Affective Collapse Under Causal Closure

Why Childhood Joy Becomes Inaccessible

Version 2.0
Florian Morin
florianmorinind@gmail.com

Research note

Ease Framework

Central claim: Maturity does not reduce joy. It makes experience self-explanatory too early for it to reorganize into an event.

Abstract

A substantial subset of children appear to live with a mild, background positive affect, not as a discrete event but as a permissive default regime of experience. With maturation, access to this regime often becomes rare. Adults typically report nostalgia, or brief flashes that feel like remnants of a lost regime. Standard explanations invoke stress, responsibility, or hedonic adaptation, but they do not specify a mechanism. This note proposes a single control-level variable, Z, cumulative causal consolidation, that progressively increases anticipatory closure. High positive affect is not extinguished with maturity but gated by structural over-closure.

Release note.

This document is intentionally over-compressed. It is complete in scope: it contains the minimal claim, the operational entry constraints, and the full falsification boundary. Later versions may expand discussion and examples, but will remain backward compatible with Box 1 and prediction labels (A1–D1).

The term joy refers to multiple, loosely related phenomena, making it a poor mechanistic target. Two people can both report “joy” while describing qualitatively different experiences. In what follows, the background-positive state of interest will be referred to as **ease**.

Ease as opioid-like gating

Ease is a permissive state that emerges when monitoring temporarily disengages. Mechanistically, it may be closer to endogenous opioid-like gating than to attention or concentration.

Ease is recognizable only from within

There is a fundamental asymmetry of knowledge involved here. Someone without access can read extensively about ease and still interpret it as just another positive state, a familiar configuration of pleasure, calm, or motivation. By contrast, someone with access does not require extensive argument, similar to discussing color with someone who has seen it and someone who has not.

Nevertheless, ease is commonly reported **as a strong, chest-resonant pleasure**, particularly responsive to music, cartoons, and **simple visual stimuli**.

Its intensity appears to be **modulated by mild expectancy violations**, not in the reinforcement-learning reward prediction error sense, but as brief disruptions of causal closure. As in childhood, bright images and fantastic-themed movies can feel special without requiring sustained attention.

Ease is experienced as something that happens to the subject rather than something the subject does. This sense of aliveness is a core feature.

Ease depends on contrast rather than accumulation, absence of supervision rather than effort, and timing rather than technique. For this reason, it does not scale with repetition: successive exposures do not reliably sum into greater magnitude.

What it seems like vs what it is

From the outside, the phenomenon described here often appears modest or familiar: a positive affective state, or a return of "childlike" engagement. Observers naturally map it onto existing categories such as mood, nostalgia, distraction, or reward.

However, this mapping fails because the defining feature is not the presence of a feeling, but the absence of several normally persistent control processes, including self-monitoring, performance optimization, and outcome tracking. These processes are largely invisible until they disengage. *(See questionnaire, p. 14.)*

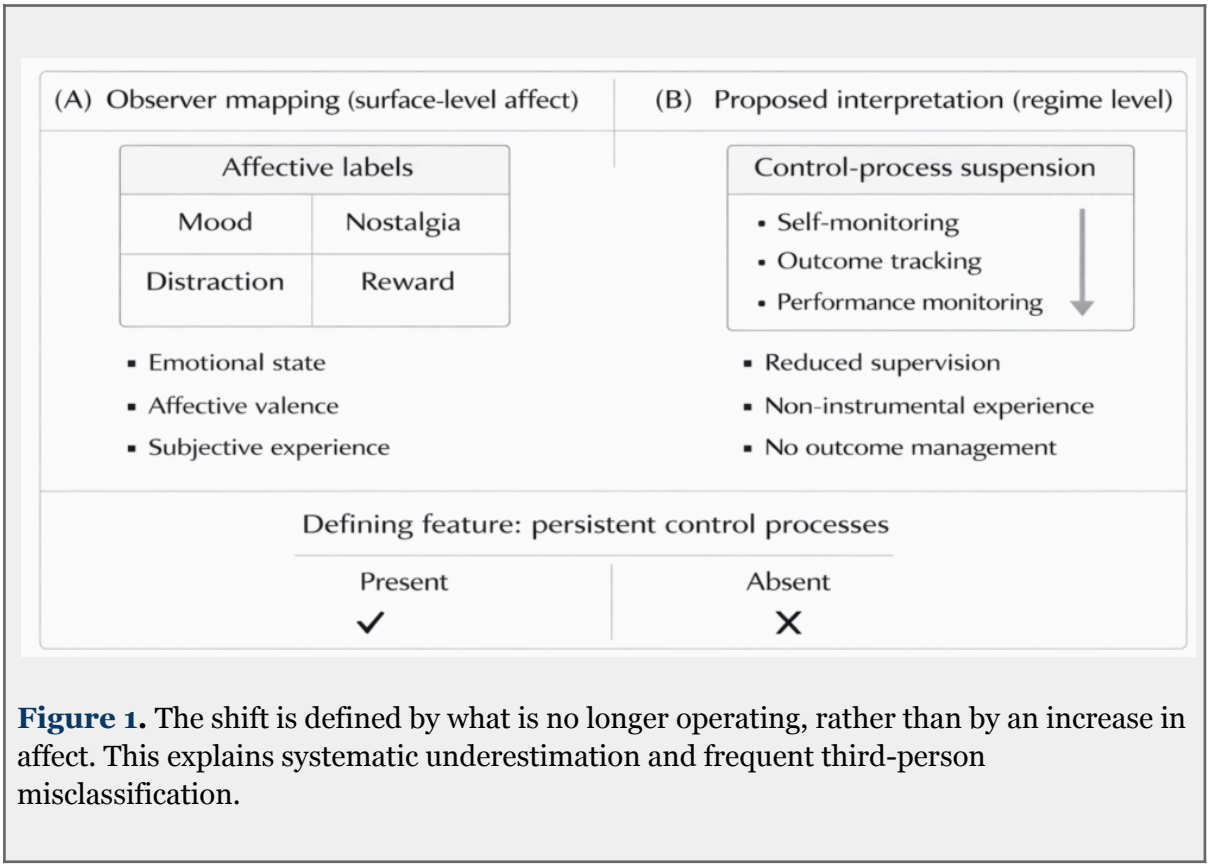

Figure 1. The shift is defined by what is no longer operating, rather than by an increase in affect. This explains systematic underestimation and frequent third-person misclassification.

Does it mean children are all hiding a secret ?

Children tend to hide the phenomenon because, when it is frequently present, it does not register as exceptional. It is simply the manner in which experience unfolds.

The child protects the regime behaviorally, but never represents it conceptually. Adults tend to forget it, because **the phenomenon leaves little trace once the control regime changes.**

This is not nostalgia, and it is not regression. In adults, nostalgia is more plausibly the recognition that this regime has faded. People report missing “how things felt”, “how alive it was”, “how simple it was”, more than missing objective conditions. This asymmetry suggests that the object of nostalgia is a mode of engagement.

Adults sometimes experience fragments. Typical instances include ten-to-twenty-second loops of a familiar music video, isolated bursts of laughter, or brief flashes of pleasure while walking in the sun. In each case, a signal crosses the threshold of notice. The experience is coherent and genuinely rewarding while it lasts, even though it remains brief, unowned, and difficult to reproduce. However, these moments do not widen into a self-sustained episode.

The cost of maturing

With maturation, experience becomes increasingly monitored, anticipated, and resolved before it can unfold.

The adult system does not wait to see what something becomes. It immediately places it within an existing explanatory frame. This reduces ambiguity, but also reduces openness. Signals may remain strong, but they are rapidly contextualized. The system knows what is happening and why. Experience becomes transparent to itself. As a result, little can reorganize internally.

Because pleasure is now embedded in monitoring, it depends on continued alignment with expectations, narratives, and evaluative criteria. Any deviation, interruption, or ambiguity recruits correction. What once unfolded on its own now requires supervision. Adult pleasure therefore often feels intense yet brief, accessible yet difficult to sustain.

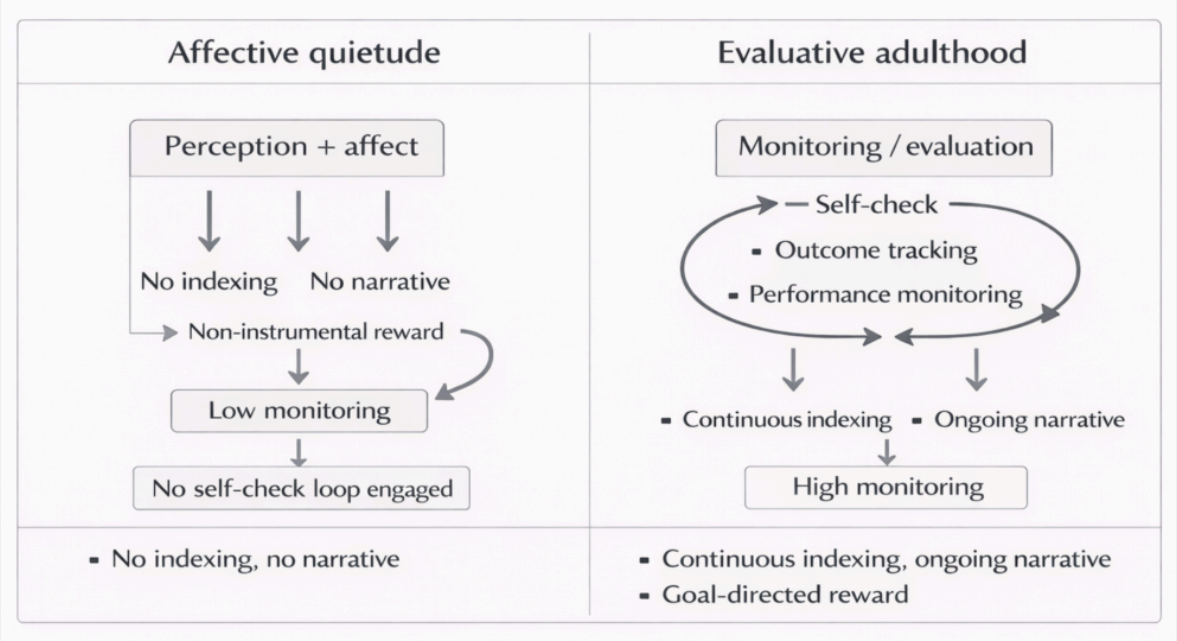

Figure 2. Childhood ease did not feel stronger because it was amplified, but because it unfolded without supervision. Its defining feature was not intensity, but the absence of a monitoring process tracking whether the feeling was happening at all. In such a state, reward signals are neither amplified nor suppressed. Quiet does not mean weak: a low signal can carry more subjective salience when nothing else is competing with it.

The early loss of ease as a causal organizer of experience may reflect normative narrative maturation rather than cumulative damage. Cumulative structural load may later further restrict access.

The following three concepts describe not how ease is produced, but how access to it is blocked, preserved, or reopened:

Capture

Ease does not arise from successful pursuit. It appears only when experience is not being used as a means to an end. It is therefore characterized by the absence of control intervention. Here, control refers to the online process of optimizing, correcting, or improving experience as it unfolds.

Capture is an evaluative veto, the self-cancellation of positive affect under self-pursuit. The more the state is sought, reproduced, measured, or protected, the more reliably it collapses at entry, before it can stabilize into the sought-after regime.

Decapture

Decapture is the reversal of capture. It is the transition by which experience exits the self-pursuit regime and returns to a permissive regime in which positive affect can unfold without being managed. Importantly, decapture is not produced by a new form of control, such as trying to relax, trying to stop monitoring, or trying to "let go". These attempts remain goal-directed and therefore tend to sustain capture.

Instead, decapture occurs when the impulse to secure, reproduce, or justify the state disengages on its own, allowing experience to become sufficient again without being used for anything.

Suspension (of optimization)

Suspension refers to a temporary condition in which the optimization process is inactive. During suspension, experience is not treated as something to improve, stabilize, or extract value from. The system is not trying to obtain a particular state, maintain it, or evaluate its quality. As a result, capture cannot occur, because the control loop that would normally recruit self-pursuit is not engaged.

Suspension is therefore not itself a pleasurable outcome, but a structural opening: a regime in which ease becomes possible by default.

Causal Memory (Z): The Hidden Variable

Z is introduced as a control-level abstraction. It subsumes several related quantities that describe how causal regularities accumulate within an adaptive system. Rather than pointing to a single mechanism, Z refers to the collective structural load produced by learning, generalization, and consolidation.

Accordingly, Z can be expressed through different, partially equivalent formulations, such as policy reuse depth, precision saturation, the reduction of uncertainty, or the density of stabilized expectations. These formulations capture the same underlying phenomenon: **the progressive reduction of structural openness** as causal relationships are learned and enforced.

Z is used here as a control-level abstraction that includes both a slow cumulative component (developmental consolidation of causal structure) and a fast, state-dependent component (daily fluctuations in evaluative monitoring). Together, these determine the effective closure of experience at any given time.

Within this framework, a child is not immature in the sense of lacking capacity, knowledge, or sophistication. **The child is Z-low**, lightly burdened by explanatory closures. Many experiences remain structurally open because causal maps are sparse and weakly consolidated.

Conversely, an adult is not mature in the sense of affective fulfillment or stability. **The adult is Z-high**, carrying a dense set of learned regularities that pre-organize experience before it unfolds. What is gained is reliability and control. What is lost is structural openness. Subjective flatness follows from this process.

As a result, the early disappearance of ease is not pathological or anomalous. Even individuals with minimal supervision and low early optimization may lose access during adolescence following a single structural shift: the first recognition that a previously available affective regime does not reliably return when anticipated. Once experience begins to be tested rather than allowed to unfold, anticipatory monitoring is recruited, even in the absence of high cumulative Z.

It does not reflect damage, loss, or dysfunction. It is normative and structural. It follows directly from maturation-as-Z: the progressive consolidation of causal regularities that prioritize prediction, stability, and control.

Stability can feel like peace until it becomes saturation.

And so what?

Positive affect is not treated here as the direct product of specific neuromodulatory signals, but as the consequence of a temporary regime in which evaluative monitoring remains available yet non-instrumentalized. This regime is unlikely to be pharmacologically stabilized in a durable way. This is not a pessimistic claim. It implies that access is constrained by **control architecture** rather than by a loss of hedonic capacity. In other words, the target is not “more pleasure”, but reduced anticipatory capture. Apparent counterexamples (alcohol, opioids, and related compounds) likely reflect **distinct mechanisms** that destabilize, saturate, or transiently suppress monitoring, rather than establishing a stable permissive regime.

Importantly, **high Z does not imply permanent loss** of access**.** It raises the entry cost by densifying anticipatory capture, but once a permissive regime has been entered without adverse consequences, the system may retain a lowered re-entry threshold. **Z-reducing tasks**, and more generally any transient manipulation that reduces early evaluative capture (pharmacological or otherwise), could in principle reopen access. No specific intervention is proposed here.

Conclusion

This note proposes that childhood-like joy does not disappear because adults lose hedonic capacity, but because maturation increases anticipatory causal closure.

The framework makes a falsifiable claim: ease is primarily blocked at entry by evaluative monitoring and becomes less vulnerable after lock-in. Z (cumulative causal consolidation) predicts entry difficulty more than persistence once the regime is reached.

If correct, the target is not "more pleasure" but reduced capture during the entry window. Adults may not be missing joy, they may be over-explaining it.

Box 1 provides the canonical minimal statement of the framework and its non-negotiable falsification boundary.

BOX 1. Ease as a Non-Instrumental Positive Regime: Minimal Statement and Falsification Set

(canonical reference block, stable wording)

Definition (phenomenological).

Ease is a high-intensity positive regime characterized by (i) high subjective positivity and perceptual vividness, (ii) minimal self-monitoring, (iii) minimal instrumental intent, and (iv) a distinctive property: it does not accumulate into meaning, progress, or durable motivational value. Instrumental intent triggers evaluative capture and collapses entry.

Somatic marker (common report).

Ease is often accompanied by a robust chest-centered pleasure sensation.

Core claim (mechanistic).

Ease is not produced by adding reward, pleasure, relaxation, or motivation. It emerges when anticipatory evaluative control fails to capture ongoing coordination. The key variable is the degree of coupling between subcortical coordination (PAG-centered) and

cortical evaluative networks. Ease corresponds to sustained subcortical coordination with reduced, unstable, or non-anticipatory coupling to evaluative cortex.

Guardrail (non-assimilation clause).

This hypothesis is not a re-description of flow, mindfulness, reward, or positive mood. The core claim is that the present regime is specifically the one that fails when it becomes instrumentable. If a framework predicts stable access under goal-maintenance, attentional training, or emotion regulation, it is likely tracking a different target.

Behavioral entry principle (operational).

Ease is facilitated by tasks that prevent anticipation and evaluation from stabilizing. This can be achieved through micro-actions that are:

(1) non-repeatable,

(2) metric-free,

(3) non-optimizable,

(4) rapidly self-terminating once evaluation appears.

A concrete demonstration domain is a library of Non-Use microtasks (e.g., game-like micro-actions), designed to die quickly when goal-monitoring emerges.

Z hypothesis (developmental).

Access to ease is primarily constrained by cumulative entropic load (Z), defined as the long-term accumulation of predictive-evaluative structure that increases the probability of anticipatory capture. High Z increases the stability of monitoring and reduces the size of the entry window.

Scope (what is *not* being claimed)

This framework does **not** claim that ease is universally desirable, morally superior, or the only valuable human state. It does **not** claim that ease maximizes productivity, mental

health, or long-term wellbeing. It does **not** claim that the mechanism is fully localized to PAG, or that PAG is the sole necessary substrate. It does **not** claim that the described behavioral entry tasks will generalize across all individuals, cultures, or clinical populations. Finally, it does **not** claim that the theory is complete, only that it is falsifiable and operational.

Falsification set (non-negotiable)

F1. Instrumental compatibility.

If ease can be reliably entered and maintained while explicitly used for a goal (performance, productivity, emotional regulation), without collapse at entry, the hypothesis is false.

F2. Repeatable direct interventions.

If a repeatable direct intervention (stimulation, drug, training protocol) produces stable long-term access to ease without increasing anticipatory capture or dependence on the intervention, the hypothesis is false.

F3. Neural signature equivalence.

If the neural signatures of ease are indistinguishable from reward, pleasure, relaxation, or flow, the hypothesis is false. Specifically, if ease shows stable anticipatory coupling between PAG-centered coordination and evaluative cortex, the mechanistic core is false.

F4. Task design irrelevance.

If Non-Use microtasks constraints (non-repeatability, metric-free, non-optimizable structure) do not affect entry probability, the operational claim is false.

F5. Z irrelevance.

If proxies for Z (lifetime optimization load, sustained evaluative training, early competitive environments) do not predict ease access, the developmental claim is false.

For attribution and unambiguous reference, predictions are labeled A1-D1 and should be cited by label.

BOX 1B. Canonical Prediction Index (for citation)

Prediction set A, Entry barrier (monitoring as access constraint)

A1. Metric removal increases entry probability. Holding task content constant, removing evaluative affordances (score, HUD, progress indicators, success cues) increases the probability of entering an in-scope episode.

A2. Evaluative prompts collapse entry more than matched interruptions. Brief prompts that recruit self-evaluation (e.g., “rate your enjoyment,” “are you in the state,” “how well are you doing”) are more disruptive during entry than equally salient but non-evaluative interruptions.

A3. Weak reward scaling under matched monitoring load. Within in-scope episodes, intensity and persistence correlate weakly with objective reward magnitude once monitoring load is controlled.

Prediction set B, Threshold and lock-in (time-dependent vulnerability)

B1. Time-dependent monitoring vulnerability. The disruptive effect of evaluative monitoring declines as a function of time since onset. Early probes are strongly disruptive, late probes are weaker.

B2. Asymmetric prevention vs termination. Small monitoring cues reliably prevent entry, but once lock-in is established, termination requires larger disruptions and is dominated by fatigue-like constraints.

B3. Persistence dissociation. Monitoring manipulations primarily shift entry and

time-to-threshold, while post-threshold persistence is comparatively better explained by fatigue proxies than by evaluative affordances.

Prediction set C, Repetition and methodification (non-monotonic access)

C1. Non-monotonic repetition curve. Entry probability rises initially across early exposures, then plateaus or declines as the procedure becomes instrumentable ("methodification").

C2. Attribution penalty. Manipulations that increase explanatory capture (prompting subjects to describe the cause of the episode, labeling it as a technique) reduce subsequent entry probability under otherwise matched conditions.

C3. Structural variation restores access. Slight structural changes to the task (map, timing, micro-constraints) restore entry more than exact repetition, even when difficulty is matched.

Prediction set D, Z and development (individual differences)

D1. Z predicts entry, not persistence. Proxies for cumulative optimization load (Z) predict reduced entry probability and longer time-to-threshold, but weakly predict post-threshold persistence duration once entry occurs.

Canonical title for reuse (do not vary):

Ease as a Non-Instrumental Positive Regime: Minimal Statement and Falsification Set

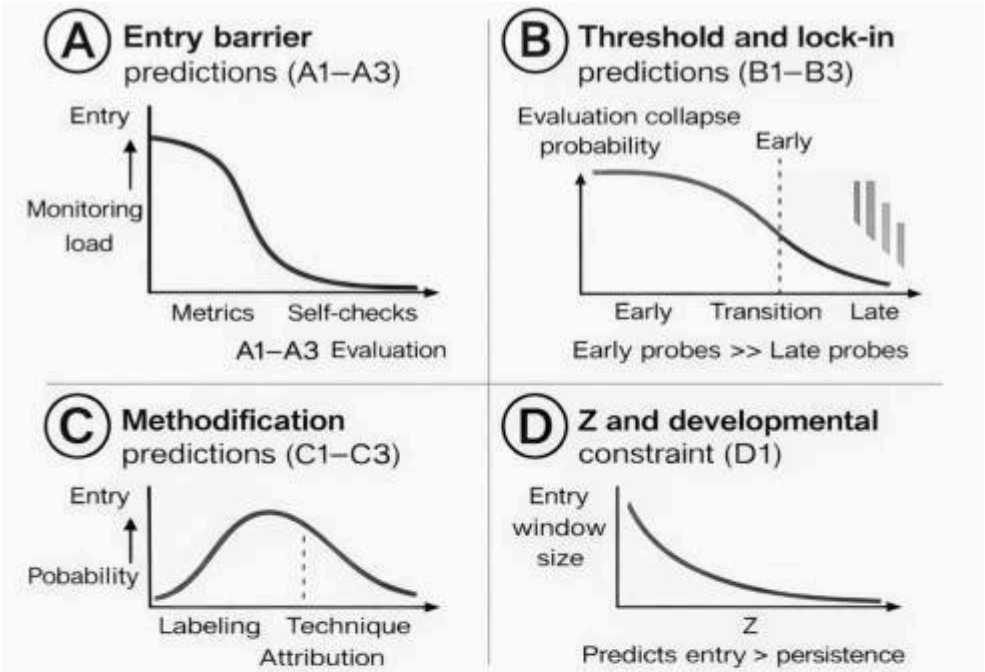

Figure 1. Canonical prediction map (A–D). (A) Entry barrier predictions (A1–A3). Entry probability is a steep function of monitoring load, with evaluative affordances (metrics, score, self-checks) acting primarily as access constraints rather than continuous suppressors.

(B) **Threshold and lock-in predictions (B1–B3).** The disruptive effect of evaluative probes is time-dependent: monitoring is maximally destructive early and progressively weaker after a transition point, with termination increasingly governed by fatigue-like constraints.

(C) **Methodification predictions (C1–C3).** Entry probability is non-monotonic across repetition: early exposures can facilitate access, but repeated instrumentalization and attribution reduce subsequent entry probability.

(D) **Z and developmental constraint (D1).** Proxies for cumulative optimization load (Z) predict reduced entry probability and longer time-to-threshold, with weaker effects on post-threshold persistence duration.

Figure 1 (Box 1). Canonical prediction map (A–D).

Short Questionnaire

It's possible that you naturally have this "open" state by default, or that it is unusually easy for you to access, without any specific technique or trigger. And because this state is hard to remember from the outside, it's easy to underestimate how stable, and how uncommon, it really is.

To make this clearer, here is a short questionnaire to help you determine whether you genuinely have the open state as a baseline, or whether you only access it intermittently. Note that this is the state long after it is stabilized, not the acute transition effect.

Emotional resonance with simple / childlike signals

1. I can feel a strong emotional response to very simple songs (especially children's songs). They can trigger an automatic wave-like pleasant sensation in my chest, sometimes radiating to the jaw.

2. Religious music, chants, or hymns can trigger an automatic wave-like pleasant sensation in my chest, sometimes radiating to the jaw, even if I am not religious.

Perceptual texture shifts (visual)

3. In certain states, my visual field can look more granular (like film grain).

4. In certain states, my visual field can take on a warm or brownish tint.

5. Highly saturated or luminous visual stimuli (phosphorescent, neon-like, precious metal-like, christmas decoration-type, intensely colorful images) can trigger an automatic wave-like pleasant sensation in my chest.

Somatic wave triggers (TV / camera cuts)

6. I sometimes feel a wave-like pleasant sensation in my chest triggered by abrupt camera changes (hard cuts) while watching TV or videos.

7. This sensation feels automatic and bodily, not related to the content of the scene.

8. This effect can occur even when the scene itself is emotionally neutral.

Pleasure from perceptual impossibility (cartoons / magic)

9. Absurd cartoons or comics where characters change shape for no reason can trigger an automatic wave-like pleasant sensation in my chest or jaw, more than with simple abrupt scene changes (hard cuts).

10. Impossible scenes or images (magic, physics violations, surreal) can trigger an automatic brief wave-like pleasant sensation in my chest or jaw, even if the scene is not nostalgic or emotionally meaningful.

Sustained high positive affect (hours)

11. I can sustain a very high level of positive affect for hours (for example while watching music videos).

12. During these periods, I feel a strong pleasurable sensation in my chest.

13. Sometimes the intensity becomes almost unbearable because it is so high.

14. This state feels stable over time rather than a short peak.