UC Berkeley
UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

The pursuit of happiness: pitfalls and promises

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1h17g64d

Journal

Trends in Cognitive Sciences

ISSN

1364-6613

Authors

Mauss, Iris B
Ford, Brett Q

Publication Date

2026-03-01

DOI

10.1016/j.tics.2026.03.001

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Trends in Cognitive Sciences

CellPress

Review

The pursuit of happiness: pitfalls and promises

Iris B. Mauss [1,*] and Brett Q. Ford[2]

All humans strive to be happy in some form. Yet the pursuit of happiness is sometimes successful and sometimes self-defeating. This review aims to resolve when and why pursuing happiness is successful or self-defeating by showing that its consequences depend on how people pursue happiness. Building on process models of goal pursuit, we consider five aspects of pursuing happiness: the happiness goals people have, affect regulation, monitoring of one's happiness, responses to one's happiness, and the broader context. Each of these aspects entails not only pitfalls but also promises, and we review recent empirical work on them. Taken together, this review offers a theoretically and empirically informed understanding of the pursuit of happiness. While there are pitfalls, attaining greater happiness is possible.

Highlights

The pursuit of happiness is a universally endorsed value. Yet, pursuing happiness is sometimes successful—leading to 'more' happiness—but sometimes unsuccessful or even self-defeating—leading to less happiness.

It is important to understand when and why the pursuit of happiness fails or succeeds, because this understanding can guide efforts to promote happiness.

We introduce a process model of pursuing happiness with five elements: (i) Happiness goals, (ii) Affect regulation, (iii) Monitoring one's happiness, (iv) Responding to one's happiness, and (v) The broader context. Theorizing suggests that each element entails pitfalls (paths to self-defeat) and promises (paths to success).

Recent research provides insights into how each element contributes to self-defeat or success in the pursuit of happiness.

The pursuit of happiness: a human universal with a mixed track record

All humans strive to be **happy** (see Glossary) [1]. While there are variations in just how important happiness is [2] and in what exactly it means to be happy (Box 1) [10,16–19], the **pursuit of happiness** is a human universal that transcends differences in culture, geographic location, age, ethnicity, and gender [1]. As the Dalai Lama put it, 'The very purpose of our life is to seek happiness' [20,p. 3].

The ubiquity of the pursuit of happiness might lead to the expectation that humans are mostly happy, at least when circumstances allow it. Yet this is not the case. Even when people's lives are good, many people feel less happy than they want to be [21,22]. Thus, while happiness is one of the prime values people hold, they often fall short of attaining it. There even appears to be what has been called a **happiness paradox**: sometimes, the more intensely people pursue happiness, the further they get from it [21,23,24].

While a growing body of research tells us that pursuing happiness can go awry, another body of research has shown that pursuing happiness can succeed. For example, **happiness interventions** can help people become happier [25,26], and this might be especially true for people who are more intensely motivated [25,27]. Research on the pursuit of happiness is thus characterized by a tension: pursuing happiness sometimes fails and sometimes succeeds. This tension indicates that the pursuit of happiness is not inherently good or bad [28,29], but that its outcomes depend on how people pursue it [25,30,31]. The present review unpacks this process—including relevant theoretical models and recent empirical research—to clarify our understanding of when and why pursuing happiness is self-defeating and how to increase its chances of being successful.

When and why does pursuing happiness fail or succeed?

How can we understand when and why pursuing happiness fails versus succeeds? Leveraging models of goal pursuit [32], a process model guides us in considering what happens psychologically when people pursue happiness [33]. In this model (Figure 1, Key figure), pursuing happiness involves (i) setting a **happiness goal**, (ii) engaging in **affect regulation** to pursue the goal, (iii) **monitoring** one's current state, (iv) **responding** to one's current state, and (v) the **broader**

[1]University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA
[2]University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

*Correspondence:
imauss@berkeley.edu (I.B. Mauss).

© 2026 Elsevier Ltd. All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

Box 1. What is happiness?

Happiness is a complex, ambiguous, and even elusive concept. This is in part because the term is used interchangeably with other terms and because it is defined in different ways by different researchers as well as laypeople. In the scientific literature, related and sometimes interchangeable terms for happiness include subjective well-being [1], psychological well-being [3], emotional well-being [4], psychosocial well-being [5], and flourishing [6]. At the broadest level, different researchers' definitions of happiness differ in how much they emphasize hedonic versus eudaimonic happiness [7,8]. Hedonic happiness encompasses primarily positive affect (feeling good) and the absence of negative affect (feeling bad), and it can also include favorable evaluations of one's life (e.g., satisfaction with life) [1,9]. Eudaimonic happiness encompasses a sense of meaning and purpose, and that one is conducting one's life with virtue and according to one's values [3,10,11]. Definitions also differ in whether particular elements are seen as happiness *itself*, as *parts* of happiness, or as *causes or correlates* of happiness [see 9,12,13]. For example, some theories view only hedonic happiness *as* happiness, whereas the other components are considered *causes of* happiness [see 14]. In recent years, researchers have proposed another element of happiness: psychological richness ('a life filled with diverse, interesting experiences' [15]).

We take a unifying approach by setting aside the question of whether these elements are constituents, causes, or correlates of happiness. As illustrated in Figure I, in this view happiness can be defined as a relatively sustained (rather than only momentary) set of states with presence of positive affect (pleasure) and absence of negative affect (pain) at the core and involving multiple related facets: a sense of meaning, purpose, and virtue as well as a favorable evaluation (e.g., satisfaction with life). As illustrated by the 'fuzzy' boundaries, we hold that there is not a clear and definitive line between happiness and unhappiness; rather, states can resemble happiness prototypes more or less. We place affect at its core *not* to imply that a happy person feels positive affect constantly, but because—ultimately—the other facets tend to feel good [see 14,16]. The facets overlap and correlate, yet remain partially distinct: their partial independence means that happiness can be shaped by different pathways while still retaining a common affective core. Within this comprehensive and unifying definition of happiness, our review focuses on the core: people's pursuit of the affective element of happiness.

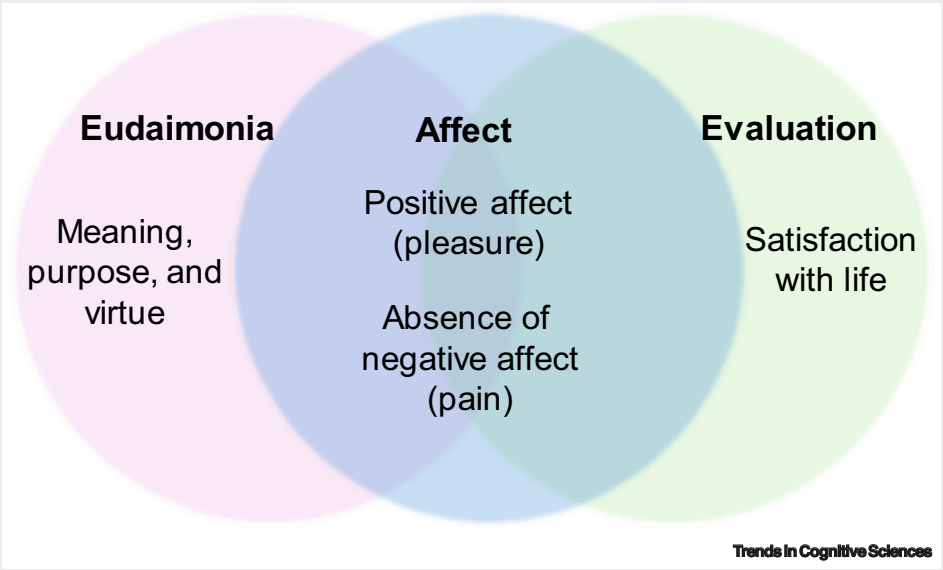

Figure I. Schematic of a definition of happiness. Happiness is constituted by multiple, overlapping facets, including the presence of positive and the absence of negative affect (affect), a sense of meaning, purpose, and virtue (eudaimonia), and a favorable evaluation of one's life (evaluation). The 'fuzzy' boundaries indicate that there is no clear and definitive line between happiness and unhappiness; rather, states can resemble happiness prototypes more or less. The facets overlap yet also have some unique aspects.

context. Each element of the process entails not only pitfalls but also promises for pursuing happiness (Box 2).

We define happiness comprehensively as a relatively sustained (not just momentary) set of states centered on the presence of positive affect (pleasure) and the absence of negative affect (pain),

Glossary

Affect: a positively or negatively valenced experiential state. Some researchers distinguish the experience of affect (e.g., feeling happy) from the meta-conscious experience of affect (e.g., being consciously aware that one is feeling happy).
Affect regulation: affect regulation involves changing one's affect in a goal-directed manner, which can involve increasing or decreasing positive or negative affect.
Broader context: the proximal (immediate situation a person is in) and distal (culture and systems) psychological and physical environments that shape and are shaped by individuals.
Eudaimonic happiness: encompasses a sense of meaning and purpose and that one is conducting one's life with virtue and according to one's values.
Happiness: a relatively sustained (not just momentary) set of states comprising positive affect (pleasure) and the absence of negative affect (pain) at its core, and involving multiple, correlated facets, including an evaluation (e.g., satisfaction with life) and a sense of meaning and purpose (see Figure I in Box 1). See Box 1 for other definitions of happiness.
Happiness goal: the degree and frequency with which someone wants to be happy.
Happiness interventions: interventions aimed at increasing the positive aspects of well-being rather than decreasing the negative aspects of well-being.
Happiness paradox: a self-defeating effect whereby striving to achieve happiness can lead to less happiness, and more intense striving can lead to a more pronounced self-defeat.
Hedonic happiness: encompasses positive affect (pleasure), the absence of negative affect (pain), as well as favorable evaluations of one's life or domains of one's life (e.g., satisfaction with one's life).
Meaning and purpose: people experience meaning and purpose when they judge their lives to have significance and coherence, make sense, and matter beyond day-to-day, immediate concerns.
Meta-emotion: emotions people feel about their emotions (e.g., approval, disappointment, or guilt).

Key figure

The process of pursuing happiness

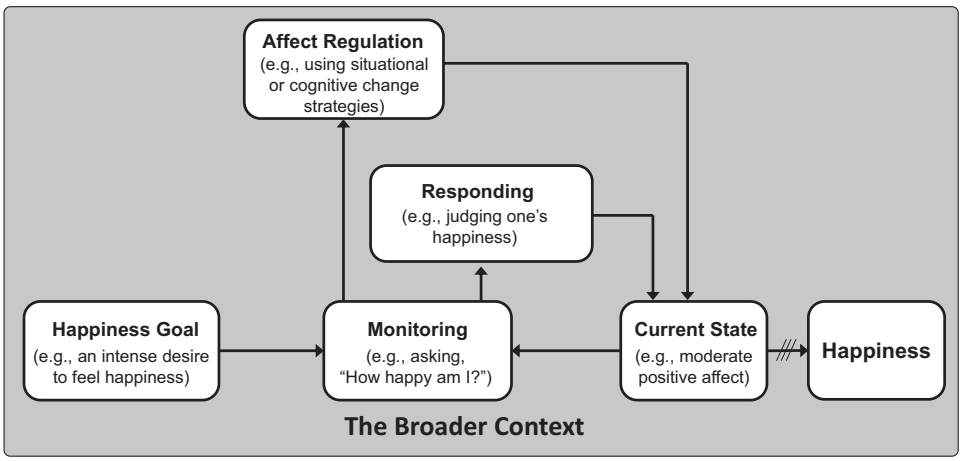

Figure 1. A process model of pursuing happiness. Pursuing happiness involves (i) setting a happiness goal, (ii) engaging in affect regulation to pursue the goal, (iii) monitoring one's happiness, (iv) responding to one's happiness, and (v) the broader context. The shading indicates that the broader context affects all elements of the model, as well as how they interact with one another. /// indicates that current state accumulates over time to shape overall happiness. We examine well-being as the outcome of pursuing happiness (rightmost box). Well-being overlaps with happiness (Box 1) but encompasses additional elements such as the absence of mental health symptoms (depression and anxiety).

Monitoring: monitoring involves attending to and introspecting on how one feels and how happy one is at a given moment or during a given event.
Pursuit of happiness: striving to experience sustained, frequent, and/or intense happiness.
Responding to one's happiness: people have strong and nuanced intuitions about happiness, which leads them to respond to their own happiness in various ways. Common responses include negative judgment ('There is something wrong with me if I don't feel happy'.) or acceptance ('Whatever levels of happiness or unhappiness I feel are okay'.).
Virtues: dispositions, habits, and activities that are in accordance with one's values and are judged to be beneficial to the self and others.

while also encompassing correlated facets such as **meaning**, **purpose**, and **virtue** (often referred to as eudaimonia) and an overall positive evaluation (e.g., satisfaction with life) (Box 1). Within this broad definition, our model and review focus on the affective element of happiness —increasing positive and decreasing negative affect—for two reasons. First, affective experience lies at the conceptual core of happiness: for example, positive affect can arise without feeling meaning or virtue, but experiences of meaning and virtue often feel good [9,14,16]. Second, this element has received the most attention in empirical research [21,25,26,31]. In Box 3, we discuss how the pursuit of other elements of happiness (e.g., meaning) could differ from the pursuit of affective happiness. While people often pursue their own personal happiness, this pursuit involves social pathways and is embedded within relational, contextual, or cultural systems that shape its process and outcomes. Thus, while the pursuit of happiness can appear to be personal, it is deeply rooted in broader contexts that we discuss throughout this review.

Finally, throughout this review, we examine well-being as the outcome of pursuing happiness because this reflects the focus of the current empirical literature. Well-being overlaps with happiness—often encompassing the elements depicted in Figure I in Box 1—but also includes elements such as the absence of mental health symptoms (e.g., depression and anxiety). We note that well-being can be understood not only at the individual level but also at the collective level.

Happiness goals

How do goals determine the success of pursuing happiness? The goal to be happy is a human universal [1], and it has become ever more pervasive and intense, especially in the West [43],

Box 2. How does pursuing happiness fail or succeed?

Concretely, how does someone go about pursuing happiness? Imagine it is your birthday. Your friends plan a party for you, bringing together all your favorite people, foods, and drinks. The conditions are perfect to feel a range of positive emotions—contentment, excitement, gratitude, and joy. So far, so good, but will this moment, together with others like it, actually contribute to greater happiness, adding up to a good life?

One factor is how intensely you wish to be happy ('Happiness goal' in Figure 1). It turns out that more intensely wishing to be happy doesn't interfere with happiness; in fact, it might promote happiness.

A second factor is whether and how you try to change your emotions ('Affect regulation' in Figure 1). Using strategies like emotion suppression (not showing your feelings) can lead to less overall happiness compared with strategies like situation selection (letting your friends throw you the party), positive reappraisal (considering how grateful you are to have thoughtful friends), and savoring the moment (allowing yourself to be spoiled).

A third factor is how you monitor and reflect on your emotions ('Monitoring' in Figure 1). If you pay close attention to your happiness during the entire party ('Am I happy? How about now?'), you will likely not fully enjoy it or its lasting benefits. However, some well-timed reflection and introspection are a good thing, as they will help you realize the party was a great idea and how wonderful it was.

The fourth factor is how you respond to your own emotions during the party ('Responding' in Figure 1). If you judge your happiness ('I should be happier'), you might end up spoiling the experience by introducing negativity—for example, guilt and disappointment *about* your own emotions. But if you encounter your emotions with acceptance and equanimity—even if there are unpleasant moments, as when one of the guests says something grouchy—you make it more likely that the event is a net positive.

The final factor is the social, cultural, and systemic context ('Broader context' in Figure 1). Some cultural norms might create pressure to have a 'perfect event' with the 'perfect emotions', paradoxically making judgment and negativity more likely. In contrast, other cultural norms might facilitate happiness, such as the idea that happiness is best realized when being with other people. Together, these five factors determine whether pursuing happiness succeeds in the moment and, over time, adds up to a happy life.

Box 3. Does pursuing different elements of happiness matter?

Most research to date has focused on people striving to attain the affective element of happiness (more positive or less negative affect) in pursuing happiness, and this is the focus of the present review. However, people can also strive to attain other elements of happiness, such as eudaimonia (meaning, purpose, and virtue), positive evaluation of one's life, or psychological richness (Box 1). While the various happiness elements overlap and are thus not mutually exclusive [14,16,34], there might be some important differences as well.

For instance, it is possible that pursuing eudaimonic versus affective happiness is more likely to lead to greater well-being for three reasons. First, pursuing eudaimonic happiness might invoke more successful types of affect regulation. For example, seeking more meaning might lead a person to engage in prosocial acts and to orient toward other people, which increases well-being [26,35–39]. In contrast, seeking positive affect might lead a person to engage in a variety of strategies, including those that do not reliably increase well-being, such as distraction [21,31]. Second, meaningful and purposeful activities are less subject to adaptation than affectively motivated activities [25]. Third, pursuing eudaimonic happiness avoids some of the paradoxical effects inherent in pursuing positive affect—as one is disappointed in one's actual affect, one undermines the very state one seeks [23,31]. This paradox is not inherent in the pursuit of eudaimonic elements of happiness.

Indeed, research that has examined people's lay definitions of happiness has found that people who understand happiness predominantly as eudaimonia (e.g., meaning, purpose, or achieving one's potential) versus affect (e.g., experiencing positive or avoiding painful emotions) tend to be more likely to experience greater, longer-term well-being [16,17,40]. This is presumably because people who conceptualize happiness as eudaimonia pursue eudaimonic elements of happiness. Along similar lines, in cultural contexts where happiness is viewed—and pursued—in relatively socially engaged ways, its pursuit tends to be more successful [41]. Together, these lines of research converge on the idea that it matters which element of happiness people strive toward, with the goal of eudaimonic happiness potentially being more conducive to attaining lasting happiness. Ultimately, however, it is important to remember that different aspects of happiness are not mutually exclusive; we do not have to choose between them. And indeed, endorsing *both* eudaimonic and affective definitions appears to be associated with the highest profiles of well-being [16,42].

fueled by and fueling positive psychology and 'self-optimization' trends. Ironically, this intensity has led to the hypothesis that pursuing happiness as an explicit goal can set people up for failure [21,24,33,44]. This idea is captured in Nathaniel Hawthorne's aphorism: 'Happiness in this world, when it comes, comes incidentally. Make it the object of pursuit, and it leads us a wild-goose chase, and is never attained' [45,p. 397]. Psychologically speaking, the idea is that intense happiness goals are bound to be accompanied by detrimental processes such as unrealistic expectations and disappointment.

Recent research, however, indicates that holding happiness goals—even lofty ones—is not necessarily self-defeating. In several studies, Happiness-Related Strivings—the goal to attain happiness captured by items such as 'I try very hard to be happy'—modestly predicted more satisfaction with life, positive affect, and psychological well-being, without predicting negative affect [30]. In a sample of about 8000 Dutch adults, endorsing happiness goals predicted greater well-being cross-sectionally, though prospectively showed a mixed pattern: no link with life satisfaction and greater positive as well as greater negative affect [46]. These and similar findings [47] indicate that happiness goals themselves might not inevitably be self-defeating.

To further explore happiness goals, a recent series of studies examined extreme happiness goals in 1815 participants from across the United States using items like 'happiness is extremely important to me' [48]. Strongly endorsing such goals was not associated with detrimental outcomes in life satisfaction, psychological well-being, or depression symptoms. Thus, simply aspiring to happiness—considering happiness very important—appeared not to interfere with attaining happiness.

In sum, there appear to be neither pitfalls nor promises inherent in happiness goals. While holding happiness goals does not doom one to fail, it also does not guarantee success: simply striving for happiness is not consistently related to outcomes either way [25]. Thus, whether the pursuit of happiness succeeds appears to depend less on the goal itself than on what follows in the process of pursuing it (Table 1).

Affect regulation

Once someone has set a happiness goal—at its core, an affective state—the next step is to use affect regulation to align one's state with that goal (Figure 1). Affect regulation involves attempts to change one's affect in a goal-directed manner, which can mean increasing or decreasing positive or negative affect [63]. Affect regulation can be grouped into four families that intervene at different points in the emotion-generative process: changing the emotion-eliciting situation (situational change), changing attention (attentional deployment), changing one's construal of the situation (cognitive change), and changing the emotional response itself (response modulation) [63,64]. While setting an intense goal for happiness *per se* neither guarantees nor interferes with happiness, research points to reliable pitfalls and promises when considering affect regulation.

Pitfalls

Each family of emotion regulation can lead to self-defeating effects in the pursuit of happiness. For example, when considering situational change, people often misforecast what will bring them happiness [65,66]. Poor affective forecasting can lead individuals to select situations that fail to improve—or can even worsen—their mood, undermining their happiness. When considering attentional deployment, although distraction can provide short-term relief from negative emotions [67], its benefits rarely persist [68], perhaps because it fosters disengagement from the situation and does not promote the kinds of cognitive and social engagement that sustain happiness over time [26].

Table 1. When and why pursuing happiness is self-defeating or successful, as indicated by a process model of pursuing happiness

Element of pursuing happiness	Implications for pursuing happiness	
	Pitfalls: How elements of pursuing happiness can be detrimental	Promises: How elements of pursuing happiness can be helpful
Holding a happiness goal	Aspiring to happiness, even intensely, is innocuous or linked with mixed outcomes [25,30,48]. Its effects depend on the subsequent elements of pursuing happiness, and thus, there are no pitfalls or promises *inherent* to holding a happiness goal.	
Affect regulation to increase happiness	Unsuccessfully or inappropriately using affect regulation strategies (those that inhibit engagement and social connection). Example: Suppressing negative emotion disrupts social connection and happiness [49,50].	Successfully utilizing appropriate affect regulation strategies (those that promote positive affect, engagement, and social connection). Example: Changing and selecting situations to increase positive affect [51,52].
Monitoring one's happiness	Too frequent monitoring of hedonic experiences. Example: Positive states of 'flow' are characterized by not attending to the self [53].	Occasional monitoring, reflection, and introspection. Example: Savoring of positive events [54–56].
Responding to one's own happiness	Judging one's happiness, especially when it is negative. Example: Concern about happiness [30,48,57].	Accepting one's happiness or unhappiness. Example: Accepting one's emotions, including negative ones [58,59].
The broader social, cultural, and systemic context	Inconsistency between happiness goals and other personal goals or societal norms. Example: Perceived societal pressure to feel happy [60–62].	Supporting successful happiness pursuit or directly fostering happiness, thus putting less burden on intentional individual happiness pursuit. Example: Cultural norms that support successful affect regulation and remove negative judgment [41].

When considering cognitive change, reappraisal (reconstruing events) is often considered a 'gold standard' strategy for improving affective states. However, reappraisal is not universally beneficial [69]. Many individuals struggle to use it effectively (e.g., up to one-third of community samples report feeling 'worse' after reappraising [70,71]). Moreover, frequent reappraisal attempts in the absence of skill can have cumulative costs, predicting more depressive symptoms among stressed individuals [72,73]. Finally, in the domain of response modulation, research on expressive suppression ('putting on a happy face') consistently finds that it leaves short-term affective experience unchanged—or worsens it—and is associated with poorer long-term well-being, especially in Western samples. These effects are largely attributable to social costs: suppression tends to reduce feelings of connection, increase loneliness, and diminish authenticity in social interactions [49,50]. One key theme across these pitfalls is that disengagement—from the present moment or from other people—tends to carry costs for affect regulation.

Promises

The pitfalls of affect regulation also point to its promise: if disengagement is costly, promising affect regulation strategies might emphasize engagement with one's situation or social connection. Indeed, when considering situational change, research on *Prioritizing Positivity* shows that individuals who intentionally structure their daily lives to include opportunities for positive experiences report greater well-being both cross-sectionally and in daily life [51,52]. Similarly, Positive Activity Interventions that guide people toward specific activities, often involving cultivating opportunities for meaningful social connection (e.g., expressing gratitude and engaging in prosocial

acts), show consistent benefits [25,26]. While their effect sizes tend to be modest, they reliably boost positive affect and reduce negative affect [25,26,74], as well as improve relationships and social connection [35–39], and might thus set in motion a virtuous cycle [75]. When considering attentional deployment, older adults may experience well-being benefits because they tend to direct attention toward positive aspects of their environment and experience greater hedonic benefits from doing so [76,77]. When considering cognitive change, although reappraisal can be difficult to use effectively, some forms appear more accessible. Positive reappraisal—reconstruing situations to highlight unexpected benefits without denying negative aspects—often leads to greater positive affect in experimental contexts [78,79]. Additionally, interventions that ask people to write gratitude letters or envision optimistic futures boost happiness in part by encouraging them to construe daily experiences more positively. These strategies not only improve affect but also reinforce a sense of meaning in everyday life, further enhancing happiness [25,80]. When considering response modulation, beyond reducing negative expression, response-focused strategies can also amplify positive experience. For instance, emphasizing and sharing positive experiences with others, as in *capitalization* [81], strengthens well-being and relationships, again underscoring the power of social connection in the pursuit of happiness.

In sum, while affect regulation can go awry, each family of strategies can also enhance happiness when used skillfully (Table 1). The devil is in the details: no strategy is inherently 'good' or 'bad'—its effects depend on how it is enacted. Across strategies, a theme emerges: the most reliable paths to happiness involve engagement—whether with one's own life or with other people through social connection. When affect regulation brings people into contact with their lives and fosters purpose, meaningful relationships, and a prosocial orientation, it is far more likely to support sustained happiness. In this sense, affect regulation that is aligned with ***eudaimonic* happiness** (i.e., cultivating meaning, purpose, and virtue) may be especially successful because it directs people toward the most robust routes to well-being, while affect regulation aligned with **hedonic happiness** (i.e., maximizing positive affect) may more easily lead people astray (Box 3).

Monitoring one's happiness

The next step in the process of pursuing happiness is to monitor one's current happiness (Figure 1). Monitoring involves attending to and introspecting on how one feels.

Pitfalls

Monitoring one's happiness has long been believed to be detrimental to one's happiness, as illustrated by the aphorism, 'Ask yourself whether you are happy and you cease to be so' [82]. The mere act of introspecting is thought to lead one to focus on the self and being 'pulled out of the moment', which could interfere with the full enjoyment of it [24].

Despite the intuitive appeal of these ideas, strong empirical evidence is limited, perhaps because it requires an 'unmonitored' condition (where a person does not introspect on their own happiness), which by definition conflicts with measuring the key outcome—experience of happiness [83]. Still, clinical studies are broadly consistent: people with disorders such as depression or anxiety tend to show elevated self-focused attention, which in turn heightens vulnerability to and exacerbates these disorders [84,85]. Research on flow provides additional correlational evidence: flow occurs when people are completely immersed in an activity that is challenging yet accomplishable—that is, when they do not pay attention to the self or how they feel [86]. Crucially, flow states are also characterized by being pleasant. For example, an experience-sampling study of 78 participants across 3432 daily observations found that many of the most pleasant moments of the day occurred when people reported being in a state of flow [53]. These findings are consistent with the idea that paying attention to happiness could interfere with feeling happiness.

Promises

Competing with the idea that introspection undermines happiness, another intuition suggests that 'the unexamined life is not worth living' (attributed to Socrates [87,38a]). This intuition underlies the popularity of happiness-tracking apps, recommendations to be mindfully aware, and the idea that reflection is integral to well-being [88]. The logic is straightforward: without some awareness of one's feelings, one cannot regulate them effectively and may not even know when one is happy.

Some empirical research indicates that introspection does not necessarily disrupt positive experiences. For example, continuously rating amusement while watching a funny film did not diminish participants' subjective, behavioral, or physiological signs of enjoyment [89]. Other research even indicates a beneficial effect of introspection. Savoring—anticipating, enjoying, and reminiscing about one's positive experiences—leads to well-being benefits [90,91]. Critically, an essential feature of savoring is 'conscious attention to the experience of pleasure' [92,p. 5]—that is, monitoring. When experiencing positive events, savoring predicts greater positive and less negative affect in the moment and in subsequent weeks [54,55]. Providing causal evidence, individuals instructed to savor (compared with control conditions) report more positive affect in response to positive pictures [56]. Going beyond momentary effects, individuals with mental and physical health difficulties have been shown to benefit in terms of well-being from savoring interventions [93].

So, is it true that if you ask yourself whether you are happy, you cease to be so? Correlational studies suggest that hedonic experiences are incompatible with monitoring, but other, more direct studies, including experiments and interventions, indicate no detrimental or even positive effects of monitoring one's happiness (Table 1). This apparent contradiction can be resolved by taking a closer look at monitoring. First, we can consider the frequency of monitoring, where a curvilinear association might best capture the benefits and costs of monitoring, with monitoring being beneficial at moderate levels and detrimental at the lowest and highest levels. Second, we can consider the distinction between the *feeling itself* ('hedonic experience') and *awareness of that feeling* ('meta-conscious experience') [9,83], where monitoring hedonic experiences may bring trouble rather than awareness. Bringing these considerations together, too frequent monitoring of one's current feeling states ('Am I happy now? How about now?') might disrupt and erode hedonic experiences and, over time, happiness. In contrast, occasional monitoring and reflection ('How happy was I during this experience?') might be harmless or even conducive to happiness by making one aware of happiness and by clarifying the conditions that foster it. The answer, then, depends on timing and dosage: constant monitoring risks undermining happiness, especially when it occurs during the pleasant experience, but periodic reflection can enhance it, especially when it occurs before or after a pleasant experience.

Monitoring one's current happiness thus has implications for happiness—sometimes detrimental, sometimes beneficial. An additional core feature of monitoring is that it invites comparison between one's current state and one's happiness goals [9]. In doing so, it sets the stage for the happiness seeker to evaluate their goal progress and potentially have a response to their own affective state. In the next section, we consider these evaluative responses and how they shape the success of pursuing happiness.

Responding to one's happiness

Happiness features prominently in how people think about themselves. People think about and respond to their own happiness with questions like, 'What does it mean that I am less happy than I want to be?' As indicated in Figure 1, these responses to one's own happiness can also play a pivotal role in the pursuit of happiness.

Pitfalls

Several lines of research converge on the idea that responses to one's happiness—namely, judging one's happiness—can interfere with happiness. For instance, valuing happiness has been linked to worse well-being when people perceive pressure not to feel anxious or depressed [60,94]. In other words, when people feel that their level of happiness could be in some way inappropriate and they ought to feel happy, the pursuit of happiness can become self-defeating [95].

A series of studies involving 1815 US participants directly examined this idea [48] and identified two distinct dimensions of how people approach happiness: first, '*aspiring to happiness*' reflects simply endorsing happiness as a goal— and was generally innocuous, even when intense. Second, '*concern about happiness'* reflects a judgement of one's own happiness, agreeing with statements like 'I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy'. Concern, unlike aspiration, consistently predicted worse outcomes, including lower life satisfaction, poorer psychological well-being, and higher depressive symptoms. Daily diary data suggested why this was: when good things happened, people higher in concern were more likely to experience negative **meta-emotions** such as disappointment about their own feelings. Each instance may seem minor, but over time, these repeated negative responses act like a slow drip of poison, gradually eroding well-being.

Making a similar distinction in how people strive for happiness, other research found that simply striving for happiness was associated with greater well-being, while happiness-related concerns were associated with lower well-being [30]. Extending these findings to the within-person level, a study using ecological momentary assessment found that momentary concern about happiness predicted less happiness in daily life, even when controlling for average levels of concern [57].

Another type of negative response to happiness that has received attention is 'fear of happiness', which refers to an aversive reaction in response to happiness, including anxiety and guilt [96]. This aversive reaction stems from the belief that happiness might lead to bad events or compromise one's character. Empirical research consistently indicates that fear of happiness is linked with worse well-being across a range of cultures [e.g., 97–99]. Together, these findings converge on the idea that judgmental responses to one's happiness might lie at the heart of self-defeat.

Promises

If negative judgment of one's happiness undermines its pursuit, a promising alternative may be to counteract judgment [100]. Research on mindfulness, and more specifically emotional acceptance, underscores the promise of this approach [95,101] (Box 4). The more accepting people are of their emotions, especially negative ones, the greater their well-being [104–107]. This link might be explained by people's emotional responses. For example, people who tend to accept their emotions experience less negative emotion in response to a laboratory stress induction [102,108] and in daily life [109,110], and experiencing less daily negative affect explains why acceptance predicts better well-being longitudinally [58].

Intervention studies and experiments provide causal evidence. For instance, acceptance and commitment therapy and mindfulness-based approaches—which include acceptance as a key active ingredient [103]—reduce negative emotion and clinical symptoms [95,111,112]. In a laboratory negative mood induction, participants led to accept (versus inhibit) their emotions felt less distress after (though not during) a laboratory negative mood induction [59]. One reason acceptance is beneficial is that it counteracts concern about happiness: whereas concern fosters toxic negative meta-emotions (e.g., disappointment about one's feelings), acceptance resolves them, thereby removing the harm of judgment [113].

Box 4. What is emotional acceptance and how to attain it?

At the heart of beneficial responding to one's own happiness (or unhappiness) lies acceptance—specifically, emotional acceptance. Emotional acceptance can be defined as encountering one's emotions without judgment and without trying to alter them. Scientific interest in acceptance has emerged alongside interest in the Buddhist notion of mindfulness, where acceptance is central [95,102,103]. Suffering is seen as rooted in attachment to particular things, thoughts, or emotions, and relief comes about when people let go of those attachments—*accepting without judgment what is* (including one's own emotions [20]). Stoic philosophers such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius likewise taught that *accepting what is* offers a path beyond suffering. Most recently, research in the field of emotion regulation has begun to focus on emotional acceptance as a form of emotion regulation [58,59,102]. Importantly, acceptance is different from resignation [58]. One can, for instance, accept one's emotions without going along with an unjust situation. In fact, accepting one's emotions might make it *more likely* that one will take action aligned with one's values. Questions about acceptance abound—Is there something special to acceptance of emotion versus acceptance of *any* psychological process? What exactly happens emotionally and cognitively when people accept their emotions? How does accepting negative emotions relate to not clinging to positive emotions? Yet, despite these questions, it is clear that acceptance has great promise and power to transform people's emotional lives and happiness.

How can people become more accepting? Although it sounds simple—to not judge, react to, or attempt to control one's emotions—it is actually quite difficult, perhaps because it runs counter to many personal habits and cultural values that tell us to avoid negative emotions. Yet three paths to becoming more accepting exist. One path involves developing a spiritual or meditation practice based on the Buddhist and Stoic roots of mindful acceptance. Another path is through mindfulness-based interventions such as acceptance and commitment therapy [95]. A third path is through actively introspecting on and countering the personal and cultural biases that impede acceptance, and building a habit to resist the urge to avoid negative emotion. Changing one's mindset can, over time, engender better emotion regulation habits, including acceptance. Like other processes we describe in this paper, these changes can take place at a personal or a societal level, when scientific insights change societal norms about emotion.

In sum, a key determinant of successfully pursuing happiness lies in one's judgments of one's happiness and one's progress toward it. Negatively judging emotions aggravates taxing events and spoils potential sources of happiness. In contrast, accepting emotions and happiness as they are, or even positively judging them, is associated with greater success (Table 1).

The broader context: social, cultural, and systemic considerations

So far, we have focused on the role of individual-level psychological factors in the pursuit of happiness. Yet people's contexts—social, cultural, and systemic—also shape the pitfalls and promising paths toward happiness and at every stage of the process (Figure 1).

Pitfalls

One key pitfall arises when happiness goals conflict with other goals. Because happiness is always pursued within a broader goal system [114,115], striving for happiness in the wrong context can undermine well-being. For example, individuals who sought to feel happy during confrontational interactions—where the competing goal was to negotiate effectively with a combative partner—experienced poorer mental health [116,117]. In contrast, negative emotions can help people successfully pursue their goals [114]. For example, anger can help people successfully confront or be assertive with others [117,118], and people who seek to avoid anger within confrontational contexts might miss out on an important edge that some degree of anger could provide. Indeed, US college students who wanted to avoid anger in contexts in which it could be useful (e.g., confrontational interactions) experienced worse psychological well-being [116,119]. Happiness goals can also backfire when they conflict with social norms—for instance, wanting to feel happy when a friend shares upsetting news.

The broader cultural context also creates pitfalls for the pursuit of happiness. Just as individuals have values and beliefs regarding happiness, so do cultures [19,43,120–122]. These norms, in turn, can shape the success of individuals' pursuit of happiness. For instance, when people perceive their society's happiness norms as pressure to be happier, this can predict less happiness,

especially for people living in happier countries [61] and for people with higher levels of negative affect [60,62]. In part, these effects might occur because they induce people to experience negative judgments about their own happiness and accompanying negative meta-emotions that undermine happiness [113]. Recently, one can observe a reaction against these cultural pressures for happiness in the popular discourse about 'toxic positivity' [22].

Promises

While broader cultural contexts can create pitfalls, they also hold promise by shaping how people pursue and respond to happiness [123]. For instance, culture influences *how* happiness goals are pursued. In a cross-cultural study comparing more individualistic groups (United States, Germany) to more collectivistic groups (Japan, Russia), more extreme valuing of happiness was linked with poorer well-being among the individualistic groups but *better* well-being among the collectivistic groups [41,124]. The benefits among the collectivistic groups were explained by people in those cultures tending to pursue happiness in more socially-oriented ways [41]. When cultures promote productive strategies for pursuing happiness, these strategies can become more practiced, habitual, and automatic (and thus, more successful and less effortful) [125]; as such, these cultural practices can help individuals sidestep the pitfalls of poorly executed affect regulation, constant monitoring, and the meta-responses that undermine happiness.

It is also important to recognize that systems and societal structures play a central role in shaping people's happiness via access to resources and the physical environment. Thus, combating poverty and income inequality, for example, should be a powerful pathway to enhance happiness. Research suggests that providing financial resources boosts happiness [26,126], especially for people facing greater financial hardship [26,127]. Returning to the theme of social pathways to happiness, wealth redistribution and decreasing inequality may work in part because they enable greater social connection and trust [128]. However, above a hardship threshold, structural interventions (e.g., providing financial and other supports) may have diminishing returns [26,127], and this is where psychological strategies become especially important. In other words, structural and systemic change and individual-level psychological interventions are complementary—both are needed and useful to foster lasting happiness.

In sum, contexts powerfully shape the pursuit of happiness. Contexts can create not only pitfalls when they undermine efforts to pursue happiness (e.g., by inducing conflicting goals or negative judgments of happiness) but also promises when they foster successful paths to happiness (e.g., by guiding more adaptive pursuits and creating conditions where happiness can emerge naturally; see Table 1). By shaping cultural and societal environments, we can circumvent the limitations of individual striving, reducing its pitfalls while fostering happiness more reliably at the collective level.

Future directions for research on the pursuit of happiness

While the pursuit of happiness is a long-standing question in philosophy, empirical psychology has come to it relatively recently, and many questions remain to be answered. First, the proposed model is new, and several of its elements have not been comprehensively tested. In particular, we need more experimental and intervention research to test the causal effects of goals, monitoring, responding to one's current state, and affect regulation. We also need more ecological assessment methods that examine how the process of pursuing happiness unfolds in real life. Lastly, a more precise understanding of the boundary conditions, mechanisms, and dose–response relationships is needed. As one example, we do not know exactly what degree and timing of monitoring is useful versus harmful.

A second important area for research considers the individual differences that may modulate the pursuit of happiness. For instance, individuals might differ in what happiness means to them, with some people understanding happiness more as an affective state while others understand happiness more as a eudaimonic state. Such individual differences likely influence the whole cascade of pursuing happiness (Box 3). People also differ in whether they strive for the presence of positive versus the absence of negative affect [79,129] or for more frequent versus more intense happiness [1]. In both cases, the former may lead to more success than the latter.

A third promising area for research lies in how culture influences the pursuit of happiness [19,43,122]. For instance, interdependent, compared with independent, cultures might lead to more social (and thus more successful) ways of pursuing happiness [41,43]. Also, at the cultural level, it will be important to identify constellations of beliefs and practices that give rise to self-defeating (such as in 'toxic positivity') or successful pursuit of happiness (such as in a 'culture of happiness').

A final area with promising implications concerns integrating individual with contextual and systemic factors. For instance, individual-level interventions may be maximally successful and effective when paired with systemic interventions [see 26]. Moreover, it may be important to balance more modest individual happiness goals with achieving happiness for a greater number of people to avoid happiness inequality [43]. We also need to better understand how individuals' pursuit of happiness intersects with the collective good to find ways to optimize both individual and collective happiness [130].

Concluding remarks

Happiness is a core value throughout human history and across cultures. Yet many people find ways to fumble it. The research reviewed here helps clarify when and why pursuing happiness is self-defeating or successful, and points to how to avoid the pitfalls and realize the promises. Contrary to long-held intuitions, intensely pursuing happiness *per se* is not necessarily self-defeating. The pursuit of happiness is more likely to be successful when people effectively utilize the right affect regulation strategies, monitor their happiness not too much and not too little, and respond to what happiness they do or do not have without counterproductive judgment. A central theme is that the success of pursuing happiness does not hinge on individuals alone; some of the most promising ways to attain happiness work through social connection and by optimizing contexts, cultures, and systems (Table 1). While many questions remain (see Outstanding questions), recent research points to actionable steps to help all humans attain greater happiness.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (435-2018-0332) and an Early Researcher Award from the Government of Ontario (ER21-16-247) to B.Q.F. and by the National Science Foundation Grant BCS-1941868 to I.B.M.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

References

1. Diener, E. (2000) Subjective well-being: the science of happiness and a proposal for a national index. *Am. Psychol.* 55, 34–43
2. Diener, E. *et al.* (1995) National differences in reported subjective well-being: why do they occur? *Soc. Indic. Res.* 34, 7–32
3. Ryff, C.D. and Keyes, C.L. (1995) The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 69, 719–727
4. Park, C.L. *et al.* (2022) Emotional well-being: what it is and why it matters. *Affect. Sci.* 4, 10–20
5. Willroth, E.C. (2022) The benefits and challenges of a unifying conceptual framework for well-being constructs. *Affect. Sci.* 4, 41–44
6. Fredrickson, B.L. and Losada, M.F. (2005) Positive affect and the complex dynamics of human flourishing. *Am. Psychol.* 60, 678–686

Outstanding questions

What is the causal role of particular elements in the process of pursuing happiness, and by what mechanisms do they affect happiness? In addition to surveys and cross-sectional studies, experimental, intervention, daily process, and longitudinal studies are needed to address these questions.

How do individual and cultural differences influence the pursuit of happiness? Which ways of pursuing happiness work for whom? For example, personality, age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and other factors likely influence the success of pursuing happiness.

How do different components of happiness influence the pursuit of happiness? For example, eudaimonic happiness might be easier to attain than affective happiness because it invokes more productive types of affect regulation. Or, it might be more productive to strive for more frequent happiness than for highly intense happiness. How does psychological richness fit in with other components of happiness?

What role do lay beliefs about happiness play in the pursuit of happiness? Central lay beliefs include the eudaimonic versus hedonic meaning of happiness and the centrality of the absence of pain versus the presence of pleasure.

Can we identify constellations of beliefs and practices at the personal and societal levels that are self-defeating (such as in 'toxic positivity') or lead to success (such as in a 'culture of happiness')?

How can we consider factors beyond the individual in the pursuit of happiness? In particular, questions remain about how contexts and systems shape the pursuit of happiness, and how individuals' pursuit of happiness intersects with the collective good. Are there ways to optimize both individual and collective happiness?

7. Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2001) On happiness and human potentials: a review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 52, 141–166
8. Huta, V. and Waterman, A. (2014) Eudaimonia and its distinction from hedonia: developing a classification and terminology for understanding conceptual and operational definitions. *J. Happiness Stud.* 15, 1425–1456
9. Kahneman, D. (1999) Objective happiness. In *Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (Kahneman, D. *et al.*, eds), pp. 3–25, Russell Sage Foundation
10. Heintzelman, S.J. and King, L.A. (2014) Life is pretty meaningful. *Am. Psychol.* 69, 561–574
11. Park, C.L. (2010) Making sense of the meaning literature: an integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychol. Bull.* 136, 257–301
12. Martela, F. and Sheldon, K.M. (2019) Clarifying the concept of well-being: psychological need satisfaction as the common core connecting eudaimonic and subjective well-being. *Rev. Gen. Psychol.* 23, 458–474
13. Ratchford, J.L. *et al.* (2024) What is virtue? Using philosophy to refine psychological definition and operationalization. *Philos. Psychol.* 37, 2597–2622
14. Kashdan, T.B. *et al.* (2008) Reconsidering happiness: the costs of distinguishing between hedonics and eudaimonia. *J. Posit. Psychol.* 3, 219–233
15. Oishi, S. and Westgate, E.C. (2025) Psychological richness offers a third path to a good life. *Trends Cogn. Sci.* 29, 1023–1033
16. Huta, V. and Ryan, R.M. (2010) Pursuing pleasure or virtue: the differential and overlapping well-being benefits of hedonic and eudaimonic motives. *J. Happiness Stud.* 11, 735–762
17. McMahan, E.A. and Estes, D. (2011) Hedonic versus eudaimonic conceptions of well-being: evidence of differential associations with self-reported well-being. *Soc. Indic. Res.* 103, 93–108
18. Tsai, J.L. *et al.* (2006) Cultural variation in affect valuation. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 90, 288–307
19. Oishi, S. *et al.* (2013) Concepts of happiness across time and cultures. *Personal. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 39, 559–577
20. Xiv, D.L. and Cutler, H.C. (1998) *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, Riverhead
21. Gruber, J. *et al.* (2011) A dark side of happiness? How, when, and why happiness is not always good. *Perspect. Psychol. Sci.* 6, 222–233
22. Ford, B.Q. (2025) The individual, relational, and societal costs of striving to feel good. *Nat. Rev. Psychol.* 4, 591–602
23. Mauss, I.B. *et al.* (2011) Can seeking happiness make people unhappy? Paradoxical effects of valuing happiness. *Emotion* 11, 807–815
24. Schooler, J.W. *et al.* (2003) The pursuit and monitoring of happiness can be self-defeating. In *Psychology and Economics* (Carrillo, J. and Brocas, I., eds), pp. 41–70, Oxford University Press
25. Sheldon, K.M. and Lyubomirsky, S. (2021) Revisiting the sustainable happiness model and pie chart: can happiness be successfully pursued? *J. Posit. Psychol.* 16, 145–154
26. Folk, D. and Dunn, E. (2024) How can people become happier? A systematic review of preregistered experiments. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 75, 467–493
27. Lyubomirsky, S. *et al.* (2011) Becoming happier takes both a will and a proper way: an experimental longitudinal intervention to boost well-being. *Emotion* 11, 391–402
28. Fritz, M.M. and Lyubomirsky, S. (2018) Whither happiness? When, how, and why might positive activities undermine well-being. In *The Social Psychology of Living Well* (Forgas, J.P. and Baumeister, R.F., eds), pp. 101–115, Routledge
29. Layous, K. and Lyubomirsky, S. (2014) The how, why, what, when, and who of happiness. In *Positive Emotion: Integrating the Light Sides and Dark Sides* (Gruber, J. and Moskowitz, J.T., eds), pp. 473–495, Oxford University Press
30. Krasko, J. *et al.* (2020) Happiness goal orientations and their associations with well-being. *J. Well-Being Assess.* 4, 121–162
31. Ford, B.Q. and Mauss, I.B. (2014) The paradoxical effects of pursuing positive emotion. In *Positive Emotion: Integrating the Light Sides and Dark Sides* (Gruber, J. and Moskowitz, J.T., eds), pp. 363–381, Oxford University Press
32. Tamir, M. (2021) Effortful emotion regulation as a unique form of cybernetic control. *Perspect. Psychol. Sci.* 16, 94–117
33. Zerwas, F.K. and Ford, B.Q. (2021) The paradox of pursuing happiness. *Curr. Opin. Behav. Sci.* 39, 106–112
34. Baumeister, R.F. *et al.* (2016) Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. In *Positive Psychology in Search for Meaning* (Leontiev, D.A., ed.), pp. 49–60, Routledge
35. Aknin, L.B. *et al.* (2022) The emotional rewards of prosocial spending are robust and replicable in large samples. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 31, 536–545
36. Curry, O.S. *et al.* (2018) Happy to help? A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of performing acts of kindness on the well-being of the actor. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 76, 320–329
37. Choi, H. *et al.* (2025) A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of gratitude interventions on well-being across cultures. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci.* 122, e2425193122
38. Regan, A. *et al.* (2022) Experimental effects of social behavior on well-being. *Trends Cogn. Sci.* 26, 987–998
39. Hui, B.P. *et al.* (2020) Rewards of kindness? A meta-analysis of the link between prosociality and well-being. *Psychol. Bull.* 146, 1084
40. Sheldon, K.M. *et al.* (2019) Pursuing eudaimonic functioning versus pursuing hedonic well-being: the first goal succeeds in its aim, whereas the second does not. *J. Happiness Stud.* 20, 919–933
41. Ford, B.Q. *et al.* (2015) Culture shapes whether the pursuit of happiness predicts higher or lower well-being. *J. Exp. Psychol. Gen.* 144, 1053–1062
42. Krasko, J. *et al.* (2022) When happiness is both joy and purpose: the complexity of the pursuit of happiness and well-being is related to actual well-being. *J. Happiness Stud.* 23, 3233–3261
43. Krys, K. *et al.* (2025) Happiness maximization is a weird way of living. *Perspect. Psychol. Sci.* 20, 874–902
44. Bardeen, J.R. and Fergus, T.A. (2020) Emotion regulation self-efficacy mediates the relation between happiness emotion goals and depressive symptoms: a cross-lagged panel design. *Emotion* 20, 910–915
45. Hawthorne, N. (1851) In *The American Notebooks* (Vol. 8) (Simpson, C.M., ed.), Ohio State University Press
46. Huang, K.J. (2024) Does valuing happiness lead to well-being? *Psychol. Sci.* 35, 1155–1163
47. Luhmann, M. *et al.* (2016) Is valuing happiness associated with lower well-being? A factor-level analysis using the valuing happiness scale. *J. Res. Pers.* 60, 46–50
48. Zerwas, F.K. *et al.* (2024) Unpacking the pursuit of happiness: being concerned about happiness but not aspiring to happiness is linked with negative meta-emotions and worse well-being. *Emotion* 24, 1789–1802
49. Srivastava, S. *et al.* (2009) The social costs of emotional suppression: a prospective study of the transition to college. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 96, 883–897
50. Joshanloo, M. and Weijers, D. (2025) Happiness as a signal: the social functions of expressions of happiness in the context of culture and emotional tribes. *New Ideas Psychol.* 79, 101184
51. Catalino, L.I. and Tov, W. (2022) Daily variation in prioritizing positivity and well-being. *Emotion* 22, 874–879
52. Catalino, L.I. *et al.* (2014) Prioritizing positivity: an effective approach to pursuing happiness? *Emotion* 14, 1155–1161
53. Csikszentmihalyi, M. and LeFevre, J. (1989) Optimal experience in work and leisure. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 56, 815–822
54. Quoidbach, J. *et al.* (2010) Positive emotion regulation and well-being: comparing the impact of eight savoring and dampening strategies. *Pers. Individ. Differ.* 49, 368–373
55. Jose, P.E. *et al.* (2021) Savor now and also reap the rewards later: amplifying savoring predicts greater uplift frequency over time. *J. Posit. Psychol.* 16, 738–748
56. Wilson, K.A. and MacNamara, A. (2021) Savor the moment: willful increase in positive emotion and the persistence of this effect across time. *Psychophysiology* 58, e13754
57. Sahdra, B.K. *et al.* (2025) One size does not make all happy: idionomic links between striving for positive states and happiness in experience sampling. *J. Happiness Stud.* 26, 101
58. Ford, B.Q. *et al.* (2018) The psychological health benefits of accepting negative emotions and thoughts: laboratory, diary,

and longitudinal evidence. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 115, 1075–1092
59. Campbell-Sills, L. *et al.* (2006) Effects of suppression and acceptance on emotional responses of individuals with anxiety and mood disorders. *Behav. Res. Ther.* 44, 1251–1263
60. Bastian, B. *et al.* (2012) Feeling bad about being sad: the role of social expectancies in amplifying negative mood. *Emotion* 12, 69–80
61. Dejonckheere, E. *et al.* (2022) Perceiving societal pressure to be happy is linked to poor well-being, especially in happy nations. *Sci. Rep.* 12, 1514
62. Bastian, B. *et al.* (2014) Is valuing positive emotion associated with life satisfaction? *Emotion* 14, 639–645
63. Gross, J.J. (2015) Emotion regulation: current status and future prospects. *Psychol. Inq.* 26, 1–26
64. Quoidbach, J. *et al.* (2015) Positive interventions: an emotion regulation perspective. *Psychol. Bull.* 141, 655–693
65. Wilson, T.D. and Gilbert, D.T. (2005) Affective forecasting: knowing what to want. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 14, 131–134
66. Hsee, C.K. and Hastie, R. (2006) Decision and experience: why don't we choose what makes us happy? *Trends Cogn. Sci.* 10, 31–37
67. Sheppes, G. and Meiran, N. (2008) Divergent cognitive costs for online forms of reappraisal and distraction. *Emotion* 8, 870
68. Kross, E. and Ayduk, O. (2008) Facilitating adaptive emotional analysis: distinguishing distanced-analysis of depressive experiences from immersed-analysis and distraction. *Personal. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 34, 924–938
69. Ford, B.Q. and Troy, A.S. (2019) Reappraisal reconsidered: a closer look at the costs of an acclaimed emotion-regulation strategy. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 28, 195–203
70. Troy, A.S. *et al.* (2010) Seeing the silver lining: cognitive reappraisal ability moderates the relationship between stress and depression. *Emotion* 10, 783–795
71. Troy, A.S. *et al.* (2013) A person-by-situation approach to emotion regulation: cognitive reappraisal can either help or hurt, depending on the context. *Psychol. Sci.* 24, 2505–2514
72. Ford, B.Q. *et al.* (2017) Understanding reappraisal as a multicomponent process: the psychological health benefits of attempting to use reappraisal depend on reappraisal success. *Emotion* 17, 905–911
73. Perez, C.R. and Soto, J.A. (2011) Cognitive reappraisal in the context of oppression: implications for psychological functioning. *Emotion* 11, 675–680
74. White, C.A. *et al.* (2019) Meta-analyses of positive psychology interventions: the effects are much smaller than previously reported. *PLoS One* 14, e0216588
75. Layous, K. *et al.* (2017) What triggers prosocial effort? A positive feedback loop between positive activities, kindness, and well-being. *J. Posit. Psychol.* 12, 385–398
76. Isaacowitz, D.M. (2022) What do we know about aging and emotion regulation? *Perspect. Psychol. Sci.* 17, 1541–1555
77. Noh, S.R. *et al.* (2011) Deliberate real-time mood regulation in adulthood: the importance of age, fixation and attentional functioning. *Cognit. Emot.* 25, 998–1013
78. Mauss, I.B. and Troy, A.S. (2024) Emotion regulation and resilience: when is reappraisal (not) conducive to resilience. In *Handbook of Emotion Regulation* (Ford, B.Q. and Gross, J.J., eds), pp. 274–281, Guilford Press
79. McRae, K. and Mauss, I.B. (2016) Increasing positive emotion in negative contexts: emotional consequences, neural correlates, and implications for resilience. In *Positive Neuroscience* (Greene, J. *et al.*, eds), pp. 159–174, Oxford University Press
80. Garland, E.L. *et al.* (2015) Mindfulness broadens awareness and builds eudaimonic meaning: a process model of mindful positive emotion regulation. *Psychol. Inq.* 26, 293–314
81. Gable, S.L. *et al.* (2018) What do you do when things go right? The intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events. In *Relationships, Well-being and Behaviour* (Reis, H., ed.), pp. 144–182, Routledge
82. Mill, J.S. (1960) *Autobiography*, Columbia University Press
83. Schooler, J.W. and Mauss, I.B. (2010) To be happy and to know it: the experience and meta-awareness of pleasure. In *Pleasures of the Brain* (Kringelbach, M.L. and Berridge, K.C., eds), pp. 244–254, Oxford University Press
84. Ingram, R.E. (1990) Self-focused attention in clinical disorders: review and a conceptual model. *Psychol. Bull.* 107, 156
85. Musson, R.F. and Alloy, L.B. (1988) Depression and self-directed attention. In *Cognitive Processes in Depression* (Alloy, L.B., ed.), pp. 193–220, The Guilford Press
86. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper and Row
87. Plato (1997) Apology. In *Plato: Complete Works* (Cooper, J.M. and Hutchinson, D.S., eds), pp. 33, Hackett Publishing Company
88. Feng, S. *et al.* (2021) How self-tracking and the quantified self promote health and well-being: systematic review. *J. Med. Internet Res.* 23, e25171
89. Mauss, I.B. *et al.* (2005) The tie that binds? Coherence among emotion experience, behavior, and physiology. *Emotion* 5, 175–190
90. Bryant, F.B. (2021) Current progress and future directions for theory and research on savoring. *Front. Psychol.* 12, 771698
91. Growney, C.M. *et al.* (2025) Momentary savoring in daily life in an adult life-span sample. *Emotion* 25, 93–101
92. Bryant, F.B. and Veroff, J. (2007) *Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
93. Cullen, K. *et al.* (2024) The effectiveness of savouring interventions in adult clinical populations: a systematic review. *Int. J. Appl. Posit. Psychol.* 9, 1589–1615
94. Humphrey, A. *et al.* (2022) When the pursuit of happiness backfires: the role of negative emotion valuation. *J. Posit. Psychol.* 17, 611–619
95. Hayes, S.C. *et al.* (2006) Acceptance and commitment therapy: model, processes and outcomes. *Behav. Res. Ther.* 44, 1–25
96. Joshanloo, M. (2024) What have we learned about fear of happiness? A review of a decade of empirical research. *Curr. Psychol.* 43, 33420–33434
97. Joshanloo, M. *et al.* (2014) Cross-cultural validation of fear of happiness scale across 14 national groups. *J. Cross-Cult. Psychol.* 45, 246–264
98. Yildirim, M. and Belen, H. (2018) Fear of happiness predicts subjective and psychological well-being above the behavioral inhibition system (BIS) and behavioral activation system (BAS) model of personality. *J. Posit. Psychol. Wellbeing* 2, 92–111
99. Jordan, D.G. *et al.* (2021) Negative affect interference and fear of happiness are independently associated with depressive symptoms. *J. Clin. Psychol.* 77, 646–660
100. Willroth, E.C. *et al.* (2023) Judging emotions as good or bad: individual differences and associations with psychological health. *Emotion* 23, 1876–1890
101. Brown, K.W. *et al.* (2007) Mindfulness: theoretical foundations and evidence for its salutary effects. *Psychol. Inq.* 18, 211–237
102. Kober, H. *et al.* (2019) Let it be: mindful acceptance down-regulates pain and negative emotion. *Soc. Cogn. Affect. Neurosci.* 14, 1147–1158
103. Lindsay, E.K. *et al.* (2018) Acceptance lowers stress reactivity: dismantling mindfulness training in a randomized controlled trial. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 87, 63–73
104. Baer, R.A. *et al.* (2008) Construct validity of the five facet mindfulness questionnaire in meditating and nonmeditating samples. *Assessment* 15, 329–342
105. Macatee, R.J. *et al.* (2015) Distress tolerance and pathological worry: tests of incremental and prospective relationships. *Behav. Ther.* 46, 449–462
106. Chawla, N. and Ostafin, B. (2007) Experiential avoidance as a functional dimensional approach to psychopathology: an empirical review. *J. Clin. Psychol.* 63, 871–890
107. Shallcross, A.J. *et al.* (2015) Regulation of emotions under stress. In *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Scott, R. and Kosslyn, S., eds), pp. 1–16, John Wiley and Sons
108. Shallcross, A.J. *et al.* (2010) Let it be: accepting negative emotional experiences predicts decreased negative affect and depressive symptoms. *Behav. Res. Ther.* 48, 921–929
109. Shallcross, A.J. *et al.* (2013) Getting better with age: the relationship between age, acceptance, and negative affect. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 104, 734–749
110. Bailen, N.H. *et al.* (2022) Negative emotion and nonacceptance of emotion in daily life. *Emotion* 22, 992–1003
111. Creswell, J.D. and Lindsay, E.K. (2014) How does mindfulness training affect health? A mindfulness stress buffering account. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 23, 401–407

112. Hofmann, S.G. *et al.* (2010) The effect of mindfulness-based therapy on anxiety and depression: a meta-analytic review. *J. Consult. Clin. Psychol.* 78, 169–183
113. Mitmansgruber, H. *et al.* (2009) When you don't like what you feel: experiential avoidance, mindfulness and meta-emotion in emotion regulation. *Pers. Individ. Differ.* 46, 448–453
114. Tamir, M. (2009) What do people want to feel and why?: Pleasure and utility in emotion regulation. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 18, 101–105
115. Mauss, I.B. and Tamir, M. (2014) Emotion goals: how their content, structure, and operation shape emotion regulation. In *Handbook of Emotion Regulation* (Gross, J.J., ed.), pp. 361–375, Guilford Publications
116. Tamir, M. and Ford, B.Q. (2012) Should people pursue feelings that feel good or feelings that do good? Emotional preferences and well-being. *Emotion* 12, 1061–1070
117. van Kleef, G.A. *et al.* (2004) The interpersonal effects of anger and happiness in negotiations. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 86, 57–76
118. Tamir, M. and Ford, B.Q. (2012) When feeling bad is expected to be good: emotion regulation and outcome expectancies in social conflicts. *Emotion* 12, 807–816
119. Ford, B.Q. and Tamir, M. (2012) When getting angry is smart: emotional preferences and emotional intelligence. *Emotion* 12, 685–689
120. Eid, M. and Diener, E. (2001) Norms for experiencing emotions in different cultures: inter- and intranational differences. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 81, 869–885
121. Kim, H.S. and Mesquita, B. (2025) Emotional acculturation: emotions as a pathway to social integration. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 35, 25–32
122. Senft, N. *et al.* (2021) Who emphasizes positivity? An exploration of emotion values in people of Latino, Asian, and European heritage living in the United States. *Emotion* 21, 707–719
123. Ford, B.Q. and Mauss, I.B. (2015) Culture and emotion regulation. *Curr. Opin. Psychol.* 3, 1–5
124. Zhao, Y. *et al.* (2020) Valuing happiness predicts higher well-being: the moderating role of acceptance. *Psych. J.* 9, 132–143
125. Mauss, I.B. *et al.* (2008) Culture and automatic emotion regulation. In *Regulating Emotions: Culture, Social Necessity and Biological Inheritance* (Ismer, S. *et al.*, eds), pp. 39–60, Blackwell Publishing
126. Dwyer, R.J. and Dunn, E.W. (2022) Wealth redistribution promotes happiness. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci.* 119, e2211123119
127. Jebb, A.T. *et al.* (2018) Happiness, income satiation and turning points around the world. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* 2, 33–38
128. Stancato, D.M. *et al.* (2024) The gap between us: income inequality reduces social affiliation in dyadic interactions. *Personal. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 50, 1280–1296
129. Kwon, Y. *et al.* (2024) The unhappy beliefs of happiness: investigating the mechanisms underlying the links between negative hedonic beliefs and diminished well-being. *J. Happiness Stud.* 25, 97
130. Ford, B.Q. *et al.* (2023) The political is personal: the costs of daily politics. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 125, 1