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Positive emotion influences a depressive-to-happy state and increases life satisfaction

By combining the experience of self-reported positive and negative emotions among 1,400 US-residents, researchers created four affective profiles which they then used to discern differences in happiness, depression, life satisfaction and happiness-increasing strategies. The differences between these profiles suggested that promoting positive emotions can positively influence a depressive-to-happy state (defined as increasing levels of happiness and decreasing levels of depression across the affective profile model), as well as increasing life satisfaction.

The study, titled “The affective profiles in the USA: happiness, depression, life satisfaction, and happiness-increasing strategies”, was published on September 10th in PeerJ, and targets some of the important aspects of mental health that represent positive measures of well-being. Happiness, for example, can be usefully understood as the opposite of depression. Life satisfaction, another positive measure of well-being, refers instead to a comparison process in which individuals assess the quality of their lives on the basis of their own self-imposed standards. As people adopt strategies to increase their overall well-being, it is important to know which ones are capable of having a positive influence.

“We examined 8 ‘happiness-increasing’ strategies which were first identified by *Tkach & Lyubomirsky in 2006*”, said Danilo Garcia from the University of Gothenburg and the researcher leading the investigation. “These were Social Affiliation (for example, “Support and encourage friends”), Partying and Clubbing (for example, “Drink alcohol”), Mental Control (for example, “Try not to think about being unhappy”), Instrumental Goal Pursuit (for example, “Study”), Passive Leisure (for example, “Surf the internet”), Active Leisure (for example, “Exercise”), Religion (for example, “Seek support from faith”) and Direct Attempts (for example, “Act happy and smile”).”

The researchers found that individuals with different affective profiles did indeed differ in the positive measures of well-being and all 8 strategies being studied. For example, individuals classified as self-fulfilling (high positive affect, low negative affect) were the ones who showed lower levels of depression, tended to be happier, and were more satisfied with their lives.

With respect to specific happiness-increasing strategies, the researchers found that strategies related to agentic (e.g. autonomy, responsibility, self-acceptance, intern locus of control, self-control), communal (e.g., social affiliation), and spiritual (e.g., religion) values were positively related to a ‘self-fulfilling’ profile. “This was the most surprising finding, because it supports suggestions about how self-awareness based on the self, our relation to

others, and our place on earth might lead to greater happiness and mental harmony within the individual” said Garcia.

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Media Contacts

For the Authors: Dr Danilo Garcia
Email: danilo.garcia@euromail.se

Phone (Sweden): +46 733 105 153

For PeerJ

Email: press@peerj.com

<https://peerj.com/about/press/>

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Abstract (from the article)

Background. The affective profiles model categorizes individuals as self-fulfilling (high positive affect, low negative affect), high affective (high positive affect, high negative affect), low affective (low positive affect, low negative affect), and self-destructive (low positive affect, high negative affect). The model has been used extensively among Swedes to discern differences between profiles regarding happiness, depression, and also life satisfaction. The aim of the present study was to investigate such differences in a sample of residents of the USA. The study also investigated differences between profiles with regard to happiness-increasing strategies.

Methods. In Study I, 900 participants reported affect (Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule; PANAS) and happiness (Happiness-Depression Scale). In Study II, 500 participants self-reported affect (PANAS), life satisfaction (Satisfaction With Life Scale), and how often they used specific strategies to increase their own happiness (Happiness-Increasing Strategies Scales).

Results. The results showed that, compared to the other profiles, self-fulfilling individuals were less depressed, happier, and more satisfied with their lives. Nevertheless, self-destructive individuals were more depressed, unhappier, and less satisfied than all other profiles. The self-fulfilling individuals tended to use strategies related to agentic (e.g., instrumental goal-pursuit), communal (e.g., social affiliation), and spiritual (e.g., religion) values when pursuing happiness.

Conclusion. These differences suggest that promoting positive emotions can positively influence a depressive-to-happy state as well as increasing life satisfaction. Moreover, the present study shows that pursuing happiness through strategies guided by agency, communion, and spirituality is related to a self-fulfilling experience described as high positive affect and low negative affect.