

Research Paper

Fear of Happiness and Its Correlates with Gender, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Perceived Stress among Medical Graduate Students in India

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Fear of happiness is the belief that happiness may have negative consequences and hence, should be avoided. While western societies take the pursuit of happiness to be a universal trait, empirical evidence suggests this assumption may not hold true for other cultures, especially in the east. We aim to study fear of happiness among medical graduate students and its correlates with gender, adverse childhood experiences and perceived stress. **Methodology:** 116 medical graduate students were asked to fill a questionnaire that included Fear of happiness scale (FHS), questions from Adverse Childhood Experiences questionnaire, and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Data was analysed using Chi-squared test to study gender differences in childhood adverse experiences, Student's t-test to compare gender differences in PSS score, and in FHS score. Pearson correlation analysis was used to study association of childhood adverse experiences and perceived stress with fear of happiness. **Results:** All forms of childhood adverse experiences were seen to be significantly greater in women, with the exception of physical neglect, while PSS scores were similar in both. There was no difference between the two genders on FHS total scores or in any of its sub-categories. **Conclusion:** Fear of happiness in our sample does not seem to differ between genders, nor do history of adverse childhood experiences or perceived stress seem to correlate with it. Fear of happiness may have more to do with how cultures and societies perceive the attainment and expression of happiness, rather than individual trauma or stress.

Keywords: Childhood Psychological Trauma, Stress Response, Gender Differences, Fear Of Happiness Scale

The pursuit of happiness has been a defining feature of human evolution for several millennia. It has been widely believed that this human endeavour is universal and cuts across all cultural divides. In 2000, Braun wrote that “every human being, no

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matter what culture, age, educational attainment, or degree of physical and mental development, wants to be happy. It is the common end to which all humans strive” [1]. In the past few decades these notions began to be challenged by researchers who studied the fear of emotions mainly as an antecedent of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety [2,3,4]. Studies of individuals with high self-criticism, stress, and depression acknowledged the existence of fear of happiness [3].

Fear of happiness is the belief that happiness may have negative consequences [5] and hence, should be avoided. [6] Happiness has increasingly come to be viewed by modern societies as an internal state that is to be achieved and controlled by the individual. This perceived pressure to attain happiness through voluntary acts can be the very cause of distress in many [7,8]. Hence, even positive emotions like happiness fail to be experienced as pleasurable in clinical populations [3].

Childhood trauma is a serious psychosocial, medical, and public policy concern with serious implications for victims and community [9]. In mental and behavioral health, there is an extensive history of studying associations between negative early life experiences and mental and behavioral health outcomes [10]. Perceived stress, or the perception of feeling overwhelmed, can lead to deleterious effects physically (such as a weakened immune system), mentally, and emotionally [11,12]. Perceived stress exists among graduate students in general [13] and in particular, graduate health science students [14].

There is a dearth of literature on the potential association of childhood trauma and perceived stress with fear of happiness. One study seemed to suggest that children who have been punished by adults following an enjoyment learn not to feel good about positive emotions [15]. Another study conducted on college students in Istanbul found a relationship between childhood psychological trauma, dissociation, and fear of happiness [16].

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine possible relationship between childhood adverse experiences, perceived stress, and fear of happiness among medical graduate students. Possible gender differences in the prevalence and correlates of fear of happiness have been specifically looked into. Two hypotheses were examined: (1) Childhood trauma and perceived stress predict fear of happiness; (2) Women experience fear of happiness more frequently than men.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A group from graduate students of the VCSG Government Medical Science & Research Institute, Srinagar, Uttarakhand participated in the study. 120 students enrolled in 2018-2019 who were in the final year of MBBS or doing internship were included. 4 students refused to participate. The participants filled the questionnaires privately under the observation of the study investigator. All participants provided written informed consent. The study was approved by the ethics and scientific committees of the institution. All students were studying their MBBS in the English language, and the questionnaires were administered in English.

Assessment instruments

Fear of Happiness Scale (FHS): This five-item self-report measure was developed by Joshanloo. Its purpose is to measure fear of happiness or aversion to happiness (the belief

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that happiness may cause bad things to happen). The scale has 5 items. Acceptable validity, reliability and invariance measurement have been demonstrated in 15 cultures. It is a 7-point Likert-type scale with possible total score between 7 and 35[5,17].

The Adverse Childhood Experience Questionnaire (ACE-Q): History of any form of adverse childhood experience was sought through questions included in this scale. It is a brief rating scale designed and first published by Felitti et al., that has provided substantial epidemiological evidence concerning the link between adverse childhood experiences and adult mental and physical illnesses. It includes the domains of emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect and family and household dysfunction (the last category includes parental separation and exposure to domestic violence, substance abuse, criminal behaviour and mental illness).[18]

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS): It is a scale used to measure the degree to which one perceives their life to be stressful. Items evaluate the extent to which respondents find their lives to be uncontrollable, unpredictable and overloaded. Current levels of experienced stress are also assessed. The questions are designed to evaluate feelings and thoughts during the past month. The scale contains 10 items, which are rated as never (0), almost never (1), sometimes (2), fairly often (3) or very often (4). Scores for positively worded questions 4, 5, 7 and 8 have to be reversed before summation across the 10 items to get the total PSS score. [19,20].

Analysis

Data was analysed using SPSS version 25.0. Chi-squared test was used to study gender differences in history of childhood adverse experiences, while Student's t-test was used to compare gender differences in PSS scores, as well as gender differences in FHS scores. Pearson correlation analysis was used to study association of childhood adverse experiences and perceived stress with fear of happiness.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the participants

Mean age of the participants (n =116) was 24.28 ± 1.624 yrs. Among participants, 52 (44.82%) students were female. Mean age of women was 23.92 ± 1.34 yrs, with a range of 21-28 years. For men, mean age was 24.56 ± 1.78 yrs with a range of 22-32 years.

Childhood trauma and Perceived Stress

18 (28.1%) men and 24 (46.2%) women reported having an adverse childhood experience of some form. Among men, 2 (3.1%) participants reported childhood sexual abuse, 8 (12.5%) physical abuse, 4 (6.3%) emotional abuse, 4 (6.3%) emotional neglect, 4 (6.3%) physical neglect and 10 (15.6%) reported family/household dysfunction. Among women, 12 (23.1%) participants reported childhood sexual abuse, 10 (19.2%) physical abuse, 8 (15.4%) emotional abuse, 6 (11.5%) emotional neglect, 2 (3.8%) physical neglect and 14 (26.9%) reported family/household dysfunction. All forms of childhood adverse experiences including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, emotional neglect and family/household dysfunction were seen to be significantly greater in women, while men reported higher rates of physical neglect. [Table 1]. The mean PSS score in men (18.56 ± 5.386) and women (18.62 ± 7.52) were found to be similar. [Table 2]

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Table 1: Childhood Adverse Experience: A Comparison Between Genders

Adverse Childhood Experience	Men		Women		Chi-squared test	
	YES N (%)	No N(%)	Yes N(%)	No N(%)	χ^2	P
ACE (any)	18 (28.1)	46 (71.9)	24 (46.2)	28(53.8)	55.172 ^a	<0.0001**
PA	8 (12.5)	56 (87.5)	10 (19.2)	42 (80.8)	72.966 ^a	<0.0001**
EA	4 (6.3)	60 (93.8)	8 (15.4)	40 (76.9)	66.759 ^a	<0.0001**
SA	2(3.1)	62(96.9)	12 (23.1)	40 (76.9)	93.241 ^a	<0.0001**
PN	4 (6.3)	60 (93.8)	2 (3.8)	50 (96.2)	79.448 ^a	<0.0001**
EN	4 (6.3)	60 (93.8)	6 (11.5)	46 (88.5)	8.828 ^a	<0.0001**
FHD	10 (15.6)	54(84.4)	14 (26.9)	38 (73.1)	39.862 ^a	<0.0001**

**statistically significant

ACE: Adverse Childhood Experience; PA: Physical Abuse; EA: Emotional Abuse; SA: Sexual Abuse; PN: Physical Neglect; EN: Emotional Neglect; FHD: Family/Household Dysfunction

Table 2-Perceived Stress: A Comparison Between Genders

	Men		Women		Student t-test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t	P
PSS total score	18.56	5.386	18.62	7.520	0.044	0.965

Fear of Happiness

There was no difference between the two genders on FHS total scores or in any of its sub-categories [Table 3].

Table 3: Fear of happiness among women and men

Scale	Men		Women		Student's t-test	
	mean	SD	mean	SD	t	P
FHS score						
Joyfulness – sadness	2.69	1.91	2.15	1.719	-1.565	0.120
Cheerfulness - bad thing	2.59	1.761	2.19	1.772	-1.218	0.226
Good fortune – disaster	3.44	2.077	3.54	2.262	0.250	0.803
Joy and fun - bad thing	2.19	1.633	2.19	1.633	-0.082	0.935
Joyfulness - bad consequence	2.69	1.936	2.69	1.936	-1.445	0.151
Total score	14.31	7.383	12.77	6.845	-1.157	0.250

In correlational analyses [Table 4], there was no significant association between either history of any form of childhood adverse experience and fear of happiness, or perceived stress and fear of happiness.

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Table 4: Correlations (Pearson) Between Scale Scores

	<u>FHS Total</u>	
	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
ACE(any)	0.163	-0.173
PA	0.281*	-0.214
EA	0.112	-0.174
SA	0.017	-0.332*
PN	0.077	0.007
EN	-0.082	-0.219
FHD	0.087	0.136
PSS total	0.172	0.042

ACE: Adverse Childhood Experience; PA: Physical Abuse; EA: Emotional Abuse; SA: Sexual Abuse; PN: Physical Neglect; EN: Emotional Neglect; FHD: Family/Household Dysfunction; PSS: Perceived Stress Scale

In men, history of physical abuse was seen to be positively correlated to total FHS scores, while in women there was a negative correlation between history of sexual abuse and total FHS scores.

DISCUSSION

Overall findings of the study suggest that there is no difference between the genders in fear of happiness. Also, history of childhood adverse experiences and perceived stress do not seem to be correlated to fear of happiness.

The mean total scores obtained on FHS in men and women seem to be elevated in a similar way to the findings of a study by Sar et al conducted on college students in Istanbul, where men had a mean FHS total score of 13.76 ± 8.00 , while women had a score of 12.28 ± 7.03 . Even in this study, no significant difference in FHS total scores was found between the two genders.[16] The absence of differences between the two genders, and a lack of correlation with adverse childhood experiences and perceived stress could be explained on the basis of the fact that fear of happiness is a social construct. It is based on how a particular society views happiness, rather than on individual experiences.

Western societies value personal happiness very highly [21] and the pursuit of personal happiness is regarded as a valuable goal. Snarey went so far as to call its attainment “a basic human right”[22]. For Americans, failure to appear happy is a cause of concern [23] and “failure to achieve happiness can be seen as one of the greatest failures a person can experience” [24]. Western psychologists often do not question ideals like happiness and well being, assuming that they are universal [25]. But the rest of the world, especially Asian cultures, do not necessarily share the same perspective on happiness as their western counterparts. In many of these societies, individuals view happiness and positive emotions negatively, with a sense of caution or even fear [5]. In a study conducted amongst university students from across 14 nations, Joshanloo demonstrated that in some cultures, it was in fact possible to not want to be overly happy. This avoidance of happiness associated with low levels of reported life satisfaction. [17]

There are various reasons for endorsing these beliefs of fear of happiness. Happiness could be seen as an invitation to being exposed to the evil eye, rivalry or envy of others [26], or punishment in the afterlife. For example, in Japanese culture, happiness is seen as a potential precursor to suffering and hence considered hazardous [27]. Some Asian cultures prescribe a limit to one’s happiness in order to avoid mishap. Several of them are under the influence of Taoism. In Taoism, all things in the world are seen to be in a state of constant change,

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eventually reverting to its opposite [28]. By that logic, happiness will ultimately revert to unhappiness and vice versa. This point of view brings into question the desirability and authenticity of happiness, which will inevitably lead to unhappiness. In the Islamic perspective, superficial or worldly happiness may be an indicator of distance from God [5]. In Indian societies happiness may be regarded as too individualistic for the communal good of the tribe. Our cultures have always placed more emphasis on the collective rather than the individual. So, an unrestrained show of happiness is often equated with showing off, overexcitement, self-centeredness, and failure at doing one's duties. Another reason for avoiding the experience of happiness is the fear of losing control over positive emotions or of their behavioral reactions to these emotions, something that would be frowned upon by society [2,4].

Research has shown that fear of happiness is positively correlated with depression [3] and negatively correlated with subjective well-being[5]. In fact, a negative correlation exists between fear of happiness and fear of negative emotions overall. For example, fear of happiness is associated with fear and avoidance of sadness and anger.[3] On the other hand, fear and avoidance of sadness and anger is also related to fear of giving compassion to oneself or receiving it from others. This suggests an association rather than contradiction between avoidance of positive and negative emotions.[3] Hence, fear of happiness seems to be a type of mental operation which tries to avoid emotions overall.

While the reason for fear of happiness may vary between different societies, it has been shown that culture strongly influences individuals' attitudes toward positive experiences. Miyamoto and Ma (2011) showed that cultural scripts played an active role in shaping emotional regulation and emotional experiences. In their study with East Asians and Americans it was found that Americans were more inclined to savour positive emotions than Japanese [29]. Hence the relatively high scores on FHS in both men and women could be a result of how society dictates happiness should be experienced and expressed. While the burden on women to show emotional restraint is more in Indian societies, it did not translate into a statistically significant difference in FHS scores in our study. In conservative societies, women are expected to maintain a reserved manner to prevent "violation" of the codes of "decent behavior." This is understood as deliberate limitation of the full expression of positive emotions [16]. Also, individual experiences of adverse childhood experiences or perceive stress do not seem to have a bearing on fear of happiness, which seems to be dictated more by cultural norms that exist in society, norms which apply uniformly to all.

While overall history of any form of adverse childhood experience did not correlate with fear of happiness in our study, there was a positive correlation with physical abuse in men and a negative correlation with sexual abuse in women. Specific types of childhood trauma may play a role in how we process and experience happiness, and avoidance of both positive and negative emotions. Sar et al demonstrated in their study that all childhood trauma types, specially sexual abuse, were significantly correlated with fear of happiness in women, though they could not establish this relationship in men [16]. A larger sample would throw more light on possible existence of correlations with specific kinds of trauma.

In future studies we would like to better understand the other possible correlates of fear of happiness, like personality traits and defence mechanisms, in a larger and more heterogeneous sample.

CONCLUSION

Fear of happiness in our sample does not seem to differ between genders, nor do history of adverse childhood experiences or perceived stress seem to correlate with it. Fear of happiness may have more to do with how cultures and societies perceive the attainment and expression of happiness, rather than individual trauma or stress.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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