

Research Paper

The Influence of Fear of Happiness on Fear of Negative Emotions and Depression

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ABSTRACT

This study sheds light on a hidden factor in depression, the fear of happiness itself. By showing a link between this fear and both fear of negative emotions and depression, it suggests that embracing joy could be a key pathway to mental well-being. Understanding this link can lead to new interventions and help people find lasting happiness. This study investigated the relationship between fear of happiness, fear of negative emotions, and depression among college students. Two groups were formed based on high and low scores on the Fear of Negative Emotions test. The Fear of Happiness Scale, Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale-II, and Depression Anxiety Stress Scales – Youth Version were used to measure respective variables. Results showed significant differences between the high and low fear groups on both fear of happiness and depression scores. Additionally, positive correlations were found between all three variables, with the strongest association between fear of happiness and depression. These findings suggest that individuals with high fear of happiness tend to experience greater fear of negative emotions and report higher levels of depression. This aligns with previous research suggesting that fear of happiness may contribute to depression through avoidance of positive experiences and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Keywords: *Fear of Happiness, Fear of Negative Emotions, Depression, College Students*

In the intricate landscape of mental health, emotions play a pivotal role in shaping individual well-being. While the pursuit of happiness is often considered a fundamental human aspiration, a paradoxical phenomenon has emerged within psychological discourse the fear of happiness. This cognitive and emotional state, characterized by an aversion to positive emotions and a sense of discomfort in response to joyful experiences, has been recognized as a potential factor influencing mental health outcomes. This research endeavors to delve into the complex interplay between the fear of happiness, fear of negative emotions, and depression, aiming to unravel the nuanced relationships that exist within this triad.

The human experience is marked by a dynamic interplay of emotions, ranging from the elation of happiness to the burdensome weight of negative emotions. Traditionally, the pursuit of happiness has been regarded as a fundamental aspect of a fulfilling life. However,

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a growing body of literature has identified a counterintuitive phenomenon called chrophobia, or the fear of happiness. This psychological state manifests as an aversion or anxiety toward positive emotions, challenging conventional notions about the universally positive nature of happiness (Mauss et al., 2011).

Simultaneously, fear of negative emotions represents another facet of emotional well-being. Individuals grappling with this fear may engage in behaviors aimed at avoiding situations that elicit negative emotions, contributing to a complex web of emotional regulation challenges (Kashdan, 2007). As these fears intertwine, their collective impact on mental health, particularly in the context of depression, becomes a focal point for exploration. Fear of happiness refers to an individual's tendency to avoid or be afraid of experiencing feelings of joy, contentment, and overall positivity. This fear can stem from various underlying beliefs and fears, such as the fear of losing these positive emotions or the belief that experiencing happiness will ultimately lead to disappointment or sadness (Türkmen, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fear of Happiness

The fear of happiness, also known as chrophobia, has garnered increasing attention within the field of positive psychology. Defined as an individual's resistance or avoidance of positive emotional experiences, chrophobia has been linked to a variety of psychological and emotional outcomes. Research by Joshanloo and Weijers (2014) proposed that cultural and individual differences play a significant role in shaping the fear of happiness, highlighting the need for a nuanced examination of this construct. Perfectionism, societal expectations, and cultural influences are potential contributors to the development of fear of happiness (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011).

Fear of Negative Emotions

Individuals experiencing fear of negative emotions exhibit avoidance behaviors towards situations that may trigger negative emotional responses. This construct is closely linked to emotional regulation and the ability to cope with life stressors (Kashdan, 2007). Research suggests a bidirectional relationship between fear of happiness and fear of negative emotions, where each may exacerbate the other over time (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014).

Depression

Depression, a prevalent and debilitating mental health condition, has been extensively studied in relation to various psychosocial factors. The intricate relationship between depressive symptoms and both positive and negative emotional experiences remains a subject of ongoing investigation. Nolen-Hoeksema's (1991) seminal work on the response styles theory posited that individuals with a tendency to ruminate on negative emotions are more susceptible to depressive symptoms, suggesting a potential link between the fear of negative emotions and depression.

Various studies have explored the multifaceted nature of depression, recognizing its complex etiology involving genetic, environmental, and psychological factors (Kendler, Kuhn, & Prescott, 2004). Recent research has begun to investigate the potential role of fear of happiness as a unique contributing factor to the development and exacerbation of depressive symptoms (Ford, Shallcross, Mauss, Floerke, & Gruber, 2012). The intersection of fear of happiness, fear of negative emotions, and depression is an emerging area of interest. Studies have suggested that individuals who fear happiness may be more prone to developing symptoms of depression, potentially through mechanisms involving avoidance

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of positive experiences and maladaptive emotional regulation strategies (Kotsou & Leys, 2016).

Rationale / Significance of study

While considerable research has independently addressed fear of happiness, fear of negative emotions, and depression, there remains a critical gap in understanding how these constructs intersect and influence one another. The rationale for this study is grounded in the recognition that emotional experiences are intricately linked, and an imbalance in the processing of positive and negative emotions may contribute to the development and exacerbation of depressive symptoms.

By scrutinizing the influence of fear of happiness on both fear of negative emotions and depression, this research aspires to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional landscape. Such insights hold potential implications for therapeutic interventions, shedding light on the nuanced factors that underlie the complex relationship between cognitive and affective processes in mental health.

Objectives of the study

1. Examine the extent to which the fear of happiness is correlated with the fear of negative emotions.
2. Investigate the relationship between the fear of happiness and the prevalence of depressive symptoms.
3. Explore potential mediating or moderating factors that contribute to the observed relationships.

Hypotheses

- Individuals reporting higher levels of fear of happiness will exhibit higher levels of fear of negative emotions.
- Individuals reporting higher levels of fear of happiness will exhibit higher Depression.
- Fear of happiness will be positively associated with the negative emotions and Depression.

Sample

The initial cohort for the current research comprised 185 college students. Subsequently, these selected individuals underwent a Fear of Negative Emotions test (as a scrutiny measure). Based on the test results, two distinct groups were established: one with a high fear of negative emotions consisting of 80 students, and another with a low fear of negative emotions also comprising 80 college students. 15 students were excluded from this study because the number of both groups should be equal for the study. All participants were residents of Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (Aurangabad) City in the state of Maharashtra. The age range of the sample was 18 to 23 years (Mean = 20.36, Standard Deviation = 3.67). The Non-Probability Purposive sampling method was employed.

Variables

Independent Variable

i) Fear of Happiness

- a) High b) Low

Dependent Variable

- i) Fear of negative emotions
- ii) Depression

Research Tools

1. **The Fear of Happiness Scale (Gilbert, 2012):** Comprises nine items designed to probe individuals' perceptions and anxieties regarding experiencing happiness and positive emotions in general (e.g., "I feel I don't deserve to be happy"). Participants assess the degree to which each statement aligns with their own experiences using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 ("Not at all like me") to 4 ("Extremely like me"). These statements were formulated based on insights from therapy sessions with author PG, such as 'I worry that if I feel good something bad could happen,' and were subjected to face validity evaluation by the research team. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, as evidenced by a robust Cronbach's alpha of .90.
2. **Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale- II Carleton, R. N., & Others (2011):** The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE) is a self-report measure developed by Carleton, Collimore, McCabe, and Antony in 2011. It assesses an individual's fear of negative evaluation, which is the apprehension or anxiety about being judged negatively by others. Participants rate each item on a Likert scale, typically ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "Not at all characteristic of me" and 5 indicates "Extremely characteristic of me." The scores are summed to obtain a total score. Highly reliable and valid.
3. **Depression Anxiety Stress Scales Szabo, M., & Lovibond, P. F. (2022):** 40 items to identify the best-performing ones, intending to create a more concise instrument that aligns with the 21-item adult DASS. The development of the initial 40-item set was guided by findings from previously published studies and unpublished research conducted by our own group. In the process of selecting items for inclusion in the current study, our goal was to encompass the entire item content of the adult DASS. For instance, in assessing Depression, our aim was to incorporate at least one item addressing each of the aspects of this emotional syndrome, including 'Anhedonia,' 'Dysphoria,' 'Hopelessness,' 'Devaluation of life,' 'Self-deprecation,' 'Lack of interest,' and 'Inertia.' However, in our prior studies, certain items consistently failed to load on their expected factor, despite being tested with various wordings in different samples.

Research Statistical Analysis

't' test and Pearson Product Moment Coefficient Correlation (Pearson – r) was used.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table No-1 Mean Std. Deviation and t value of Fear of Happiness, Fear of Negative, and Depression among college students.

Dimension	Types of Fear of Happiness				df	't'
	High (N=80)		Low (N=80)			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Fear of Negative	45.36	4.15	32.87	4.09	158	19.17**
Depression	17.02	3.57	12.49	4.74	158	6.82**

Sig – 0.05 = 1.96, 0.01**=2.62*

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In the provided table, we observe that the mean score for college students with a high Fear of Happiness on the Fear of Negative Emotion scale is 45.36, with a standard deviation (SD) of 4.15. For those with a low Fear of Happiness, the mean score is 32.87, and the SD is 4.09. The calculated 't' value is 19.17, demonstrating significance at the 0.01 level. This suggests that students in the high fear group exhibit a higher level of fear of happiness compared to students in the low fear group.

Similarly, when examining the mean score of college students with high Fear of Happiness on the depression scale, it is 17.02, with an SD of 3.57. For those with low Fear of Happiness, the mean score is 12.49, and the SD is 4.74. The 't' value remains 19.17, indicating significance at the 0.01 level. Consequently, it can be concluded that students in the high fear group report experiencing more depression than their counterparts in the low fear group.

Table No-2 Product Moment Correlation (Pearson r) between Fear of Happiness, Fear of Negative, and Depression among college students.

	Fear of Happiness	Fear of Negative	Depression
Fear of Happiness	1	.536**	.701**
Fear of Negative	.536**	1	.597**
Depression	.701**	.597**	1

Significant 0.05 = 0.10, 0.01** = 0.14*

The table shows the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between fear of happiness, fear of negative, and depression among college students. The correlations are all positive and significant, which means that there is a positive relationship between all three variables. Students who fear happiness also tend to fear negative experiences and have higher levels of depression. The strongest correlation is between fear of happiness and depression ($r = .701$), followed by the correlation between fear of negative and depression ($r = .597$), and the correlation between fear of happiness and fear of negative ($r = .536$). This suggests that fear of happiness is the most closely related to depression, followed by fear of negative experiences.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the relationship between fear of happiness and depression. For example, a study by Kashdan et al. (2006) found that people who score high on a measure of fear of happiness are more likely to experience symptoms of depression. The authors of the study suggest that fear of happiness may lead to avoidance of positive experiences, which can in turn contribute to depression. Maybe people who fear happiness may have a negative view of themselves or the world. They may believe that they are not deserving of happiness, or that happiness is always followed by sadness. These beliefs can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, as people who avoid positive experiences are more likely to experience negative emotions. Another possibility is that fear of happiness may lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms. For example, people who fear happiness may avoid social activities or relationships in order to avoid the possibility of feeling pain. These coping mechanisms can lead to social isolation and loneliness, which are risk factors for depression.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Students in the high fear group exhibit a higher level of fear of happiness compared to students in the low fear group.

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2. Students in the high fear group report experiencing more depression than their counterparts in the low fear group.
3. There is a positive relationship between all three variables. Students who fear happiness also tend to fear negative experiences and have higher levels of depression.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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