}{M \cdot S}$$

where M denotes evaluative monitoring and S denotes predictive stabilization.

Under this formulation, access to the target regime depends not on the absolute level of activation, but on the extent to which the system remains free from predictive and evaluative structuring. Repeated exposure progressively stabilizes expectations, thereby increasing monitoring and reducing the likelihood of access. This expression is not intended as a precise quantitative model, but as a minimal formalization of the constraints governing access.

This formulation suggests a common mechanism linking tolerance and measurement effects. Measurement increases monitoring directly, whereas repeated exposure increases monitoring indirectly through prediction. In both cases, access probability is expected to decrease through the same constraint. This predicts that interventions maximizing unpredictability while minimizing evaluation should outperform purely activation-based approaches.

A critical distinction must be drawn between pharmacological tolerance and what may be termed pseudo-tolerance arising from the re-engagement of evaluative monitoring. In classical accounts, tolerance reflects a reduced physiological or neurochemical responsiveness following repeated exposure, implying a diminished capacity of the system to generate an effect. However, in the present framework, repeated exposure may instead alter the access conditions without reducing underlying capacity. Specifically, initial exposures may occur under low-monitoring conditions, allowing access to high-intensity positive states, whereas subsequent exposures become anticipated, predicted, and implicitly evaluated. This increase in prediction recruits evaluative monitoring, which in turn suppresses access to the target regime. The resulting phenomenology, namely a progressive loss of re-induction despite similar external conditions, is indistinguishable from tolerance at the behavioral level but differs mechanistically.

Under pseudo-tolerance, the system remains capable of generating the state, yet fails to access it due to a shift in control dynamics. This distinction yields a clear empirical prediction: if the loss of effect reflects true tolerance, then reinstating unpredictability or reducing evaluation should not restore access; conversely, if pseudo-tolerance dominates, then interventions that disrupt prediction and minimize monitoring should partially recover access probability even after repeated exposure. These converging constraints motivate an alternative framework centered on access conditions rather than activation alone.

6 Access-Based Framework

The limitations of activation-based approaches motivates a shift in perspective: the primary constraint may lie not in insufficient activation, but in restricted access to a permissive configuration of the system. From this standpoint, an alternative class of interventions can be defined, targeting the conditions that enable access rather than attempting to amplify affective processes directly.

This shift reframes induction as constraint reduction rather than production. Instead of attempting to generate a target state, such approaches aim to minimize evaluative monitoring, control, and optimization pressures that interfere with access. This implies a distinct set of design principles: interventions should be brief, non-instrumental, and resistant to optimization, avoiding explicit goals, continuous self-evaluation, and performance framing. Repetition and procedural standardization should also be limited, as they may reintroduce expectation and control.

Within this framework, behavioral protocols can be understood as structured attempts to reduce evaluative monitoring while maintaining engagement. One such approach, referred to here as the Morin Z-Reduction Task (M-ZRT), consists of short, non-instrumental activity episodes designed to disrupt goal-directed control without introducing alternative evaluative demands. Importantly, the task is not intended to directly produce positive affect, but to test whether reducing evaluative monitoring increases access probability (see Appendix A).

The defining feature is not the specific content of the activity, but the configuration of constraints under which it is performed. Activities are minimally consequential, weakly goal-directed, and non-optimizable. Instructions emphasize the absence of objectives and discourage attempts to evaluate, improve, or reproduce any observed effects.

At present, such approaches should be understood as exploratory and hypothesis-driven rather than as established induction methods. Their value lies in providing a testable alternative to activation-based approaches. If the proposed framework is correct, reducing evaluative monitoring should increase the probability of access, even in the absence of strong pharmacological or neurostimulatory input.

This perspective also reframes evaluation criteria: success should not be defined in terms

of consistent outcomes, but in terms of rare, abrupt transitions that are difficult to sustain or reproduce under controlled conditions, consistent with a probabilistic, event-like regime.

Formally, participants engage in a brief, low-instrumental activity under either real-time or delayed reporting conditions. In the real-time condition, participants continuously monitor and report their internal state. In the delayed condition, no evaluation is required during the task, and reporting occurs only post hoc. The model predicts a higher probability of abrupt, high-intensity positive affect in the delayed condition, reflecting reduced evaluative monitoring at entry.

Access-based behavioral approaches target the conditions of possibility for high-intensity positive affect rather than its direct production. Their primary value lies in operationalizing and testing the hypothesis that evaluative monitoring functions as a gating mechanism for this class of affective states.

7 Preliminary Evidence

Preliminary observations based on self-experimentation suggest that, under conditions minimizing evaluative monitoring, rare but abrupt high-intensity episodes can occur[Morin, 2026a]. These episodes are discrete, unambiguous, and not reproducible on demand. In contrast, when similar activities are performed under even minimal evaluative engagement, such as attempting to observe or assess the state, these transitions are not observed.

Across repeated sessions, outcomes appear discontinuous: most trials yield no detectable effect, while a minority produce clearly demarcated episodes. This distribution is inconsistent with a graded activation process and instead supports a probabilistic access model, in which entry occurs as a threshold-like transition rather than a continuous increase in intensity.

These observations should be interpreted as hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory. However, they provide a consistent phenomenological pattern: under specific constraint configurations, abrupt transitions can occur without instrumental pursuit, whereas the introduction of evaluative monitoring appears sufficient to prevent their occurrence.

The regime exhibits hysteresis: entry is probabilistic, whereas persistence requires no active maintenance but remains contingent on the absence of evaluative monitoring. These observations are consistent across sessions, yet remain resistant to voluntary or controlled reproduction, consistent with a probabilistic access process.

8 Testable Predictions

The Morin Z-Reduction Task (M-ZRT) provides a behavioral instantiation of the access-based account and allows direct experimental testing of its core claims. Rather than attempting to induce positive affect through stimulation or reward, the protocol targets the reduction of evaluative

monitoring, enabling a set of specific, falsifiable predictions.

A central prediction concerns the role of evaluative monitoring as a gating variable. Under otherwise identical M-ZRT conditions, participants assigned to a delayed-report condition, in which no real-time evaluation or introspection is required, should exhibit a higher incidence of abrupt, high-intensity positive affect than participants in a real-time monitoring condition. This effect should persist when task content, duration, and environment are held constant, isolating evaluative monitoring as the critical determinant of access.

Secondary predictions follow from this central constraint. First, the introduction of explicit goals or performance framing within the M-ZRT should reduce or eliminate access. If participants are instructed to optimize their behavior, track their experience, or attempt to "reach" a particular state, the probability of abrupt transitions should decrease relative to a strictly non-instrumental condition.

It follows that outcome distributions should be discontinuous. Within sessions, most trials are expected to produce no notable effect, while a minority produce clearly demarcated episodes. Group-level averages should therefore underestimate the phenomenon, with a heavy-tailed distribution emerging under low-monitoring conditions.

Third, repetition and procedural stabilization should reduce effectiveness over time. Repeated exposure to an identical configuration should progressively decrease access probability, even in the absence of pharmacological intervention. This reduction is expected to arise from expectation formation and the re-engagement of evaluative monitoring, rather than from classical tolerance mechanisms. Accordingly, irregular timing, contextual variation, and minimal standardization should preserve access more effectively than fixed protocols.

Finally, the suspension of in-task affordances should be critical. Within interactive environments, conditions that neutralize goal-directed cues, such as refraining from pursuing targets or interrupting ongoing action sequences, should increase access probability relative to conditions in which such affordances remain active. This provides a test of the hypothesis that decoupling perception from goal-directed action is a key component of the permissive configuration.

These predictions can be tested using minimal experimental designs. For instance, participants may engage in a brief interactive task under two conditions: one continuous evaluation and goal tracking, and one implementing the M-ZRT constraint structure with delayed reporting only. The primary outcome should not be mean affect ratings, but the frequency of clearly demarcated, abrupt positive episodes reported post hoc.

Taken together, these predictions define a coherent empirical signature of access-based dynamics. They allow direct comparison between activation-based and access-based accounts, and provide a concrete pathway for testing whether evaluative monitoring functions as a gating mechanism for high-intensity positive affect.

9 Limitations and Boundary Conditions

Several limitations should be noted. The present account does not exclude the contribution of individual differences, including genetic or neuro-biological factors, which may modulate access probability. In addition, the framework has been informed by structured self-experimentation, which, while useful for hypothesis generation, does not provide controlled or generalizable evidence. The claims advanced here should therefore be interpreted as testable propositions rather than established empirical findings.

Evaluative load (Z) is also unlikely to be unitary. It likely comprises multiple sub-components, including an accumulated evaluative structure over development (Z_{acc}), reflecting long-term exposure to controlled or performance-oriented environments. Such accumulation may increase the rigidity of monitoring processes and reduce access probability.

In behavioral implementations such as the M-ZRT, residual goal-directed processes may persist even when participants are instructed to act non-instrumentally. Individuals may continue to pursue implicit objectives, such as seeking a specific effect, moving toward salient targets, or navigating toward implicit destinations, often without explicit awareness. Even minimal latent goal pursuit may be sufficient to reinstate evaluative monitoring and reduce access probability. This issue may be partially mitigated by simple procedural constraints that disrupt continuous goal pursuit, for example by instructing participants not to continuously maintain forward or "run" inputs during interactive tasks, thereby reducing sustained directional commitment and instrumental engagement.

Although the present framework does not rely on pharmacological interventions, mild and non-systematic modulators of arousal or control state may influence access probability in otherwise inaccessible conditions. Such manipulations should not be interpreted as directly inducing joy, but rather as transiently altering the probability of access through modulation of evaluative monitoring. Any observed effects should therefore be understood as changes in access conditions rather than as evidence for activation-based mechanisms, and interpreted with caution due to potential variability across individuals.

Finally, evaluative monitoring may exert effects even when not explicitly engaged during the task itself. Anticipation of future evaluation, retrospective interpretation, or even minimal awareness that the experience may later be assessed may be sufficient to reinstate monitoring and prevent entry. If correct, this implies that even delayed-report paradigms may underestimate access probability, and that minimizing both immediate and distal forms of evaluation is critical for preserving access conditions.

10 Discussion

Joy may not be rare, but structurally inaccessible under current methods. The present framework advances a simple but consequential claim: the limited empirical visibility of high-intensity positive affect reflects a structural mismatch between access conditions and measurement practices, rather than intrinsic rarity. This implies that affective science may be systematically calibrated to observe only those states that remain compatible with evaluative monitoring.

This reinterpretation challenges the assumption that positive affect can be represented along a single continuous dimension. While this assumption holds for stable, monitoring-compatible states such as happiness, it fails to capture high-intensity, access-dependent regimes that are disrupted by evaluation itself. As a result, widely replicated findings may describe only a constrained subset of affective experience while excluding its most intense forms.

This perspective also provides a potential explanation for the absence of a stable and widely accepted definition of such states. If access is incompatible with evaluative monitoring and standard reporting conditions, then experiences may occur without leaving durable conceptual or descriptive traces. Under this view, the lack of a clear definition may reflect a limitation in observation and transmission, rather than the absence of the phenomenon itself. This would predict systematic under-reporting or post hoc reinterpretation of such experiences. Developmental changes may reflect increased stabilization of evaluative monitoring processes over time, though this remains to be empirically tested.

Across observation and reproducibility, a consistent pattern appears to emerge: measurement suppresses the state at entry, and rapid tolerance prevents stable re-induction. In addition, it seems that joy, while intensive, does not leave memory traces. More work is needed to explore this idea. These limitations may reflect a shared underlying constraint on access rather than independent mechanisms.

The framework reframes the logic of intervention. Increasing neural activation, whether pharmacological or neuro-stimulatory, is insufficient to produce regime transitions under evaluative conditions. Instead, access depends on the configuration of control dynamics, particularly the level of evaluative monitoring.

This distinction shifts experimental strategy from amplifying signal intensity to manipulating the conditions that permit entry. Importantly, the present framework makes predictions that differ from standard attentional or arousal-based accounts. In particular, increasing stimulation or engagement should not reliably increase access probability if evaluative monitoring remains active. Observation is not neutral but constitutive: the act of measurement may determine whether the phenomenon can occur. This raises the possibility that similar access-dependent regimes exist in other domains but remain empirically underrepresented due to methodological incompatibility.

The relationship between the present construct and existing terms such as euphoria remains

an open question. The current framework does not rely on a strict categorical distinction. Instead, it proposes a structural account based on access conditions and compatibility with evaluative monitoring. Under this view, states typically described as euphoria may, in some cases, correspond to attenuated or monitoring-compatible expressions of the same underlying regime. This account predicts that states labeled as euphoria should vary in intensity and stability as a function of evaluative monitoring.

The present account is not intended as confirmatory evidence, but as a grounded framework that generates specific, falsifiable predictions. Reducing evaluative monitoring, including through behavioral protocols such as the M-ZRT, should increase the probability of abrupt high-intensity positive states even in the absence of increased stimulation. Under otherwise identical conditions, delayed reporting should yield a higher incidence of such states than real-time reporting, whereas increased evaluative engagement should suppress them regardless of intervention. Induction success should not scale monotonically with intervention strength and may decrease at higher levels due to increased monitoring.

If correct, this framework implies that affective science may be overlooking its most intense and informative target. Progress will depend not on refining measurement within existing paradigms, but on designing methods that preserve the conditions of access. What cannot be measured may not be absent, but systematically prevented.

11 Conclusion

The limited observation of joy in affective science may not reflect its rarity, but a structural inaccessibility imposed by current methods. Measurement-induced suppression and rapid tolerance jointly constrain observation and reproducibility. Together, these constraints suggest that the central problem is not insufficient activation, but restricted access.

The state can occur but not be measured, and can be induced but not be reproducibly re-accessed. The apparent instability of these states may reflect not weak underlying mechanisms, but systematic exclusion by method.

We propose that these constitute a distinct class of affective phenomena, referred to as joy, defined by their dependence on access conditions rather than activation alone. Unlike flow, which is goal-directed and self-limited, and sustained through ongoing task engagement, the present regime is characterized by high intensity, probabilistic entry, persistence beyond the conditions of induction, and incompatibility with evaluative monitoring. Once accessed, the state can continue in the absence of structured activity, suggesting a decoupling from the processes that enabled its onset.

If current methods preferentially capture monitoring-compatible affect, then affective science may be systematically calibrated toward its most stable and measurable forms, while its most

intense states remain structurally excluded. Progress will therefore depend not on increasing signal strength, but on preserving the conditions of access.

The author declares no competing interests.

References

[Addicott et al., 2007] Addicott, M. A., Marsh-Richard, D. M., Mathias, C. W., and Dougherty, D. M. (2007). Acute tolerance to alcohol impairment of behavioral and cognitive mechanisms. *Experimental and Clinical Psychopharmacology*, 15(4):383–397.

[Baumeister et al., 2013] Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., and Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6):505–516.

[Beecher, 1959] Beecher, H. K. (1959). Measurement of subjective responses: Quantitative effects of drugs. *Journal of Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics*, 125(1):1–14.

[Carstensen et al., 2000] Carstensen, L. L., Pasupathi, M., Mayr, U., and Nesselroade, J. R. (2000). Emotional experience in everyday life across the adult life span. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(4):644–655.

[Eikemo et al., 2016] Eikemo, M., Leknes, S., and Fields, H. L. (2016). Opioid modulation of affect and reward in humans: A systematic review. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 61:1–15.

[Fredholm et al., 1999] Fredholm, B. B., Bättig, K., Holmén, J., Nehlig, A., and Zvartau, E. E. (1999). Actions of caffeine in the brain with special reference to factors that contribute to its widespread use. *Pharmacological Reviews*, 51(1):83–133.

[Kahneman and Deaton, 2010] Kahneman, D. and Deaton, A. (2010). High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107(38):16489–16493.

[Koob and Le Moal, 2001] Koob, G. F. and Le Moal, M. (2001). Drug addiction, dysregulation of reward, and allostasis. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 24(2):97–129.

[Lara, 2019] Lara, D. R. (2019). Neurobiology of mood: Toward a unified model of emotional states. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry*, 41(6):529–538.

[Li et al., 2020] Li, J., Murray, C. H., Weafer, J., and de Wit, H. (2020). Subjective effects of alcohol predict alcohol choice in social drinkers. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 44(12):2579–2587.

[Morin, 2026a] Morin, F. (2026a). Joy is fragile under evaluation: A threshold model of entry.

[Morin, 2026b] Morin, F. (2026b). Prediction error without closure in childhood.

[Morin, 2026c] Morin, F. (2026c). A regime theory of joy: Evaluative monitoring, threshold dynamics, and access conditions: The ease regime as a permissive control configuration.

[Posner et al., 2005] Posner, J., Russell, J. A., and Peterson, B. S. (2005). The circumplex model of affect: An integrative approach to affective neuroscience, cognitive development, and psychopathology. *Development and Psychopathology*, 17(3):715–734.

[Russell, 1980] Russell, J. A. (1980). A circumplex model of affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(6):1161–1178.

[Schacter et al., 2011] Schacter, D. L., Guerin, S. A., and St. Jacques, P. L. (2011). Memory distortion: An adaptive perspective. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 15(10):467–474.

[Schlaepfer et al., 2008] Schlaepfer, T. E., Cohen, M. X., Frick, C., Kosel, M., Brodesser, D., Axmacher, N., and Sturm, V. (2008). Deep brain stimulation to reward circuitry alleviates anhedonia in refractory major depression. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 33(2):368–377.

[Schmidt et al., 2001] Schmidt, K., Nolte, H., and Lötsch, J. (2001). Remifentanil reduces pain, but not necessarily improves mood: A randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study in healthy volunteers. *Anesthesiology*, 95(3):573–581.

[Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008] Stevenson, B. and Wolfers, J. (2008). Economic growth and subjective well-being: Reassessing the easterlin paradox. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2008(1):1–87.

[Stone et al., 2010] Stone, A. A., Schwartz, J. E., Broderick, J. E., and Deaton, A. (2010). A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the united states. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 107(22):9985–9990.

[Villard et al., 2023] Villard, S. et al. (2023). The origin of pleasant sensations: Insight from direct electrical brain stimulation. *Cortex*.

[Watson and Tellegen, 1985] Watson, D. and Tellegen, A. (1985). Toward a consensual structure of mood. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2):219–235.

Appendix A

A Minimal Protocol for the Morin Z-Reduction Task (M-ZRT)

A.1 Objective

The Morin Z-Reduction Task (M-ZRT) is a brief behavioral protocol designed to transiently reduce evaluative monitoring and goal-directed control. It does not aim to directly induce positive affect, but to create conditions under which access to high-intensity positive affect may become possible.

A.2 General Principles

The protocol is defined by constraint configuration rather than specific content. The following principles apply:

- Non-instrumentality: no explicit goal, performance criterion, or expected outcome
- Minimal evaluation: no real-time self-assessment or tracking of internal state
- Variability: to prevent expectation formation and strategy optimization
- Low consequence: actions should not carry meaningful stakes or outcomes
- Suspension of in-task incentives: ongoing task affordances that normally invite goal pursuit should be actively neutralized

A.3 Procedure

Any apparent induction should be interpreted as probabilistic access, not controlled production

1. Context selection
Choose a setting that is:

- familiar
- low-stakes
- free of external

evaluation or time pressure

2. Activity initiation
A first-person interactive environment may be particularly appropriate for this phase, because it recruits a dense visuomotor coordination loop that can shift the system away from explicit self-monitoring. Rather than asking the participant to relax or introspect, the task keeps behavior active, perceptually anchored, and continuously adjustable, which may reduce the immediate dominance of reflective monitoring.

3. Instruction set
During the activity:

During the activity, participants are not instructed to actively suppress goal-directed behavior or monitoring in a sustained manner. Instead, a minimal initial framing is provided, for example by internally adopting the stance 'there is nothing to optimize here.' This framing is not meant to be maintained or rehearsed, but simply to bias the initial mode of engagement. Continuous attempts to enforce these constraints would themselves reintroduce evaluative monitoring and defeat the purpose of the task.

4. Suspension of goal-directed affordances (critical step)
If the activity environment presents implicit objectives (e.g., enemies to engage, destinations to reach, rewards to collect), these should be actively ignored or neutralized. In interactive environments, this may involve:

- refraining from pursuing visible targets (e.g., not moving toward enemies or objectives)
- interrupting goal-directed movement (e.g., stopping ongoing running or pursuit without replacing it with an alternative goal)
- allowing trajectories to remain incomplete or purposeless

The intended mode of engagement is comparable to unguided walking in real life. When not in a mission-oriented state, individuals may slow down, stop, or change direction without a clear reason, simply because no specific objective is being pursued. Similarly, within the task, participants may interrupt movement, pause briefly, or drift without replacing the interruption with a new goal.

5. Micro-disruptions Brief, non-rhythmic, low-amplitude actions may be introduced to disrupt automatic optimization patterns (e.g., slight posture shifts, transient changes in movement). These should be non-repetitive and occur at most twice during the session.

Optionally, a small dose of caffeine may be used. If present, its timing should not be fixed (e.g., sometimes before the activity, sometimes during, sometimes not at all), and its use should not become systematic. The purpose is not pharmacological enhancement per se, but to introduce mild variability in internal state without establishing a controllable parameter.

6. Duration

- termination should be arbitrary rather than goal-based

7. Termination

The activity should be stopped without transition or evaluation. Participants are instructed to immediately resume ordinary behavior, as if the activity had not occurred. No attempt should be made to reflect on, evaluate, or consolidate the experience

A.4 Frequency Constraints

- The protocol should not be repeated within the same day
- Repetition across days should not follow a fixed schedule
- Overuse or regularization is discouraged, as it may reintroduce monitoring and expectation

A.5 Prohibited Operations

- evaluating success or failure during or immediately after the task
- standardizing the procedure across trials
- extending duration to “improve” outcomes
- forming explicit hypotheses about what works during execution
- reintroducing implicit goals

A.6 Outcome Characteristics (Non-normative)

No specific outcome is required. However, under the proposed framework, relevant observations-if they occur-may include:

- abrupt, event-like changes in affect
- lack of gradual buildup
- absence of clear causal attribution

These features are not criteria for success but are consistent with the hypothesized regime properties.

A.7 Methodological Notes

- The protocol is hypothesis-driven and exploratory
- It is not designed for immediate reproducibility under standard experimental conditions
- Measurement, if required, should be:
  - delayed
  - indirect
  - minimally intrusive

A.8 Summary

The M-ZRT operationalizes an access-based approach to affect induction. Its defining feature is the systematic removal of constraints associated with goal-directed control, including the suspension of in-task incentives that normally structure behavior.

A.9 Optional Modulators: Salience and Openness Operations

In some instances, brief micro-operations that modulate salience or attentional openness may be introduced, provided they do not introduce goals, evaluation, or repetition.

Two broad classes can be distinguished:

(i) Salience-oriented operations

- momentarily treating a single sensory feature as primary
- assigning arbitrary local importance to a neutral element
- allowing a perceptual fragment to dominate briefly without elaboration

(ii) Openness-oriented operations

- suspending attempts to interpret incoming information
- maintaining a loosely distributed attentional state

All such operations should be brief, non-repetitive, non-optimized.

A.10 Optional Modulator: Low-Dose Stimulant Intake

In some instances, a small dose of a mild stimulant (e.g., caffeine) may be present.
Constraints:

- low dose
- non-systematic timing
- non-instrumental use
- irregular inclusion Importantly, any observed effects extending beyond the pharmacokinetic window of caffeine (typically a few hours) are unlikely to be attributable to its direct action, supporting the interpretation that stimulant presence is incidental rather than causal.

A.11 Examples

Example (illustrative). In a first-person game (e.g., Unreal Tournament or Quake), with HUD removed or ignored, the participant moves freely without objective. During movement, a simple internal image may be briefly formed and allowed to fade without intervention. One or two brief, irregular motor perturbations may occur in close succession (e.g., two non-rhythmic shoulder movements, not patterned or repeated). A small sip of coffee may be taken at an arbitrary moment, after which the activity ends.

Example (illustrative). In a first-person game (e.g., Unreal Tournament or Quake), with HUD removed or ignored, the participant moves freely without objective. During movement, an incomplete internal question may be introduced (e.g., 'what if…') without attempting to resolve it. One or two irregular motor perturbations may occur in close succession (e.g., two non-rhythmic shoulder movements, not patterned or repeated). A small sip of coffee may be taken at an arbitrary moment, after which the activity ends.