

CHAPTER 20

THE PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF PURSUING POSITIVE EMOTION

When and Why Wanting to Feel Happy Backfires

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The search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness.

—Eric Hoffer (1954)

The experience of positive emotion is generally associated with, and even leads to, positive outcomes (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, it is less clear what outcomes are associated with *pursuing* positive emotion. Exploring the correlates and effects of pursuing positive emotion is important and interesting for two reasons. First, many people want to feel positive emotion, and this goal is very important to them (Barrett, 1996; Diener, Sapyta, & Suh, 1998; Rusting & Larsen, 1995; Tamir & Ford, 2012a). Second, several lines of research suggest a surprising paradoxical effect: the more people pursue positive emotion, the *less* likely they are to experience positive outcomes, including well-being, psychological health, and feelings of happiness (Mauss, Savino, et al., 2011; Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011; Schooler, Ariely, & Loewenstein, 2003). This suggests that a common goal many people pursue—happiness—may lead to decreased well-being, psychological health, and happiness.

This chapter reviews current findings on the paradoxical effects of pursuing positive emotion, discusses possible mechanisms to explain these paradoxical effects, and suggests methods to avoid them. This chapter focuses on happiness as a commonly pursued and commonly studied positive emotion and explores three key mechanisms for the paradoxical effects of pursuing happiness. First, as people pursue happiness, they tend to set high standards for their happiness. This can cause discontent (and lowered happiness) when their current state falls short of those

standards. Second, people are not always accurate about what will help them achieve happiness. They may consequently engage in activities that are ineffective for achieving happiness. Third, as people pursue happiness, they tend to monitor their attainment of this goal, and this monitoring can impair their ability to actually achieve happiness.

Fortunately, these three mechanisms also suggest how people can avoid paradoxical effects of pursuing happiness. For example, by removing impossibly high standards, discontent and disappointment can be avoided. Or, by engaging in more productive ways to increase happiness, people may be able to attain a more sustainable experience of happiness. Or, by rendering the process of pursuing happiness more automatic, the ill effects of monitoring can be avoided. In sum, the pursuit of happiness can lead to paradoxical effects of reduced happiness. However, by understanding the mechanisms by which this pursuit can go astray, we can obtain valuable insights into more effective ways to achieve that most cherished goal—happiness.

DEFINING TERMS

In the present chapter, we will focus on happiness as a widely studied positive emotion (Russell, 2003; Watson & Clark, 1999) that is a salient goal to many people. The term *happiness* is sometimes used to reference a broader, more global construct incorporating other constructs like life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and psychological health (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). However, we will use *happiness* more narrowly to refer to the emotional state of happiness. In describing much of the following research, feeling happy (the emotional state) is separate from being happy (the sense of global satisfaction and well-being), but these two constructs are not truly at odds with one another—rather, they are likely reciprocally and causally related. Finally, if the research being discussed examines a more general positive affective state, we will use the term *positive emotion*.

The literature pertaining to the pursuit of happiness is varied, and a number of terms have been used to discuss related processes: *social desirability* and *norms* (e.g., Barrett, 1996), *wanting* and *valuing* (e.g., Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011), *pursuing* (e.g., Schooler et al., 2003), and *emotion regulation* (cf. Gross & Thompson, 2007). For our purposes, *social desirability* and *norms* reflect social and cultural prescriptions that may or may not be internalized by the individual and thus may or may not affect that individual's emotional goals toward happiness (e.g., Barrett, 1996). On the other hand, *wanting* and *valuing* happiness refer to an emotional goal held by an individual—a goal to experience more of the emotion happiness (e.g., Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011). *Pursuing happiness* implies the individual holds an emotional goal for happiness and is taking action towards the attainment of that goal (e.g., Schooler et al., 2003). In this sense, pursuing happiness is a form of *emotion regulation*: the up-regulation of happiness (cf. Gross & Thompson, 2007). As an additional point, we remain agnostic as to whether the primary aim of the pursuit of happiness is to achieve a higher *frequency* or greater *intensity* of happiness. Both aims are likely to be important to the pursuit of happiness and we distinguish between them only when the research allows it.

To the extent that wanting or valuing happiness represents a goal, and the pursuit of happiness represents moving toward that goal, wanting and valuing happiness is an important prerequisite to the pursuit of happiness (see Tamir & Mauss, 2011). Because the pursuit of happiness thus

involves both wanting and valuing happiness and vice versa, and because wanting, valuing, and pursuing happiness all appear to be associated with paradoxical effects, we use these three terms interchangeably in the present chapter. However, we note that they constitute different processes.

DO PEOPLE WANT TO FEEL HAPPY?

To understand the impact that the paradoxical effects of pursuing happiness may have, it is important to first understand how pervasive this goal is. In answering the question *do people want to feel happy*, both anecdotal reports and research give a resounding “yes.” The Dalai Lama posits that “the very purpose of our existence is to seek happiness” (Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998, p. 16). This sentiment resonates with lay people and researchers alike, and much empirical research has verified happiness as one of humans’ paramount objectives.

For example, U.S. college students have identified happiness as a very important and nearly essential goal (King & Broyles, 1997; Richards, 1966), reported a strong preference to feel happiness in general (Tamir & Ford, 2012a), and rated happiness as very desirable (Barrett, 1996; Rusting & Larsen, 1995). U.S. community participants judged higher levels of happiness as a critical factor in determining the desirability of a life (King & Napa, 1998). Supporting the cross-cultural nature of this goal, an international sample of college students also rated happiness as very important and valuable (Diener et al., 1998).

Thus, a variety of evidence supports happiness as an important goal for many people. At least two reasons can account for why people want to pursue this goal. First, culturally-transmitted ideas (e.g., beliefs) and artifacts (e.g., films, books) tend to espouse the pursuit of happiness, particularly in Western culture. For instance, happiness was built into the infrastructure of the United States’ government when the pursuit of happiness was asserted as an inalienable right in the Declaration of Independence, a highly visible and memorable cultural artifact. Countless self-help books purport offering secrets on how to pursue and attain happiness. U.S. culture appears to almost have an obsession with happiness (e.g., Gruber, Mauss & Tamir, 2011). Findings also suggest that engaging with cultural artifacts that promote happiness *causes* people to pursue happiness to a greater degree, thus offering evidence for a causal link between cultural artifacts and values for happiness. Specifically, in an experimental study, young children (ages 4–5 years) who read storybooks portraying characters who felt very positive (versus calm) were more likely to subsequently want to engage in activities that promote even greater levels of happiness (Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida, 2007).

Second, experiencing happiness is associated with many positive outcomes for the individual. Happiness is pleasant to experience (Barrett & Russell, 1999) and pleasure is an important determinant of emotional well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Happiness, however, has more to offer than simple hedonic gratification. Experiencing happiness is highly adaptive in many ways: it leads to improved social outcomes, psychological health, and even physical health (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000; Fredrickson et al., 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Given these lines of research, it should be no surprise that on average people report a strong preference to feel happy (Barrett, 1996; Rusting & Larsen, 1995; Tamir & Ford, 2012a). Overall, these findings reaffirm that people want to feel happy, but do not yet speak to the repercussions of pursuing happiness. Logic suggests that the pursuit of a goal makes the attainment of that goal more likely. However, recent findings suggest otherwise—pursuing happiness can actually make its attainment *less* likely.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF PURSUING HAPPINESS?

In spite of the strong preference many people hold for happiness and the clear benefits associated with the experience of happiness, a growing body of research suggests that the *pursuit* of happiness may be maladaptive. Importantly, there is variability in the extent to which people pursue happiness (Eid & Diener, 2001), which leaves room for this to be a critical individual difference that can influence well-being. Indeed, the more people report valuing happiness in correlational studies, the more likely they are to report lower emotional well-being and higher depressive symptoms (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011), the more likely they are to report greater loneliness (Mauss, Savino, et al., 2011), and the more likely they are to be diagnosed with major depressive disorder (Ford, Shallcross, Mauss, Floerke, & Gruber, 2012). These studies all employed a seven-item self-report measure (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011) developed to assess the extreme valuing of happiness. This scale includes items like “Feeling happy is extremely important to me,” or, “How happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is.”

In addition to research demonstrating the paradoxical effects of pursuing increased *intensity* of happiness, research has also demonstrated the paradoxical effects of pursuing increased *frequency* of happiness. In particular, one study examined participants’ self-reported preferences to feel happiness at an increased frequency by measuring preferences in a variety of different contexts. Participant reports of wanting to feel happiness in contexts where happiness would not be adaptive (e.g., a confrontational social interaction versus a collaborative social interaction) were associated with lower self-reported social support and college grades (Tamir & Ford, 2012a). This research demonstrates that when happiness is pursued so frequently that it is pursued without regard to context, participants’ well-being and adaptive functioning is likely to suffer.

We have argued that the more people want to be happy, the unhappier they actually become. However, the research discussed thus far has all been correlational in nature. Therefore, it is possible that the reverse causal direction is more accurate: the more unhappy people are, the more they want to feel happiness. This is a simple and compelling alternative hypothesis but it is rendered less likely when considering the evidence involving experimental manipulation of the pursuit of happiness. In one such study, some participants were instructed to make themselves feel as happy as possible while listening to hedonically ambiguous music (Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*) while other participants were simply asked to listen to the music. Results indicated that, compared to those who simply listened to the music, participants who tried to increase their happiness during the music reported worsened mood (Schooler et al., 2003).

Subsequent experimental research has substantiated these findings: In another study, participants were presented with a sham article discussing either the advantages of happiness, or an article not mentioning happiness, thereby inducing stronger valuing of happiness or not, respectively. Subsequently, participants watched a happy film clip, thus providing a context in which participants have every reason to feel happy. Results indicated that valuing happiness backfired: those who were induced to value happiness were less happy compared to the control participants after watching the happy film clip (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011). In sum, several lines of evidence converge to support the hypothesis that the pursuit of happiness—measured through questionnaires or induced through experimental manipulations—can lead to increased negative outcomes, including, paradoxically, decreased happiness.

Interestingly, the pursuit of happiness appears to be related to a variety of outcomes: ill-being (e.g., more depression), well-being (e.g., lower subjective well-being), social outcomes (e.g.,

greater loneliness), adaptive functioning (e.g., lower college grades), in addition to mood effects (e.g., more negative affect, less positive affect). It is possible that the pursuit of happiness exerts an effect on many psychological outcomes via one common mechanism (e.g., by lowering positive affect, which in turn leads to varied negative outcomes). However, it is also possible that several mechanisms are involved. This possibility is underscored by the diverse nature of the outcomes linked to the pursuit of happiness, which strongly suggest that multiple mechanisms play a role in the deleterious effects of the pursuit of happiness. In the next section, we examine three plausible mechanisms for these paradoxical effects.

WHY DOES PURSUING HAPPINESS HAVE PARADOXICAL OUTCOMES?

The pursuit of happiness is a goal-oriented state. As such, the pursuit of happiness can be viewed through a goal framework, which can help us understand how the pursuit of happiness can go awry. Broadly speaking, goals are defined as internal representations of desired states (e.g., Emmons, 1986) that guide individuals' actions in pursuit of the goal (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). Given that the end state is strongly desired, individuals monitor their progress toward the goal (Lawrence, Carver, & Scheier, 2002). Hence, goals involve establishing standards, guiding action toward the goal, and inducing monitoring of progress toward the goal. With regard to the goal of happiness, these processes may take the form of (1) setting high standards for one's happiness, (2) engaging in specific actions to attain happiness, and (3) monitoring one's progress toward the goal of happiness. Importantly, each of these three processes may result in worse outcomes for the individual (see Figure 20.1).

First, those pursuing happiness may set high standards for their levels of happiness. When their happiness falls short of their standards—which is likely when the standards are high—the resulting disappointment and frustration impedes the experience of happiness. Second, those pursuing happiness may not know what will truly make them happy. Consequently, they may engage in self-focused, materialistic, or otherwise misguided attempts at achieving happiness, which can backfire. Third, those pursuing happiness may be more likely to monitor their success at this pursuit. Monitoring one's hedonic experiences can alter the hedonic experience itself, often in detrimental ways. These three mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that multiple mechanisms co-occur. For example, one could imagine a person who sets a high standard for her happiness and also constantly monitors her progress toward this goal. However, for the sake of clarity, we will discuss each of the three mechanisms in turn.

UNREALISTIC STANDARDS FOR HAPPINESS

A great obstacle to happiness is to anticipate too great a happiness.

—Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1687/1926)

As people pursue happiness, they tend to set high standards for their happiness. When pursuing any goal, it is necessary to first deem that goal desirable (Kruglanski & Kopetz, 2009). Desirable end states, in turn, tend to involve high standards. For example, a person who wants to do well in a particular academic class is likely to set high standards for their achievement on the final

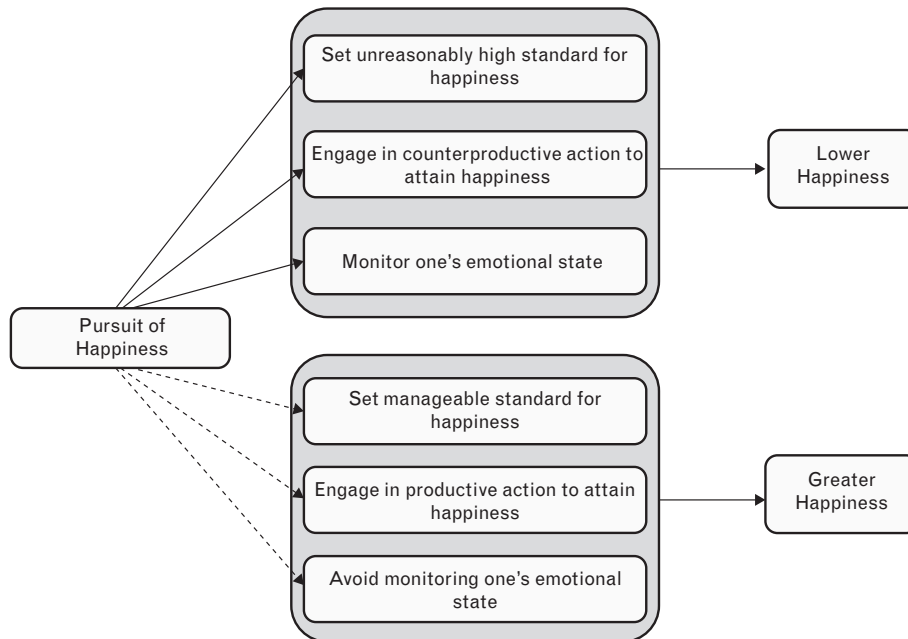


FIGURE 20.1: Schematic depiction of the pursuit of happiness, as interpreted through a goal-pursuit framework. The goal to attain increased happiness leads to paradoxical outcomes (e.g., lower happiness and well-being) via the three mechanisms summarized in the upper box. However, these paradoxical outcomes do not necessarily follow from the pursuit of happiness. As summarized in the lower box, the pursuit of happiness can lead to greater happiness and well-being if the three mechanisms are avoided.

exam for this class. Thus, it follows that when happiness is pursued as a goal, high standards may be assumed. These standards may relate to the frequency with which an individual wants to feel happy and/or the intensity with which they want to feel happy.

Wanting to feel happy at an increased frequency will likely lead to wanting to feel happy during contexts where happiness is not advantageous. Indeed, feeling happy across all contexts is not likely to be adaptive because people face a variety of environmental challenges that are best served by experiencing other emotions. For example, anger helps people successfully confront a social interaction partner (Tamir & Ford, 2012b) and wanting to feel angry during these types of confrontational situations is associated with overall higher well-being (Tamir & Ford, 2012a). However, wanting to feel happy during these situations (given that happiness does not promote successful confrontation) is associated with negative psychological health and adaptive functioning outcomes (Tamir & Ford, 2012a).

Wanting to feel happy at an increased intensity will likely lead to feeling disappointed when the one's current state falls short of those high standards. Disappointment, in turn, impedes the experience of happiness itself. Typically, the attainment of a highly valued goal (e.g., striving for a good grade on an exam) is separable from the emotional response toward that goal (e.g., feeling frustrated that the grade was not high enough). In this case, it is possible to attempt to meet the goal (a better grade), and yet be disappointed at the same time. When examining the pursuit of happiness, however, feeling disappointed will conflict with the goal of happiness. Unlike non-hedonic goals, therefore, feeling disappointed about one's progress toward their goal for happiness can impair one's very progress toward the goal (i.e., happiness).

Supporting this hypothesis, research has demonstrated that participants experimentally induced to value happiness were less happy in response to a happy film clip, compared to those given a neutral induction. Furthermore, this effect was fully mediated by the experience of disappointment (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011). Thus, those who watched the film clip hoping to increase their experience of happiness felt more disappointed and, consequently, less happy.

Interestingly, these effects were only observed for participants who watched a happy film clip. After watching a sad film clip, participants induced to value happiness felt no worse compared to a control group. This finding underscores the importance of high standards when examining the pursuit of happiness. In relatively negative situations (e.g., watching a sad film clip), people have an “excuse” for why they might *not* feel happy, and thus are less likely to feel disappointed if their goal for increased happiness remains unmet. Conversely, in relatively positive situations (e.g., watching a happy film clip), people have every reason to feel happy, are likely to have high standards for their happiness, and are likely to feel disappointed if they do not feel happy.

A study reported by Schooler and colleagues (2003) further emphasizes the importance of high standards in the attainment of happiness (or lack thereof). Participants in this study completed a questionnaire about their upcoming New Year’s Eve plans during the last week of December, 1999. In the two months following that New Year’s Eve, participants were contacted again and asked how much they enjoyed it. Surprisingly, the people who planned the biggest parties and who spent the most amount of time preparing for their plans were the ones most disappointed after the fact, perhaps because they thought they were going to enjoy their plans the most. This study illustrates what can happen when people attempt to maximize their happiness in a context where happiness is thought to be highly attainable: disappointment can ensue, and therefore, happiness is less likely to be attained.

It is possible that high standards may simply increase the likelihood that people *label* their emotional experience as more negative because they contrast it with the higher standard. In other words, the pursuit of happiness might not affect people’s actual emotional experience but only how they label it. Though plausible, this explanation becomes less likely when considering effects of valuing happiness on an implicit measure of positive mood. Participants induced to value happiness and then given a chance to pursue happiness (by watching a happy film clip), were less likely to report liking a series of neutral polygons (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011), an implicit measure of affective state (Mayer & Hanson, 1995). This implicit measure lends support to the view that setting high standards for happiness affects one’s actual mood, and not just how one labels it. The additional mechanisms discussed below also provide evidence that the *experience* of happiness (and not just how one evaluates one’s experience) is adversely affected by the pursuit of happiness. Overall, multiple lines of research support the view that high standards are a mechanism in the link between pursuing happiness and negative outcomes.

MISGUIDED ATTEMPTS TO ACHIEVE HAPPINESS

Happiness is not a goal; it is a by-product.

—Eleanor Roosevelt (1960)

Making decisions based on what will increase happiness is an ill-fated venture, because people are notoriously poor at knowing what will make them happy (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). Overall,

people often overestimate the duration and intensity of their future emotional states: how happy or unhappy they will be in assigned college housing (Dunn, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2003), as a result of a meaningful sporting event (Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000), or after receiving multiple prizes (Kurtz, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2007). In other words, because people generally do not have accurate understanding of what will make them happy, they are likely to pursue happiness by striving to attain objects or engaging in activities that they believe will make them happy but that, in fact, are ineffective or even counterproductive. For example, many people believe that spending money on oneself should promote one's happiness. However, research has provided evidence for the opposite: people who spend money on themselves are not as happy as those who spend it on other people (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011).

At least two types of activities are counterproductive to attaining happiness: first, activities that are viewed only as a means to an end, and not ends in and of themselves; and second, activities that increase self-focus or impair social connection. Regarding the first type of activities, when people engage in an activity for a reward rather than for its own sake, the activity can lose its intrinsic appeal (see Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999, for review). Analogously, when people engage in an activity only to increase their happiness, the intrinsic appeal of the activity itself may be lost (Schooler et al., 2003). For example, people who invest in activities that are ends in themselves (e.g., activities that one enjoys or that include acquiring special life experiences) are more likely to be happy in the long run compared to people who invest in activities that are a means to an end (e.g., activities that focus on acquiring material possessions or other measures of wealth) (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

Regarding the second type of activities, pursuing the goal to increase one's own happiness can be a self-focused undertaking that may impair social connection and thereby diminish valuable opportunities to feel happy. Conceptually, happiness derived from self-focus may be temporary, whereas happiness derived from selfless focus is more likely to be enduring and durable (Dambrun et al., 2012). Specifically, self-focused happiness may rely on momentary and context-dependent experiences of pleasure and are thus necessarily fleeting. On the other hand, selfless happiness relies on internal resources that are less dependent on fluctuating external circumstances (e.g., serenity, fulfillment; Dambrun et al., 2012).

Empirical evidence also supports the hypothesis that attempting to increase one's own happiness can disrupt social connection and thus impair happiness. In one study, valuing happiness was found to induce loneliness using both a self-report measure and a hormonal measure (i.e., progesterone) (Mauss, Savino, et al., 2011). In this study, participants were assigned to either a condition that led them to value happiness (by reading a bogus article touting the benefits of feeling happiness) or a control condition (by reading the same article, only touting the benefits of accurate judgment). They then watched a 35-minute film clip validated to activate themes of affiliation and intimacy, reported their loneliness, and provided a saliva sample from which progesterone was assayed. Results indicated that participants induced to value happiness reported more loneliness after watching the film clip compared to the control group. This pattern was replicated with progesterone, a hormonal index of affiliation (Brown et al., 2009): participants induced to value happiness had lower progesterone levels after watching the film clip compared to the control group. Findings held when controlling for emotional state, suggesting that the effects are specific to social outcomes. By demonstrating that valuing happiness leads to loneliness, these results suggest that valuing happiness interferes with social connection.

Overall, the pursuit of happiness may lead to negative outcomes by increasing engagement in activities meant to enhance happiness. But, given that people generally have poor insight into what activities are effective in attaining happiness, and that people may instead engage in self-focused pursuit of happiness that damages social connections, the pursuit of happiness actually makes them less happy.

MONITORING HAPPINESS

Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so.

—John Stuart Mill (1873/1960)

Monitoring one's happiness has been aptly likened to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, where the observation of the phenomenon changes the phenomenon itself (Schooler et al., 2003). In this manner, monitoring one's happiness affects, and perhaps undermines, the happiness experience.

Multiple lines of research support the view that monitoring one's hedonic state interferes with the actual experience of that hedonic state. For example, people asked to think about why a joke was funny find it less funny than if they were not asked to introspect (Cupchik & Leventhal, 1974). Or, when making a decision on which of two posters to take home, people asked to think about their reasons for choosing one poster or another were less satisfied with their choice compared to those who did not introspect about their reasons (Wilson et al., 1993). When making other types of decisions (e.g., which jam was better), people asked to think about their reasons for choosing one over another were less likely to agree with experts or with consensus, compared to those who did not introspect about their reasons (Wilson & Schooler, 1991). These effects are consistent with an account in which monitoring interferes with the hedonic experience, although, to our knowledge, no research to date has directly tested this hypothesis.

Why might monitoring interfere with one's hedonic state? One possibility is that monitoring induces "meta-awareness" of one's hedonic state, which involves reflecting upon one's concurrent experiences rather than simply experiencing them (Schooler & Mauss, 2010). As such, meta-awareness precludes the ability to "be in the moment" or be in a state of *flow*. Flow is a valuable state linked with being completely engaged and absorbed in the present moment and is associated with people's most rewarding and contented moments, though they may not have been "aware" of it at the time (cf. Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Consistent with the account that meta-awareness interferes with hedonic experiences, participants who were asked to monitor their happiness while listening to music were less happy than those who were asked simply to listen to the music (Schooler et al., 2003). Furthermore, participants high in neuroticism were less happy when they reported their happiness six times a day, compared to when they only reported happiness once a day (Conner & Reid, 2011). Overall, the precise path by which monitoring happiness leads to decreased happiness has not yet been fully accounted for empirically. In spite of this, the conclusion remains: the more one thinks about one's experience of happiness, the less likely one is to experience happiness.

Some evidence to the contrary may be provided by a study in which participants who rated their emotional experience moment-by-moment during a mood induction did not differ in emotional arousal (as measured by physiological activation) from participants who did not rate their emotional experience (Mauss, Levenson, McCarter, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2005). This study

may suggest that monitoring does *not* reduce emotional experience. However, this study used a rating dial to make moment-to-moment ratings, and the very purpose of the rating dial was to avoid inducing meta-awareness by practicing its use beforehand and by using it continuously during the mood induction. Thus, finding no differences in emotional arousal between the group asked to make moment-to-moment ratings and the group not asked to make these ratings could be due to the fact that meta-awareness and self-monitoring had not been activated.

The research discussed thus far has demonstrated that monitoring one's experience of positive emotional states is maladaptive. This conclusion, however, needs to be reconciled with findings of a meta-analysis regarding self-focus—a concept closely related to self-monitoring—suggesting that a positive self-focus is *adaptive* (Mor & Winquist, 2002). Specifically, the meta-analysis found that self-focus on positive aspects of the self is related to lower negative affect. Thus, the question remains: if self-focus on positive aspects of the self is related to *lower* negative affect, how might we explain the findings that pursuing happiness—presumably a positive aspect of the self—is related to *higher* negative affect? One possibility is that the pursuit of happiness involves monitoring a goal that has not yet been attained: the happiness in question is not yet a memory that can be savored, but it is a future state that is desired. Under these circumstances, it appears that the happiness is not exactly a positive aspect of the self, because the happiness has not yet been achieved. Rather, happiness may even be a negative aspect of the self because it is a reminder of the goal that has not been fulfilled. This nuance allows for the possibility that the self-focus involved in the pursuit of happiness is maladaptive.

In sum, although the literature is somewhat mixed regarding which types of self-focus may be associated with detrimental outcomes, there is a strong theoretical rationale for why the monitoring involved in the pursuit of happiness is maladaptive. Together, the theoretical considerations and empirical findings summarized in this section are consistent with the idea that pursuing happiness leads people to monitor their own hedonic experiences, which through multiple paths (e.g., meta-awareness), may lead to decreased experience of happiness itself.

HOW CAN WE PURSUE HAPPINESS WITHOUT PARADOXICAL OUTCOMES?

The finding that pursuing happiness is associated with negative outcomes may lead us down a pessimistic path. If the pursuit of happiness is ineffective—or even counterproductive—should we simply give up and resign to being miserable? The success of several happiness-enhancing interventions, however, strongly suggests that happiness can be attained, at least sometimes (Fredrickson et al., 2008; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). These findings suggest that pursuing happiness is not necessarily self-defeating. Perhaps pursuing happiness could lead to greater happiness if people do it in the right way. The present analysis points to what these right ways might involve.

First, if high standards for happiness generate paradoxical effects, removing those standards might be particularly effective. Indeed, disengaging from unattainable goals is an important aspect of psychological health (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). Furthermore, research on acceptance-based therapies suggests that accepting one's emotions—rather than seeking or avoiding them—is associated with improved well-being (Campbell-Sills, Barlow, Brown, & Hofmann, 2006; Shallcross, Troy, Boland, & Mauss, 2010). Therefore, accepting one's

emotions, and not pursuing any particular emotional goal (even happiness), may be an effective pathway to greater well-being.

Second, if people usually do not know what will make them happy and therefore engage in counterproductive activities in their pursuit of happiness, it may be beneficial to learn about and engage in activities that do in fact increase happiness. For example, if someone pursues self-focused activities, then redefining happiness and its pursuit in terms of social engagement might be effective (Fredrickson et al., 2008; Kesebir & Diener, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2006). Pursuing social experiences (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), selfless functioning (Dambrun et al., 2012), prosocial expenditures (Aknin, Dunn, & Norton, 2011), and other experiences that support socially-derived happiness, all have been shown to increase happiness. Other strategies beyond the social domain, such as flexible and effective emotion regulation, have also been shown to help people pursue happiness effectively (Gross & John, 2003; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). These successful paths to increasing happiness have one thing in common: They avoid the direct pursuit of happiness and instead lead people to make changes in their activities or in their emotion-regulatory habits. These ideas fit well with the concept of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which hold that activities lead to greater happiness and well-being if they are engaged in for their own sake rather than for a reason extrinsic to the activity.

Third, if monitoring happiness can disrupt the experience of happiness, then rendering the process of pursuing happiness more automatic could alleviate the need to monitor and thus alleviate backfiring. Research on automatic forms of goal pursuit (Aarts, Custers, & Marien, 2008; Bargh, 1994), and on automatic forms of emotion regulation (Mauss, Bunge, & Gross, 2007; Mauss, Cook, & Gross, 2007) suggests that certain goals (including emotional goals) can be efficiently pursued without awareness. The bulk of everyday goal pursuit is likely unintentional and lacks monitoring: conscious intention and attention is costly and tends to be used sparingly for people to live productive lives (Hassin, Aarts, Eitam, Custers, & Kleiman, 2009). Automatic emotion regulation, specifically, is defined as “goal-driven change to any aspect of one’s emotions without making a conscious decision to do so, without paying attention to the process of regulating one’s emotions, and without engaging in deliberate control” (Mauss, Bunge, et al., 2007). To attain this automaticity, an individual may benefit from making the pursuit of happiness a habit (e.g., through implementation intentions; see Gollwitzer, 1999). By rendering the pursuit of happiness more habitual, the pitfalls of monitoring may be avoided.

Overall, by examining the ways that pursuing happiness can go awry, we can find effective paths by which happiness is attainable. Specifically, happiness may be within reach if (a) people remove impossible standards and instead accept their emotions and avoid striving for any particular emotional state, (b) people engage in prosocial activities or effective emotion-regulation strategies, and (c) people automatize the pursuit of happiness, perhaps by habitualizing the activities or strategies mentioned in (b).

OPEN QUESTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Thus far, this chapter has summarized the theoretical and empirical evidence supporting the paradoxical effects of pursuing happiness, has outlined several mechanisms that may account

for these paradoxical effects, and has suggested several ways in which these paradoxical effects may be avoided. This is a nascent body of literature, however, and thus, we turn to some of the open questions that remain to be fully resolved.

IS THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS ONLY DETRIMENTAL IN THE EXTREME?

One important question the present findings raise is whether pursuing happiness affects happiness in a linear fashion, or whether the effects of pursuing happiness are curvilinear. For example, it may be that pursuing happiness leads to negative effects only when it is extreme (while it may not when pursued in moderation). One study tested the curvilinear relationship between valuing happiness and negative outcomes and found no evidence for such a relationship (Mauss, Tamir, et al., 2011). However, this evidence is not conclusive because the scale used to measure valuing happiness was indexing relatively extreme pursuit of happiness by including items such as “experiencing happiness is extremely important to me” and “to have a meaningful life, I need to feel happy most of the time.” In this case, arguably the entire scale (rather than only the very end of the scale) assessed the extreme pursuit of happiness. It is possible that a scale assessing the full range (mild to extreme) of pursuit of happiness may find evidence for a curvilinear effect. Thus, it is possible that more moderate forms of the pursuit of happiness may not be associated with detrimental outcomes.

DO CULTURES DIFFER IN THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS?

Another question raised by the present review regards the role of culture in the pursuit of happiness. On one hand, there is some reason to believe that happiness may be universally valued (Diener et al., 1998). For the pursuit of happiness to be a cross-culturally relevant goal, happiness must serve the interests of individuals across cultures. Interestingly, happiness can serve many interests. Happiness feels good (Barrett & Russell, 1999), and can thus serve the interest to pursue and obtain pleasure that is typically more characteristic of individualistic cultures. But happiness also promotes friendliness and collaboration (Cunningham, 1988; Tamir & Ford, 2012b), and can thus serve the interest to promote social harmony that is typically more characteristic of collectivistic cultures. This multi-faceted nature of happiness may ensure its value across cultures.

On the other hand, valuing happiness may be associated with negative outcomes in a culture-specific manner. Research suggests that happiness can have different meanings across different cultures (Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009; Uchida, Norasakkunkit, & Kitayama, 2004). As such, these different meanings may influence *how* people from these different cultures pursue happiness and the down-stream effects of that pursuit.

Some support for the hypothesis that pursuing happiness is differentially related to well-being across cultures has been provided by research examining the discrepancy between participants' *ideal affect* (i.e., the emotions people want to feel) and their *actual affect* (i.e., the emotions people actually feel). Overall, people from more individualistic cultures (e.g., European Americans) value and want to feel high-arousal positive affective states (e.g., excitement) more than people from more collectivistic cultures (e.g., Hong Kong Chinese), who, in turn, are more likely to value and want to feel low-arousal positive affective states (e.g., calmness) (Tsai, Knutson, &

Fung, 2006; Tsai, Louie, et al., 2007; Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung, & Yeung, 2007). Interestingly, the discrepancy between *actual* affect and *ideal* affect predicted increased depressive symptoms for European American and Hong Kong Chinese participants, but in culturally-specific ways linked to highly-valued states: the discrepancy for high-arousal positive affect predicted depression only for the European Americans and the discrepancy for low-arousal positive affect predicted depression only for the Hong Kong Chinese.

While happiness appears to be valued and pursued across cultures, what happiness means to different people appears to be culturally specific. Thus, there may be culturally specific effects of the pursuit of happiness. However, it does appear to be consistent across cultures that when a highly valued emotion is not experienced to the extent to which it is desired, negative outcomes ensue.

HOW DOES THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS (OR LACK THEREOF) RELATE TO EMOTIONAL ACCEPTANCE?

Acceptance is defined as the process of deliberately and non-judgmentally experiencing emotions with the goal of understanding them (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002) and is associated with decreased negative emotions and depression (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; Shallcross et al., 2010). One of the main ingredients of acceptance is not striving for any particular emotional state (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006) and as such, acceptance could be seen as the opposite of the pursuit of happiness. In this light, acceptance-based therapies may be successful at least in part because they target the maladaptive pursuit of happiness.

One primary pathway by which acceptance may exert its beneficial effects is that it reduces the experience of meta-emotion and monitoring as we have conceptualized them here: by approaching emotions in a non-evaluative way, these emotions are allowed to run their natural (short-lived) course and not be prolonged by rumination or other harmful evaluations. Therefore, accepting one's emotions, just like not striving for any particular emotion (even happiness) may improve psychological health (e.g., Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; Shallcross et al., 2010) at least in part by reducing meta-emotion and monitoring. It remains to be more fully explored to what extent acceptance and the pursuit of happiness overlap in their psychological ingredients and effects.

HOW DOES THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS RELATE TO EMOTION REGULATION?

The pursuit of happiness necessarily involves emotion regulation in that we attempt to alter our emotional experiences as we strive to be happy (Gross, 1999). Importantly, studies verify that people can use emotion regulation to improve their mood and well-being (Gross & John, 2003). These findings suggest a potential contradiction: as we have argued, the pursuit of happiness leads to *decreased* well-being and worse mood; in contrast, certain forms of emotion regulation result in *improved* well-being and better mood (Gross & John, 2003).

To resolve this apparent inconsistency, it may be helpful to invoke the quote by John Stuart Mill: "Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness" (Mill, 1873/1960). Not unlike the paradoxical effects of thought suppression (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987; though see also Anderson & Green, 2001), trying to be happy

per se may backfire. However, emotion regulation is not necessarily focused on “being happy.” For example, reappraisal (one of the most effective types of emotion regulation) involves an attempt to reframe a situation in a more positive or less negative way (Gross, 1998). While this process may result in the increased experience of happiness, increased happiness is not its proximal or explicit goal. In fact, attention is directed away from one’s own experience of happiness, and is focused on cognitively reframing the emotional meaning of an event. From this perspective, the beneficial outcomes of effective types of emotion regulation (e.g., reappraisal) are consistent with the findings discussed throughout this chapter. This can be contrasted with other less effective types of emotion regulation (e.g., experiential avoidance; Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth, & Steger, 2006), which may indeed be associated with paradoxical effects. Overall, some types of emotion regulation may be vital tools in the successful pursuit of happiness. It is a fruitful question for future research to explore which types of emotion regulation might best serve this goal.

Discussing the link between pursuing happiness and emotion regulation may also clarify the valence-specificity of the effects of the pursuit of happiness. Specifically, the pursuit of happiness involves a form of emotion regulation focusing on up-regulating positive affect. The up-regulation of positive affect, in turn, has been conceptually and empirically distinguished from emotion regulation focusing on down-regulating negative affect (McRae, Ciesielski, & Gross, 2012; Shiota & Levenson, 2009; Wager, Davidson, Hughes, Lindquist, & Ochsner, 2008). As suggested by the research reviewed in this chapter, attempts to up-regulate positive affect (i.e., the pursuit of happiness) are often met with negative outcomes, but is there any reason to believe that attempts to down-regulate negative affect would be met with the same fate? To the extent that attempting to down-regulate negative affect invokes the same mechanisms discussed throughout this chapter, we posit that any emotional goal (e.g., increasing happiness, decreasing sadness, etc.) can be associated with paradoxical outcomes. For example, monitoring one’s negative emotional states has also been robustly linked with negative effects (Mor & Winquist, 2002). However, to the extent that any emotional goal is pursued effectively (e.g., with the proper strategies), it should be more likely that this goal will be met with success.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Although studying happiness often involves measuring how people feel, the research presented here highlights the importance of taking into account the emotions people *want to feel* to gain a more complete picture of happiness and its implications for psychological health and adaptive functioning. We reviewed recent research suggesting that wanting to feel happy may lead to negative outcomes, including less well-being, poorer psychological health, and, paradoxically, less happiness. Importantly, the present findings do not mean that wanting to be happy is *necessarily* associated with negative outcomes. The pursuit of happiness could indeed lead to greater happiness if people are given the right tools.

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