Background

- Individuals with dysphoria have difficulty with envisioning positive future events due to prospection biases (Beck et al., 2006).
- Anxious individuals also tend to think negatively about the future (Miranda & Mennin, 2007), for instance focusing on potential threats and harm (Beck et al., 1987).
- Repeated simulation of emotional future events increases perceived probability of them occurring, regardless of event valence (Szpunar & Schacter, 2013).
- Positive future thinking can modify predictions about the future. Boland et al. (2018) demonstrated that perceptions of likelihood, vividness, importance, and controllability of positive and negative future events can be modified after engaging in a positive future thinking task, including in dysphoric individuals.

Aims & Hypotheses

- The present study investigated the effect of positive episodic simulation on event predictions in anxiety by conducting a partial replication of Boland et al. (2018).
- It was hypothesised that anxious participants’ predictions for positive events would increase for likelihood, controllability, importance, and vividness after engaging in positive episodic simulation.
- Based on the findings of Boland et al. (2018) it was also hypothesised that negative event predictions would decrease for likelihood, importance, vividness and increase for controllability, post-intervention.

Method

- Participants
  - Anxious = 20
  - Non-anxious = 29

- Future Event Prediction Task
  - 15 positive & 15 negative events

- Distraction Jigsaw Puzzle
  - 5 minutes

- Future Simulation Task
  - 30 positive cue words

- Future Event Prediction Task
  - 15 positive & 15 negative events

- Anxiety measure – GAD-7

Results

- Significant increase for positive events and decrease for negative events ($p < .001$) across mood groups.

- Trend towards a significant interaction between time and valence ($p = .053$), such that positive events were rated as significantly more controllable, regardless of timepoint.

- Regardless of timepoint, positive events were rated more highly than negative events; difference was greater for low-anxiety than high-anxiety participants ($p < .001$). Positive events were rated more highly by all participants at time 2 than time 1, whereas negative event ratings did not change ($p = .04$).

Discussion

- The higher importance accorded to positive events overall was less pronounced for high-anxiety participants. This may be explained by the fact that negative events are more personally relevant to anxious than to non-anxious individuals, and therefore perceived as more important (Tallon et al., 2020).
- These findings add to literature suggesting that positive imagery can impact prospective thought in subclinical groups.
- Further work should focus on a larger sample of anxious participants for better estimation of effects.