The Joy Mechanism: A Hypothesis You Can Test (1 minute per day)

A mechanism can be testable, coherent, and useful, yet remain unexamined when it falls outside institutional pathways.

Reward is the feeling we all know after effort. It can be extremely powerful. But there is also another powerful emotion: joy.

And it appears to follow a very different rule: reduced evaluation and monitoring. Joy feels more physical than ordinary reward, which makes it interesting.

This document proposes a directly testable hypothesis of joy, developed independently and open to critique. The model predicts abrupt access and, in some cases, persistence of joy accessibility. One hypothesis is that once the state has been accessed, subsequent re-entry may become easier because the system has already encoded the state as possible. Sustained evaluation and monitoring can still transiently collapse the effect.

Author: Florian Morin, Independent. florianmorin.com

Some individuals report transient perceptual tone shifts, altered texture salience, increased vividness, or warmth-related visual impressions, phenomena broadly consistent with known state-dependent perceptual modulation observed in various affective or pharmacological conditions.

This proposal is grounded in **control dynamics.** Intense joy may depend primarily on a reduction in evaluative load, a suspension of optimization, and the emergence of a permissive configuration in which the system temporarily stops converting every signal into decision-making, control, verification, or strategy.

The proposed transition refers to a shift from a high-correction regime toward a lower evaluative-coupling regime in which certain signals remain phenomenologically active for longer durations

During the transition period, some individuals may report temporary increases in perceptual vividness and spontaneous imagery, comparable to non-pathological variations in attentional salience.

Normally, discrepancy-related signals are rapidly canceled before they can accumulate enough to strongly affect subjective experience. The model proposes that reduced evaluative coupling allows these signals to persist long enough to amplify subjective intensity.

The proposal differs from standard reward-learning accounts by suggesting that subjective intensity depends not only on signal magnitude, but on whether evaluative systems rapidly normalize, suppress, or stabilize discrepancy-related activity.

Reference: Morin, F. (2026). A Regime Theory of Joy: The Ease Regime as a Permissive Control Configuration. *SSRN,* https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6711318 https://florianmorin.com/papers/regime-of-joy/

Below, the theory is translated into minimal behavioral perturbations intended to reduce evaluative stabilization.

2. The game-task: “M-ZRT” for the “Morin Z-Reduction task”

In a FPS, easy-mode, without hud, when optimization is locally suspended, the player can retain immediate control and perceptual intensity **while evaluative load (Z) is reduced**. The FPS task preferentially targets Z while maintaining sensory engagement.
The effect follows an inverted **U-shape:** brief, non-instrumental perturbations reduce Z, whereas routine and repetition reintroduces anticipation, comparison, and checking, increasing Z.
too little perturbation → no effect; too much repetition/optimization → evaluative recapture
Therefore, the aim is to reduce optimization, not to replace it. The task should be no more than 60 seconds per day, as a matter of principle.

Exercise	Operation	Openness	Suspension (of optimization)	Salience	Mechanism
Deviate trajectory	While running, a tiny curve instead of a perfect line.	moderate	moderate to high	low	disrupts trajectory optimization and prevents immediate correction
See projectiles pass	When a rocket, shock ball, or shot crosses space, it briefly becomes a visual event rather than a threat.	low	low	high	transiently amplifies low-semantic perceptual salience
Question, no answer	Ask a question in your head (e.g., “What if I turned left?”) but you do not attempt to answer it.	moderate	moderate	low	prevents cognitive closure and blocks conversion into problem-solving
Tiny move, continue	You perform a small twitch (eg:non-rhythmic shoulders move).	low	moderate	low	creates a minimal discrepancy without triggering a goal-directed response

Image fades	Create a mental image and passively allow its disappearance. Let it fade.	moderate	moderate	high	leverages transient salience without stabilizing it through control
At the side	While moving, a detail at the edge of the screen becomes slightly salient without turning toward it.	low	low	high	amplifies novelty-like perceptual tagging without narrative elaboration
Suspension phrases usage	“No need to decide yet.”, "Not important now.", or just ”Leave it there”, without waiting for an effect	moderate	high	low	reduces closure pressure while avoiding conversion into a new task
Path hesitation	Brief hesitation between two possible directions	high	light	low	short-lived unresolved trajectory competition may disrupt automatic path commitment
Texture That Catches	Occasionally, a texture pattern catches, inside ongoing movement. Then it disappears.	low	low	high	low-semantic stimuli without recruiting narrative evaluation
Coffee (very low dose, a sip)	A sip, then continue	low	low	high	increases salience without necessarily reducing Z
Alcohol (very low dose; a sip)	A sip, then continue. Reduces control and monitoring globally (this does not imply that reduced control alone is sufficient)	high	high	high + noise	lowers evaluative load but may reduce signal coherence

These exercises fall into three functional classes, **salience** (transiently tags an element as important), **openness** (weakens the sense of closure), and **suspension**. Some combine multiple mechanisms.

Use up to three items from the table, vary their order each day, and randomly alternate between coffee, nothing, and alcohol.

After the game

Exercise	Operation	O	SU	SA	Mechanism
Simple faces or jewels	You observe faces images with.clear expressions or gemstones.	++	++	++	high perceptual intensity with minimal interpretative demand
Music-clip	Self-selected music-clip	++	++	++	high perceptual intensity with minimal interpretative demand

Once an exercise is captured by the monitoring system, it should be considered temporarily ineffective for a few days. An exercise is considered captured when the subject begins attempting to perform it correctly, efficiently, or predictively. The apparent loss of effect may reflect evaluative recapture rather than passive sensory habituation alone. Recommended: not more than 1 attempt at the game-task for every 24h.

3. The Counter-Intuitive Regime-First Logic

The more a stimulus becomes identified as “the source,” the more it recruits monitoring. So, avoid having “place preferences”. Once a place or object is tagged as preferred, it may reduce the chance of joy to happen.

Walking may provide a naturally low-evaluative context because behavior remains continuous and minimally goal-locked. Walking tolerates micro-deviations, pauses, trajectory shifts, and attentional drift without immediate performance costs.

A different route
At times, take a path that is not meaningful, not the nicest, or not the most promising, without attempting to select the “worst” path either, then continue normally afterward.
Cross now
Switch sides of the street arbitrarily. Not at the “best moment”.

Stop, then go.
You stop for 1-2 seconds, then resume walking without explaining the interruption. Do not count exactly two seconds. Variants: a) A micro-slowdown rather than a complete stop.
b) After the stop, allow a brief micro-latency before choosing what to do next.
Music. No perfect moment: do not wait for the “right moment” to start music. Sometimes, stop the music when it starts to become interesting. Sometimes, stop the music at a neutral moment.

Then another part. Shifting between unrelated paragraphs from a book disrupts narrative continuity.
Look once. Look at the time, but do not check it a second time. **Just the time**. Look at the time without searching for any special meaning. **See time, then something ordinary.** See

the time, then notice an ordinary detail before making any decision.
Other exercises: **A closed door.** Look at a closed door without imagining what is behind it. **Sky, then continue.** Look at the sky for a few seconds without searching for emotion or meaning. **The weight.** Notice the weight of an object in your hand.

In general, act without explaining or justifying what you do, internally or externally. Do not defend internal states.

The present model proposes that transient reductions in optimization pressure, rather than reward maximization itself, may permit access to unusually intense positive states.
If you feel like it, you can send the questionnaire to me at florian@florianmorin.com, no pressure at all.

What to recall: **suspension** interrupts optimization, **openness** weakens the sense of closure, and **salience** transiently tags an element as important. The important constraint is that one should not try to optimize, succeed, or evaluate the task. Once you try to improve the task, it is temporarily “caught” by the monitor and will likely be ineffective for a few days.

Yes/No

1. I felt less need to decide what to do next.
2. I felt less need to correct or adjust my actions.
3. Something felt unexpectedly more vivid, pleasant, or engaging.
4. Any strong change felt sudden rather than gradual.
5. I could not identify a clear cause for any change.

free-text question: **In a few sentences, describe what happened, especially whether anything felt different, sudden, vivid, pleasant, effortless, or strange**