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BRIEFLY

Optimism lights up a brain part

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A person's optimism about the future seems to be controlled by a small front part of the mid-brain.

That area deep behind the eyes activates when people think good thoughts about what might happen in the future. The more optimistic a person is, the brighter the area showed up in brain scans, scientists reported in a small study published online Thursday in the journal Nature.

That same part of the brain, called the rostral anterior cingulate cortex (rACC), seems to malfunction in people suffering depression, said the study coauthors, Elizabeth Phelps of New York University and Tali Sharot of University College London.

Researchers gave 15 people functional magnetic resonance imaging scans while they thought about future possibilities. When the participants thought about good events, both the rACC and amygdala, which is involved in emotional responses including fear, were activated. But the correlation with optimism was biggest with the cingulate cortex.

Psychologists have long known people have an "optimism bias," but the new study offers new details.

Having our brains wired to optimism is generally a good thing because "if you were pessimistic about the future, you would not be motivated to take a lot of action," Phelps said.

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