Emotion

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Felicia K. Zerwas[1], Brett Q. Ford[2], Oliver P. John[3], and Iris B. Mauss[3]
[1] Department of Psychology, New York University
[2] Department of Psychology, University of Toronto
[3] Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley

Previous work suggests that sometimes the more people value happiness, the less happy they are. For whom and why is this the case? To answer these questions, we examined a model of happiness pursuit that disentangles two previously conflated individual differences related to valuing happiness. The first individual difference operates at the strength of the value itself and involves viewing happiness as a very important goal (i.e., aspiring to happiness). The second individual difference occurs later in the process of pursuing happiness and involves judging one's levels of happiness (i.e., concern about happiness). This model predicts that aspiring to happiness is relatively innocuous. Conversely, being concerned about happiness leads people to judge their happiness, thereby infusing negativity (i.e., negative meta-emotions) into potentially positive events, which, in turn, interferes with well-being. We tested these hypotheses using cross-sectional, daily-diary, and longitudinal methods in student and community samples, collected between 2009 and 2020, which are diverse in gender, ethnicity, age, and geographic location (N_{total} = 1,815). In Studies 1a and 1b, aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness represented distinct individual differences. In Study 2, concern about happiness (but not aspiring to happiness) was associated with lower well-being cross-sectionally and longitudinally. In Study 3, these links between concern about happiness and worse well-being were partially accounted for by experiencing greater negative meta-emotions during daily positive events. These findings suggest that highly valuing happiness is not inherently problematic; however, concern and judgment about one's happiness can undermine it.

Keywords: valuing happiness, well-being, meta-emotions, pursuit of happiness

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Happiness is widely and highly valued (Eid & Diener, 2001; Hornsey et al., 2018; Oishi & Gilbert, 2016; Tamir, 2009), so it is troubling that some work has found extremely valuing happiness to be problematic (Ford, 2019; Ford & Mauss, 2014; Gruber et al., 2011; Lutz & Passmore, 2019). Indeed, valuing happiness to an extreme degree has been linked with negative outcomes including less happiness in the moment (e.g., Mauss et al., 2011) and less happiness in the long term (e.g., Ford et al., 2014; Ford, Mauss, et al., 2015). This has raised the hypothesis that valuing happiness may not translate into more happiness and can even backfire.

However, another body of research suggests that individuals can actively and successfully pursue and obtain happiness (e.g., Catalino et al., 2014; Catalino & Tov, 2022; Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013; Nelson et al., 2015). Because pursuing happiness should be a function of valuing happiness, these literatures seem discrepant and raise the questions for whom and why valuing happiness backfires. Zerwas and Ford (2021) proposed a model that can resolve this discrepancy, suggesting two individual differences relevant to the pursuit of happiness: The first individual difference operates at the strength of the value itself and

involves viewing happiness as a very important goal (i.e., *aspiring* to happiness). The second individual difference occurs later in the process of pursuing happiness and involves judging one's levels of happiness (i.e., *concern* about happiness). Based on the model, these two individual differences should differentially influence the process of pursuing happiness and the outcomes of this process; however, the majority of existing empirical work linking valuing happiness to worse well-being has conflated these two individual differences (Zerwas & Ford, 2021).

The present research builds on this theoretical model by empirically examining these individual differences and their implications for well-being. It does so by utilizing cross-sectional, daily-diary, and short-term longitudinal methods in student and community samples to address three critical questions: First, are aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness distinct individual differences? Second, how do these individual differences relate to well-being? Third, through which processes do these individual differences relate to well-being?

Valuing Happiness

Many people value happiness (Eid & Diener, 2001; Hornsey et al., 2018; Oishi & Gilbert, 2016; Tamir, 2009), but this value appears to backfire at extreme levels (Ford, 2019; Ford & Mauss, 2014; Gruber et al., 2011), at least in Western cultural contexts (Ford, Dmitrieva, et al., 2015). Specifically, people who value happiness to an extreme degree have been found to be less likely to attain happiness in the long term as shown by lower levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Catalino et al., 2014; Ford, Dmitrieva, et al., 2015; Hansenne, 2021; Humphrey et al., 2022; Luhmann et al., 2016; Mauss et al., 2011) and more depressive symptoms (Bardeen & Fergus, 2020; Fergus & Bardeen, 2016; Gentzler et al., 2019; Humphrey et al., 2022; Mahmoodi Kahriz et al., 2020).

Although this research paints a problematic picture for valuing happiness, especially at extreme levels, another body of research suggests that many people are able to successfully pursue happiness even when they are highly motivated to do so (for a review, see Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). Because pursuing happiness should be related to valuing happiness, these two bodies of research appear to be at odds, which raises the questions for whom and why valuing happiness backfires.

Some existing work has begun to address the "for whom" question by exploring potential facets within the broader construct of extremely valuing happiness. One study suggested three facets for six of the original seven valuing happiness items and found that only one of the three facets consistently related to lower well-being (Luhmann et al., 2016). This work suggests that valuing happiness might involve multiple distinct facets and that only a subset of the items in the Valuing Happiness Scale might be driving the relationships with well-being. Importantly, however, the aforementioned study did not aim to provide a theoretical framework for these findings. Another study took a similar approach in that it suggested two facets for the original seven valuing happiness items (Yıldırım et al., 2022). It found these two facets to both be negatively related to specific aspects of well-being (self-acceptance and autonomy). Although this study provided a theoretical framework for distinct facets of valuing happiness (i.e., goal type theory), the framework and the findings do not account for potential divergent effects of facets of valuing happiness on well-being more broadly.

The current work integrates and builds on these studies by proposing two individual differences relevant to the pursuit of happiness—aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness—and considers whether and why these individual differences relate to well-being (Zerwas & Ford, 2021). The approach here addresses limitations in prior work by identifying two theoretically motivated individual differences that help clarify for whom and why valuing happiness backfires. In the following section, we describe the process of pursuing happiness and how these two individual differences may differentially influence this process and, in turn, the outcomes of this process.

Aspiring to Happiness, Concern About Happiness, and Their Implications for Pursuing Happiness

We build from a recent conceptual model that leveraged models of goal pursuit (i.e., cybernetic models; Carver & Scheier, 1982, 2001; Inzlicht et al., 2014) to identify key elements of the process of pursuing happiness (Zerwas & Ford, 2021). As shown in Figure 1, two core elements of the goal pursuit process are particularly relevant to the pursuit of happiness (Mauss & Tamir, 2014; Tamir, 2021). One core element involves setting a happiness goal (see left side of Figure 1)—this goal sets the standard for what someone wants to feel (e.g., to feel happy). Another core element involves monitoring one's progress toward one's happiness goal (see middle of Figure 1)—this involves a comparison between the goal state and the current state (e.g., not currently feeling as happy as desired). Within this monitoring process, it is possible to experience a negative emotional reaction to that comparison (see top of Figure 1)—this reaction can be understood as a *negative meta-emotion* (e.g., feeling disappointed at one's current levels of happiness). Prior literature suggests meta-emotions are common (Bailen et al., 2019; Leahy, 2002; Mitmansgruber et al., 2009), and if one does indeed experience a negative meta-emotion, it can lower the overall positivity of one's current state.

The proposed theoretical model suggests that these two core elements in the process of pursuing happiness—happiness goals and monitoring happiness—represent two places where individual differences can play a pivotal role in the pursuit of happiness (Zerwas & Ford, 2021). Distinguishing between these individual differences and considering how they influence the process of pursuing happiness help clarify for whom and why the process of pursuing happiness can go awry.

Aspiring to Happiness

One fundamental individual difference, aspiring to happiness, operates at the goal element in the model and involves viewing happiness as very important. People with a tendency to view happiness as an important goal should be more likely to set frequent (i.e., wanting to be happy often) and/or high-intensity (i.e., wanting to be happy at a high level) happiness goals. Setting goals to feel happy more frequently could provide more opportunities to experience happiness and may not necessarily interfere with attaining happiness (Ford & Tamir, 2012; López-Pérez & McCulloch, 2021; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Tamir et al., 2017). Similarly, setting goals to feel happy more intensely could

Figure 1

Two Individual Differences and How They Influence the Process of Pursuing Happiness
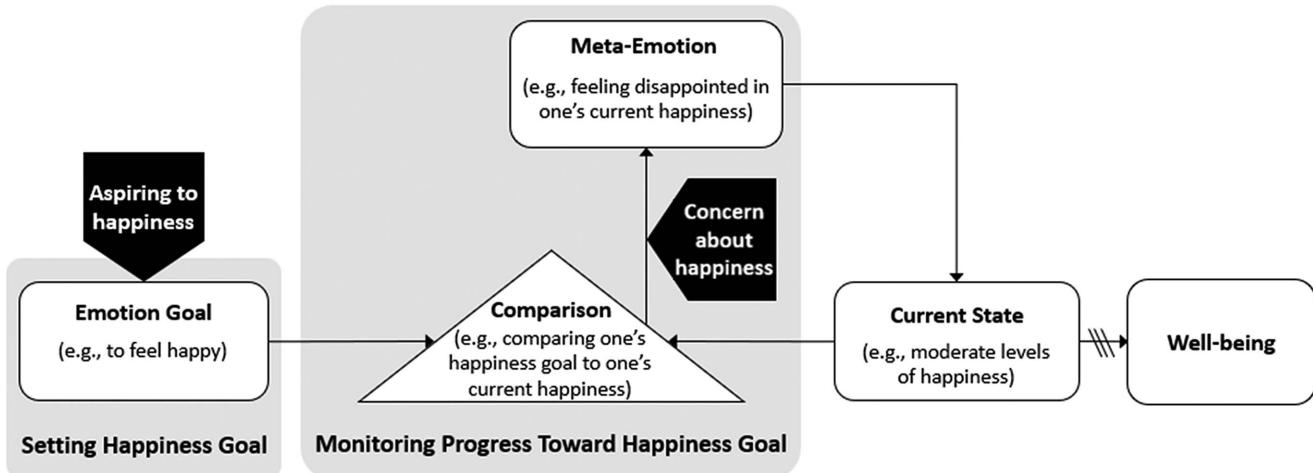
Note. The conceptual model (see Zerwas & Ford, 2021) whereby two individual differences (black shapes) amplify elements of the pursuit of happiness (gray boxes). Aspiring to happiness amplifies the goal element by increasing the frequency or intensity of the happiness goal. Concern about happiness amplifies the response to the comparison element, thereby increasing the chances of experiencing a negative meta-emotion. Together, the elements of the pursuit of happiness shape the current emotional state in the moment, which accumulate over time to influence well-being, indicated by " \\\." The original model contains an additional element labeled "Emotion Regulation/Regulating Happiness," which is omitted from the figure because it was not the focus of the present study. Adapted from "The Paradox of Pursuing Happiness," by F. K. Zerwas and B. Q. Ford, 2021, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, *39*, p. 110 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.03.006). Copyright 2021 by Elsevier.

lead to more happiness in the moment and may not necessarily interfere with attaining happiness (Oishi et al., 2009). Overall, then, aspiring to happiness may be positively related to well-being or innocuous (Nelissen et al., 2007).

Concern About Happiness

Another fundamental individual difference, concern about happiness, operates at the outcome of the comparison element in the model and involves judging one's levels of happiness. People with a tendency to judge their happiness levels might experience more negative meta-emotions in response to comparing their goal and current state. This tendency might become activated especially during positive events when happiness is within reach. That is, as they judge their feelings during positive events when happiness is expected (e.g., as a sign something may be or is wrong), they infuse those events with negativity. It is worth noting that pursuing a happiness goal does not *necessarily* imply a meta-emotion: people can simply make comparisons *without* judging the outcome of that comparison. To illustrate, imagine one person who is low in concern about happiness and another person who is high in concern about happiness. Both people want to feel happy, but they evaluate the comparison between their current and goal state differently. The person low in concern about happiness *will not* judge their current state, whereas the person high in concern about happiness *will* judge their current state, independent of their happiness levels, leading to the experience of a negative meta-emotion in the moment. As these moments of sabotaging their own happiness accumulate over time, they should experience worse well-being.

Some existing research is consistent with the notion that valuing happiness can contribute to negative meta-emotions, which in turn contribute to worse well-being. In an experimental study, participants induced to value happiness (vs. a control condition) experienced more disappointment (i.e., a negative meta-emotion) about their feelings when watching a positive film clip, which in turn accounted for experiencing lower overall positive emotion (Mauss et al., 2011). More generally, prior research suggests that negative meta-emotions relate to greater depressive symptoms (Bailen et al., 2019; Leahy, 2002; Mitmansgruber et al., 2009). Overall, concern about happiness may be problematic because it induces negative meta-emotions, and consequently, jeopardizes longer term well-being.

Related Work on Individual Differences Relevant to the Pursuit of Happiness

This work is not the first to examine individual differences relevant to the pursuit of happiness. First, a study proposed two happiness goal orientations called *happiness-related strivings* and *happiness-related concerns* (Krasko et al., 2020). The first goal orientation, happiness-related strivings, differs from the current work in that the items focus more on the effort one puts in to pursue happiness (e.g., "I try very hard to be happy." "I do everything I can to avoid being unhappy."). The second goal orientation, happiness-related concerns, differs from the current work in that the items are more future-oriented and focus more on a fear of unhappiness (e.g., "I am scared of being unhappy." "I worry a lot that I might not succeed in being happy."). Consistent with these conceptual observations, happiness goal orientations are empirically distinct

from the individual differences proposed here[1] ($rs \leq .35$; Krasko et al., 2020).

Second, another study proposed an approach for pursuing happiness in one's everyday life called prioritizing positivity. Prioritizing positivity differs from the current work in that the items focus more on how one attains happiness (e.g., "I structure my day to maximize my happiness." "I look for and nurture my positive emotions."). Additionally, prioritizing positivity is empirically distinct from valuing happiness (see Catalino et al., 2014; Humphrey et al., 2022).

A final study used goal-type theory to propose valuing happiness in terms of *attainment* and *maintenance goals* (Yıldırım et al., 2022). This study used the items from the original Valuing Happiness Scale and an exploratory factor analysis led to different facets in somewhat smaller samples relative to the current work ($Ns < 178$). Attainment goals focus on how one's current state differs from a desired state, whereas maintenance goals focus on the maintenance of some equality between one's current and desired state. As defined, attainment and maintenance goals stem from monitoring one's happiness levels, thus blurring the lines between the goal and monitoring components of the pursuit of happiness. In contrast, the current approach focuses on two individual differences that cleanly map onto the goal and monitoring components, separately, so we can compare how individual differences relevant to these different components of the process shape the outcomes of the process.

Present Research

We examined three critical questions about valuing happiness to help clarify for whom and why it backfires. First, are aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness distinct individual differences? Second, how do these two individual differences relate to well-being? Third, through which processes do these individual differences relate to well-being? We addressed these questions in five student and community samples ($N_{total} = 1,815$) using cross-sectional, longitudinal, and daily-diary methods.

The current research makes several contributions. First, we compared two individual differences that have been hypothesized to influence different elements of the process of pursuing happiness (Zerwas & Ford, 2021), thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of valuing and pursuing happiness compared to earlier work that conflated these two. Second, we examined negative meta-emotions during positive events as a theoretically motivated process for the predicted association between concern about happiness and lower well-being. To test this idea, we designed a novel and reliable measure of negative meta-emotions during positive events. Third, to demonstrate the specificity of the observed effects to concern about happiness, we tested whether effects held even when accounting for a general tendency to worry. Additionally, in Study 3, we ensured that people who were concerned about happiness were not experiencing lower well-being because they were experiencing less intense positive events.

Five design features enhance the confidence of our conclusions. We utilized multiple methods (i.e., cross-sectional, longitudinal, daily diary) to reduce common-method variance, examined negative meta-emotions in an ecologically valid context (i.e., during participants' daily positive events), measured multiple indicators of well-being (Tov et al., 2022), and appropriately

parsed the temporal sequence of our conceptual mediation model (assessing concern about happiness first, followed by negative meta-emotions, followed by well-being last). Finally, to enhance the generalizability of our findings, we examined our hypotheses in five large and well-powered samples (four community samples and one undergraduate sample) with demographics that varied with regard to gender, ethnicity, age, and geographic location.

Participants, Procedures, and Transparency and Openness

We used five samples to address our research questions (see Table 1 for descriptive information), which all received ethics approval: Samples A, D, and E from the University of California, Berkeley's institutional review board (IRB); Sample B from Yale University's IRB; and Sample C from the University of Denver's IRB. We preregistered hypotheses and analyses for Sample E (https://osf.io/8ryt2/). To offset lack of preregistration in Samples A–D, replication across multiple large samples was built into the study design. Data and code to replicate the results are available at the same link as the preregistration. Data were analyzed using R, Version 4.1.1 (R Core Team, 2022) and Mplus, Version 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017).

Sample A consisted of 593 U.S. and Canadian workers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk after exclusions. We excluded participants ($n = 111$) who failed or did not complete the single attention check in the survey and who failed to fill out ($n = 0$) or incorrectly filled out the Valuing Happiness measure ($n = 0$). The sample size was determined to have sufficient power for analyses for a different unrelated study. The measures were cross-sectional; participants completed an online survey.

Sample B consisted of 450 undergraduates from Yale University after exclusions. There were no attention checks in this study. We excluded participants who failed to fill out ($n = 49$) or incorrectly filled out the Valuing Happiness measure ($n = 11$). Additionally, one person was excluded because they reported their age as 17 (the minimum age to participate was 18). The sample size was determined by the amount of time available to collect data. The measures were cross-sectional; participants completed an online survey.

Sample C consisted of 312 community members from Denver, Colorado after exclusions. There were no attention checks in this study. We excluded participants who failed to fill out ($n = 30$) or incorrectly filled out the Valuing Happiness measure ($n = 0$). The sample size was determined to have sufficient power for analyses for a different unrelated study. The measures were both cross-sectional and longitudinal; participants completed an online entrance survey and an online follow-up survey 6 months later.

Sample D consisted of 159 females from the Berkeley Bay Area, California community after exclusions. We excluded participants who failed 25% or more of the 12 attention checks ($n = 1$) in the

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[1] Krasko et al. (2020) translated the items from the original Valuing Happiness Scale into German and formed two factors from them. They scored the items slightly differently than in Study 1a of the current work; one item was dropped completely (I want to feel happier than I generally am), and one item was switched to the other scale (To have a meaningful life, I need to feel happy most of the time). We believe the scoring was similar enough to support empirical distinction between the two happiness goal orientations and the two individual differences presented here.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Five Samples

Demographic characteristic	MTurk adults (A)	Yale undergrads (B)	Denver community (C)	Berkeley community (D)	MTurk adults (E)
Years collected	2017	2009–2010	2009–2010	2015–2016	2020
Sample size	593	450	312	159	301
% Women	45	57	50	100	47
Age in years					
M	34.2	19.8	39.8	46.4	38.3
SD	10.4	2.5	11.2	17.1	10.0
Ethnicity					
% African American	11	12	4	6	10
% Asian American	12	20	2	23	5
% European American	75	54	81	62	77
% Latinx	6	10	0	4	4
% Middle Eastern	1	0	0	2	1
% Native American	2	1	2	1	<1

Note. MTurk = Mechanical Turk.

entrance survey and who failed to fill out ($n = 0$) or incorrectly filled out the Valuing Happiness measure ($n = 0$). The sample size was determined to have sufficient power for analyses for a different unrelated study. The measures were cross-sectional and longitudinal; participants completed an online entrance survey, 8 days of online daily diaries starting about 1 week after the entrance survey, and an online follow-up survey about 6 months after completing the entrance survey.

Sample E consisted of 301 U.S. and Canadian workers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk after exclusions. As preregistered, we excluded participants who failed one or more of the three standard attention checks in the survey ($n = 46$), participants who failed a more complex vignette attention check ($n = 76$), participants who spent less than half of the average time to complete the survey ($n = 11$), and participants who failed to fill out ($n = 0$) or incorrectly filled out the Valuing Happiness measure ($n = 0$). The sample size was determined to provide over 80% power to detect small effect sizes (.15) for bivariate relationships. The measures were cross-sectional; participants completed an online survey.

Study 1a: Are Aspiring to Happiness and Concern About Happiness Distinct Individual Differences?

Previous research has used a single scale to operationalize valuing happiness (e.g., Mauss et al., 2011), but analyses of the structure of the scale suggest that it may measure more than one individual difference relevant to the pursuit of happiness (Krasko et al., 2020; Luhmann et al., 2016; Yıldırım et al., 2022). Analyzing the items in the Valuing Happiness Scale, Study 1a tested whether we can capture two individual differences relevant to the pursuit of happiness in this item set. We expected two distinct and related components in the scale—aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from Samples A and B. See Table 1.

Measures

Valuing Happiness. Participants answered the seven items from the Valuing Happiness Scale (Mauss et al., 2011) using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). All items are listed in Table 2.

Results

The eigenvalues for the original seven items (2.99, 1.25, 0.74, 0.58, 0.55, 0.49, 0.39 in Sample A and 2.54, 1.34, 0.83, 0.73, 0.66, 0.48, 0.41 in Sample B) showed the first principal component accounted for 43% of the variance in Sample A and 36% in Sample B, respectively. The second component was considerably smaller, accounting for 18% and 19% of the variance, respectively. These numbers are consistent with a large general factor, because the first component explains almost twice the variance compared to the second; however, both the scree test and parallel analysis suggested two components in both samples, so we retained two components in an exploratory principal component analysis in Sample A and replicated it in Sample B.

Given that all the items came from the same scale and all interitem correlations were positive, we expected the two factors to be correlated positively. Thus, we used oblimin rotation, which allows for correlated components. Table 2 shows the oblimin-rotated loadings for the items in both Samples A and B. One component represented items like "Feeling happy is extremely important to me" and captures the tendency to view happiness as a very important goal ("aspiring to happiness"). The other component represented items like "I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy" and captures the tendency to judge one's levels of happiness ("concern about happiness").

Overall, the pattern of loadings in Table 2 shows good simple structure. The expected loadings were all large and considerably higher than any of the cross-loadings. Additionally, Tucker's coefficient of factor congruence (Lorenzo-Seva & ten Berge, 2006; Tucker, 1951) across the two studies was 0.99 for the aspiring to happiness component and 0.96 for the concern about happiness component, suggesting that the component structure in Sample A was closely replicated in Sample B. As expected, the

Table 2

Two Individual Differences in the Pursuit of Happiness: Loadings on Two Oblimin-Rotated Components in Samples A and B

Item and descriptive information	Aspiring to happiness		Concern about happiness	
	MTurk adults (A)	Yale undergrads (B)	MTurk adults (A)	Yale undergrads (B)
Aspiring to happiness items				
1. Feeling happy is extremely important to me.	0.85	0.76	−0.22	−0.13
2. I value things in life only to the extent that they influence my personal happiness.	0.60	0.64	0.26	−0.02
3. To have a meaningful life, I need to feel happy most of the time.	0.76	0.79	0.15	0.06
4. How happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is.	0.73	0.55	0.09	0.31
Mean of absolute value of loadings	0.74	0.69	0.18	0.13
Concern about happiness items				
1. I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy.	−0.05	−0.01	0.81	0.72
2. If I don't feel happy, maybe there is something wrong with me.	0.10	0.14	0.75	0.79
3. I would like to be happier than I generally am.	0.02	−0.12	0.75	0.80
Mean of absolute value of loadings	0.06	0.09	0.77	0.77
Factor congruence across the two samples	0.99		0.96	

Note. MTurk = Mechanical Turk.

two oblimin-rotated components were positively correlated, $r = 0.32$ in Sample A and 0.26 in Sample B.

We used confirmatory factor analysis in Sample B to test whether the two-correlated component structure identified in Sample A fit better than both a single-factor model and a two-factor uncorrelated model. Supplemental Table S1 shows the loadings for a two-factor correlated confirmatory model. This model, $\chi^2(13) = 66.68$, $p < .01$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .91, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .10, standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .06, is consistent with the results shown in Table 2 and fit significantly better than both the single-factor model, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 112.48$, $p < .001$, and the two-factor uncorrelated model, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 54.07$, $p < .001$.[2]

Discussion

Study 1a has several key takeaways. First, the items tended to load onto one general factor; however, in both Samples A and B, we found evidence for two related (i.e., not orthogonal) individual differences—aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness. Furthermore, a two-factor correlated model fit significantly better than other potential models. Before understanding how these individual differences relate to well-being, we identified a few areas of improvement for the measure of concern about happiness. Specifically, concern about happiness only has three items, and previous research has highlighted one of the three items (*I would like to be happier than I generally am.*) as potentially problematic (Luhmann et al., 2016). Thus, our next goal was to improve the measurement of concern about happiness in Study 1b.

Study 1b: Can We Improve the Measurement of Concern About Happiness?

The aim of Study 1b was to replicate the two-dimensional structure identified in Study 1a when two new, conceptually derived items were included to better define the concern about happiness construct.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from Samples C, D, and E. See Table 1.

Measures

Valuing Happiness. First, we dropped the item "I would like to be happier than I generally am" because this item potentially captures a general lack of happiness rather than concern about happiness (see Luhmann et al., 2016).[3] Second, because dropping this item left only two items to measure the concern about happiness component, the author team wrote two new items to create a more reliable scale defined by four items. These two new

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[2] To our knowledge, two previous studies have examined the structure of the Valuing Happiness Scale, and their conclusions differ from each other and the present work. Please see Supplemental Table S2 to compare the solutions. Luhmann et al. (2016, p. 48) reported three factors in their analysis of six items (one item was dropped); however, they indicated that they "do not claim that the three identified factors represent theoretically meaningful dimensions of valuing happiness nor that these dimensions can be measured reliably with the Valuing Happiness Scale." The present analyses did not find evidence for three dimensions, and the two theoretically meaningful dimensions identified here seem more appropriate for a set of seven items than three, each defined by only two items. Yıldırım et al. (2022) also did not replicate the three-factor solution and instead suggested two factors similar to the present work, except that two items are switched across factors (see Supplemental Table S2). Given that Yıldırım et al.'s and our model have the same degrees of freedom, we could not do a formal comparison of fit. However, as shown in Supplemental Table S3, the χ^2, RMSEA, and SRMR values were lower and the CFI value was higher for our model compared to Yıldırım et al.'s model, indicating better fit. Study 1b provides further tests of the generalizability of the two-factor solution proposed here.

[3] We dropped this item from use in the scale; however, we still included this item in the study to compare the three-item version and the four-item version of concern about happiness in Study 1b and to compare the two individual differences to the original Valuing Happiness Scale in Study 2.

items further capture the tendency to judge one's levels of happiness. Participants answered the resulting eight items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). All items are listed in Table 3.

Results

We used confirmatory factor analysis to test our hypothesized structure and compare the three models. The first is a single-factor model which assumes that the items measure just one general factor. The second is a two-factor orthogonal model which assumes that the items measure two factors that are not correlated. The third is a two-factor correlated model which assumes that the items measure two factors that are correlated as we found in Study 1a. The results of the model comparison were clear and consistent across all three samples: When comparing a one-factor model to a two-factor correlated model, the two-factor correlated model always fit better, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 92.25, p < .001$, in Sample C, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 47.89, p < .001$, in Sample D, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 92.67, p < .001$ in Sample E. Similarly, when comparing the two-factor orthogonal model to a two-factor correlated model, the two-factor correlated model always fit better, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 102.19, p < .001$, in Sample C, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 54.75, p < .001$, in Sample D, $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 131.13, p < .001$, in Sample E. Finally, the absolute fit statistics for the two-factor correlated model indicated, across all three samples, good-to-acceptable fit both for the CFI (.94–.96) and for the SRMR (.04–.05), and marginal fit for the RMSEA (.08–.09), indicating that the fit of the current item set is not perfect and could be improved in future research: in Sample C, $\chi^2(19) = 63.19, p < .01$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .05; Sample D, $\chi^2(19) = 40.18, p < .01$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .05; and Sample E, $\chi^2(19) = 56.68, p < .01$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .04.[4] Table 3 shows the standardized loadings for the two-factor correlated confirmatory model. All items loaded substantially on their expected factors (i.e., larger than .40). Across the three samples, the loadings on the aspiring to happiness factor averaged .65, and the loadings on the concern about happiness factor averaged .72.

Table 3 also indicates good internal consistency of the two 4-item scales, with an average α of .73 for the Aspiring to Happiness scale and an average α of .81 for the Concern About Happiness scale (John & Soto, 2007). As in Study 1a, the two scales were positively correlated; the average correlation across the three samples was .55, ranging from .50 to .60. Finally, we tested whether the addition of the two conceptually derived new items might have changed the meaning of the Concern About Happiness scale from Study 1a to Study 1b. In Samples C, D, and E, the three-item and four-item versions always correlated substantially, *r*s = .90, .86, and .86 respectively, suggesting that dropping the item related to unhappiness and adding two new items did not substantially change the meaning of the Concern About Happiness scale.

Discussion

Study 1b has several key takeaways. First, across three samples, we found reliable evidence for two correlated individual differences, and this model fit significantly better than a single-factor model or a two-factor uncorrelated model. Second, dropping one problematic item and adding two new items to Concern About Happiness did not substantially change the scale. This suggests we are capturing two

distinct individual differences relevant to the pursuit of happiness, which might differentially relate to well-being. Thus, we examined how these individual differences relate to well-being in Study 2.

Study 2: How Do Aspiring to Happiness and Concern About Happiness Relate to Well-Being?

In Study 2, we examined how aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness relate cross-sectionally (i.e., measures collected at the same time point) and longitudinally (i.e., measures collected 6-months apart) to well-being in Samples C, D, and E. Additionally, in Sample D, we measured well-being using a different data source (i.e., daily diaries vs. surveys). The following predictions were preregistered for Sample E. We expected that aspiring to happiness would not be associated with well-being, because it should not interfere with the process of pursuing happiness. We expected that concern about happiness would be negatively associated with well-being, because, according to the theoretical model, it should interfere with the process of pursuing happiness. To demonstrate the specificity of the observed effects for concern about happiness, we tested whether effects held when accounting for a more general sense of concern (i.e., trait-level worry).

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from Samples C, D, and E. See Table 1.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants in Samples C and D completed measures of valuing happiness and well-being during an entrance survey and measures of well-being during a follow-up survey 6 months later. Additionally, participants in Sample D completed eight daily diaries including measures of well-being between the entrance and follow-up surveys. Participants in Sample E completed measures of valuing happiness and well-being at one time point.

Measures

Descriptive statistics for all variables in all studies are presented in Supplemental Table S4. Internal consistencies, excluding the two measures discussed next, were acceptable (Cronbach's αs ≥ .70). Internal consistencies were lower for the daily measure of psychological well-being (αs ranged from .62 to .68 across days) and the daily measure of depressive symptoms (αs ranged from .58 to .73 across days). To offset concern about low reliability, we included a daily well-being composite with the three daily measures of well-being (life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and reverse-scored depressive symptoms), which had good internal consistency (αs ranged from .80 to .83 across days).

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[4] We examined modification indices across the three samples for the two-factor correlated model to aid future research in improving the modeling of this construct. We found four correlated residuals that were consistently suggested by relatively large modification indices across samples: based on the labels in Table 3, concern about happiness Item 3 with aspiring to happiness Item 4, aspiring to happiness Item 3 with aspiring to happiness Item 1, aspiring to happiness Item 3 with aspiring to happiness Item 4, and concern about happiness Item 2 with aspiring to happiness Item 2.

Table 3

Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results in Study 1b: Standardized Loadings for the Two-Factor Correlated Model in Samples C, D, and E

Item and descriptive information	Denver community (C)	Berkeley community (D)	MTurk adults (E)	Average
Aspiring to happiness				
1. Feeling happy is extremely important to me.	.71	.61	.54	.62
2. I value things in life only to the extent that they influence my personal happiness.	.43	.48	.72	.54
3. To have a meaningful life, I need to feel happy most of the time.	.83	.86	.80	.83
4. How happy I am at any given moment says a lot about how worthwhile my life is.	.60	.49	.69	.59
Cronbach's α for the four-item scale	.72	.70	.78	.73
Concern about happiness				
1. I am concerned about my happiness even when I feel happy.	.58	.65	.66	.63
2. If I don't feel happy, I worry about it.[a]	.75	.88	.75	.79
3. If I don't feel happy, maybe there is something wrong with me.	.68	.65	.70	.68
4. I get somewhat distressed if I don't feel happy.[a]	.80	.71	.85	.79
Cronbach's α for the four-item scale	.80	.81	.82	.81

Note. MTurk = Mechanical Turk.
[a] The two new conceptually derived items that were not included in the original Valuing Happiness Scale.

Valuing Happiness. We measured aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness using the eight items from Study 1b.

Satisfaction With Life. We used the five-item Satisfaction with Life scale (Diener et al., 1985) in all samples. Participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale to indicate agreement with statements like, "I am satisfied with my life." For the daily measure in Sample D, participants used the same Likert scale to rate three statements from the original scale.

Psychological Well-Being. We used the 18-item shortened version of the Ryff Psychological Well-Being scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) in all samples. Participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale to indicate agreement with statements like, "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them." For the daily measure in Sample D, participants used the same Likert scale to rate six statements from the original scale.

Depressive Symptoms. We used 20 items from the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1996) in all samples. We did not include the item pertaining to suicidal ideation per IRB requirements. Participants saw four statements per question and indicated which statement describes them (e.g., 3 = "I am so sad and unhappy that I cannot stand it"). We calculated imputed sum scores in all samples. For the daily measure in Sample D, participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale to indicate agreement with two items from the Center for Epidemiological Studies–Depression scale (Radloff, 1977).

Well-Being Composite. We combined the measures of well-being collected in each sample (satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, and reverse-scored depressive symptoms) by z-scoring and averaging them to create a well-being composite. For the daily measures, because the items were on the same response scale, we reverse-scored the measure of depressive symptoms and averaged them to create a well-being composite.

General Sense of Worry. In Samples C and D, we measured general sense of worry with a face-valid, single-item measure. Specifically, participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale to indicate agreement with the statement, "I worry

a lot." In Sample E, we measured general sense of worry with four face-valid items from the Penn State Worry Questionnaire (Meyer et al., 1990). Participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale to indicate agreement with statements like, "Many situations make me worry."

Results

For the measures from the entrance and follow-up surveys, Pearson's correlation coefficients for the associations between each individual difference, the original Valuing Happiness Scale, and well-being are shown in Table 4.

Aspiring to happiness was not reliably associated with any measures of well-being. Conversely, concern about happiness was robustly associated with lower well-being cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Specifically, concern about happiness was associated with lower satisfaction with life and psychological well-being and greater depressive symptoms cross-sectionally and 6 months later. Furthermore, the results for the original Valuing Happiness Scale replicate the results of concern about happiness; this suggests that concern about happiness is the active ingredient in the association between extremely valuing happiness (as conceptualized in previous work) and well-being.

We conducted secondary analyses to examine the unique effects of concern about happiness on each outcome variable when separately controlling for aspiring to happiness and a general sense of worry. See Supplemental Tables S5 and S6 for all secondary analyses. The effects for concern about happiness remained consistent when controlling for aspiring to happiness. We saw some evidence for a suppressor effect (Paulhus et al., 2004), such that concern about happiness was associated more strongly with lower well-being when controlling for aspiring to happiness. We also observed a suppressor effect for aspiring to happiness, such that aspiring to happiness was associated with significantly greater well-being when controlling for concern about happiness. Furthermore, the effects for concern about happiness remained

Table 4

Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Correlations of the Concern and Aspiring Individual Differences and the Valuing Happiness Total Scale With Three Well-Being Indicators and the Well-Being Composite

Well-being indicator	Sample	Concern about happiness		Aspiring to happiness		Original total scale	
		CS	L	CS	L	CS	L
Satisfaction with life	C: Denver community	**−.46**$_a$	**−.33**$_a$	−.10$_b$	−.02$_b$	**−.37**	**−.24**
	D: Berkeley community	**−.26**$_a$	**−.27**$_a$	.03$_b$	.05$_b$	−.22	**−.18**
	E: MTurk adults	**−.15**	—	.12	—	−.07	—
	Meta-analytic mean	**−.30**	**−.31**	.02	.004	**−.22**	**−.22**
Psychological well-being	C: Denver community	**−.55**$_a$	**−.43**$_a$	**−.15**$_b$	**−.15**$_b$	**−.44**	**−.37**
	D: Berkeley community	**−.41**$_a$	**−.36**$_a$	−.05$_b$	−.08$_b$	**−.32**	**−.30**
	E: MTurk adults	**−.32**$_a$	—	−.01$_b$	—	**−.24**	—
	Meta-analytic mean	**−.43**	**−.41**	−.07	−.13	**−.34**	**−.35**
Depressive symptoms	C: Denver community	**.53**$_a$	**.44**$_a$	**.27**$_b$	**.21**$_b$	**.49**	**.42**
	D: Berkeley community	**.41**$_a$	**.38**$_a$	−.04$_b$	<.001$_b$	**.26**	**.24**
	E: MTurk adults	**.27**$_a$	—	−.03$_b$	—	**.18**	—
	Meta-analytic mean	**.41**	**.42**	.07	.11	**.32**	**.34**
Well-being composite	C: Denver community	**−.58**$_a$	**−.47**$_a$	**−.20**$_b$	**−.16**$_b$	**−.49**	**−.40**
	D: Berkeley community	**−.43**$_a$	**−.40**$_a$	.01$_b$	−.01$_b$	**−.32**	**−.28**
	E: MTurk adults	**−.28**$_a$	—	.05$_b$	—	**−.18**	—
	Meta-analytic mean	**−.44**	**−.45**	−.05	−.10	**−.34**	**−.35**

Note. Bolded values indicate significance at the 5% level. Correlations for concern about happiness and aspiring to happiness within a sample with different subscripts differ significantly from one another. Dashes indicate the well-being indicator was not measured at a separate time point in that sample. The means across samples were calculated using a meta-analytic analysis from the *meta* package in R; we report the estimates from the random effects model (vs. common effect model), which assumes the observed estimates can vary across studies. CS = cross-sectional; L = longitudinal.

mostly consistent when controlling for a general tendency to worry. Of the 20 associations examined, 16 remained significant. The associations between concern about happiness and satisfaction with life in Samples D and E, depressive symptoms in Sample E, and the well-being composite in Sample E were no longer significant when controlling for a general tendency to worry.

For the analyses with daily-diary measures of well-being in Sample D, we examined multilevel models with Level-2 predictors (i.e., concern about happiness and aspiring to happiness) and Level-1 outcomes (well-being indicators). Because the predictors are Level-2, these analyses only provide information about between-person effects; we included them in the current work to demonstrate replication using a different data source (i.e., daily diaries vs. surveys). The standardized estimates are shown in Table 5. Concern about happiness was negatively associated with satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, and the well-being composite and positively associated with depressive symptoms. These associations held when separately controlling for aspiring to happiness and general worry. Aspiring to happiness was not associated with well-being.

Discussion

Results for Study 2 indicate that concern about happiness is reliably associated with lower well-being, including when examining this association longitudinally (across 6 months), when controlling for aspiring to happiness and a general sense of worry, and when using a different data source to measure well-being (i.e., daily diaries). As predicted, aspiring to happiness was not consistently associated with well-being. We propose that concern about happiness is associated with worse well-being because it infuses the experience of positive events with negativity (whereas aspiring to happiness does not)—a mechanistic model that we begin to test more directly in Study 3.

Study 3: Through Which Processes Do These Individual Differences Relate to Well-Being?

Study 3 aimed to understand *why* concern about happiness is associated with lower well-being. We propose that people who are concerned about their happiness tend to judge whether they

Table 5

Standardized β Coefficients From Multilevel Models With Concern About Happiness and Aspiring to Happiness as Level-2 Predictors of Level-1 Well-Being Outcomes in Sample D

Well-being indicator	Concern about happiness	Concern about happiness[a]	Concern about happiness[b]	Aspiring to happiness
Satisfaction with life	**−.24** [−.39, −.10]	**−.37** [−.53, −.21]	**−.17** [−.32, −.01]	.08 [−.07, .22]
Psychological well-being	**−.42** [−.55, −.29]	**−.50** [−.64, −.36]	**−.31** [−.44, −.17]	−.08 [−.22, .06]
Depressive symptoms	**.39** [.27, .50]	**.54** [.41, .66]	**.29** [.16, .41]	−.04 [−.17, .09]
Well-being composite	**−.39** [−.52, −.26]	**−.53** [−.67, −.38]	**−.28** [−.42, −.14]	.03 [−.12, .17]

Note. Bolded values indicate significance at the 5% level. MTurk = Mechanical Turk.
[a] These estimates control for aspiring to happiness.   [b] These estimates control for general worry.

are happy. This tendency to judge one's happiness amplifies the response to one's happiness in the monitoring element, thereby increasing the chances of experiencing a negative meta-emotion. This additional negative emotional response infuses negativity during the very events where positivity is possible. As these moments of sabotaging their own happiness accumulate over time, people high in concern about happiness should experience worse well-being. We tested this full theoretical model (Zerwas & Ford, 2021) in two samples with complementary designs to first explore these patterns cross-sectionally (Sample E) and then confirm them longitudinally (Sample D). Specifically, for Sample D, concern about happiness was measured in an entrance survey, negative meta-emotions were measured across 8 days in daily life as people were considering their most positive event of the day starting about 1 week after the entrance survey, and well-being was measured 6 months after the entrance survey. Furthermore, we accounted for the intensity of the positive events to rule out the possibility that people who are concerned about their happiness experience lower well-being because they experience less intense positive life events.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from Samples D and E. See Table 1.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants in Sample E completed an online survey. Participants in Sample D completed an online entrance survey to measure concern about happiness, 8 days of online daily diaries starting about 1 week after the entrance survey to measure negative meta-emotions during positive events, and an online exit survey 6 months after the entrance survey to measure well-being.

Measures

Descriptive statistics for all variables in all studies are presented in Supplemental Table S4.

Concern About Happiness. We measured concern about happiness using the four items from Study 1b.

Negative Meta-Emotions During Positive Events. In Sample E, we created a five-item measure of negative meta-emotions during positive events. Participants thought about a positive event that had taken place in the previous 2 weeks and then used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale to indicate agreement with statements like, "I felt disappointed about the feelings I experienced during the event."

In Sample D, the measure of negative meta-emotions during positive events was adapted for daily responding. For 8 days, participants identified the most positive event that happened to them that day, no matter how small. After briefly recalling the positive event, participants answered various items about their reactions to that event. Participants used a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert scale to indicate agreement with statements like, "I feel disappointed about the feelings I experienced during the event."

Intensity of Positive Event. In Sample E, we asked a single item to gauge how intense the event was while minimizing overlap with the emotional reaction to the event. Specifically, participants

used a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) Likert scale in response to the question, "How much will this positive event impact your life?"

Well-Being Composite. We used the same well-being composite described in Study 2.

Results

In Sample E, we used zero-order correlations to test associations among concern about happiness, negative meta-emotions, and well-being, and partial correlations to test whether negative meta-emotions accounted for variance shared between concern about happiness and well-being. Although we cannot infer mediation from cross-sectional correlational data, we can test the possibility of a mediating relationship by examining correlations and partial correlations among the measures.[5]

As shown in Table 6, in Sample E, the zero-order correlation showed that participants with a greater concern about happiness also reported lower well-being. Additionally, participants with a greater concern about happiness tended to experience greater negative meta-emotions in response to positive events, which in turn was associated with lower well-being. The partial correlation showed that the relationship between concern about happiness and well-being was nonsignificant after accounting for negative meta-emotions; thus, negative meta-emotions accounted for the variance shared between concern about happiness and well-being. Overall, these relationships provide preliminary evidence that mediation is possible, and we used Sample D to examine these relationships using longitudinal data.

In Sample D, the predictor (concern about happiness), mediator (negative meta-emotions), and outcome (well-being) were measured chronologically in time. We used multilevel structural equation modeling in Mplus to test our mediation model, given that the predictor and outcome variables were measured at Level 2 and the mediator was measured at Level 1 (2-1-2 mediation; see Preacher et al., 2010). One advantage to using multilevel structural equation modeling is that this approach accounts for the variability of each participant's negative meta-emotional experiences across the daily diary period.

As shown in Figure 2, greater concern about happiness at the entrance survey was associated with greater negative meta-emotions in response to daily positive events which, in turn, was negatively associated with well-being measured 6 months later. Additionally, as shown in Supplemental Figure S1, this pattern of results held when separately accounting for aspiring to happiness, general sense of worry, and the intensity of the positive events.

Discussion

Concern about happiness was linked with worse well-being in part because of greater negative meta-emotional experiences. We found evidence for these patterns using correlations and partial correlations in one sample with cross-sectional data and using mediation analyses in one sample with the predictor (concern about happiness), mediator (negative meta-emotions in response to daily events), and outcome (well-being) measured chronologically in

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[5] We deviated in one way from the preregistration for Sample E: We preregistered mediation analyses. However, given the limitations of cross-sectional mediation analyses (Maxwell & Cole, 2007), we decided to use zero-order and partial correlations, which are more appropriate for cross-sectional data.

Table 6

Zero-Order Correlations and Partial Correlations Between Concern About Happiness, Negative Meta-Emotions, and Well-Being

| | MTurk adults (E) | |
Correlation between …	Zero order	Partialing …
Concern about happiness and well-being	**−.28**	Negative meta-emotion −.08
Concern about happiness and negative meta-emotions	**.40**	Well-being **.30**
Negative meta-emotions and well-being	**−.54**	Concern about happiness **−.49**

Note. Bolded values indicate significance at the 5% level. Partial correlations reflect associations between concern about happiness and well-being controlling for negative meta-emotions, concern about happiness and negative meta-emotions controlling for well-being, and negative meta-emotions and well-being controlling for concern about happiness. MTurk = Mechanical Turk.

time. This pattern of results was robust to three potential confounds (aspiring to happiness, general sense of worry, and the intensity of the positive events).

Although the variables in Sample D were measured chronologically over 6 months, we acknowledge that the analysis does not meet all assumptions required to make causal mediation inferences (e.g., manipulation of the predictor variable; MacKinnon et al., 2007). Thus, the results from Study 3 provide preliminary evidence consistent with the idea that mediation is possible. Future experimental and prospective work is needed to further corroborate this model.

General Discussion

The present work examined for whom and why valuing happiness relates to well-being. More specifically, we used cross-sectional, daily-diary, and short-term longitudinal methods in student and community samples to address three critical questions raised by recent theorizing (Zerwas & Ford, 2021). First, are aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness distinct individual differences? In both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, we found reliable evidence for two correlated but distinct individual differences relevant to the pursuit of happiness—aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness. Second, how do these individual differences relate to well-being? As predicted and preregistered for Sample E, concern about

happiness was reliably associated with lower well-being, including when examining these associations longitudinally, when controlling for aspiring to happiness and a general sense of worry, and when examining well-being in a different data source (i.e., daily diaries). Aspiring to happiness was overall not associated with well-being. Third, through which processes does concern about happiness relate to well-being? Across two samples (one cross-sectional and one longitudinal), we found evidence consistent with the idea that concern about happiness is linked with worse well-being in part due to greater negative meta-emotional experiences. Again, this pattern held when accounting for aspiring to happiness, general worry, and the intensity of the positive events.

Two Individual Differences in the Pursuit of Happiness

One body of research suggests that highly valuing happiness is linked with lower well-being (e.g., Mauss et al., 2011), whereas another body of research suggests that people are able to successfully pursue happiness (e.g., Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2014). To begin addressing this tension, the current work tested recent theorizing that disentangles previously conflated individual differences related to valuing happiness with distinct implications for the process of pursuing happiness and, in turn, well-being (Zerwas & Ford, 2021). Consistent with this theorizing, we identified and found empirical support for two distinct individual differences with different associations with well-being. The first individual difference involves viewing happiness as a very important goal (i.e., aspiring to happiness). Aspiring to happiness was not related to well-being cross-sectionally or longitudinally. The second individual difference involves judging one's happiness levels (i.e., concern about happiness). Concern about happiness was negatively related to well-being cross-sectionally and longitudinally. These two individual differences align with and extend upon existing theory and research in important ways.

Previous work has shown that extremely valuing happiness is related to lower levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Catalino et al., 2014; Hansenne, 2021; Humphrey et al., 2022; Luhmann et al., 2016; Mauss et al., 2011) and more depressive symptoms (Bardeen & Fergus, 2020; Fergus & Bardeen, 2016; Gentzler et al., 2019; Humphrey et al., 2022; Mahmoodi Kahriz et al., 2020). Given that concern about happiness, but not aspiring to happiness, was linked with lower well-being in the current work, it appears that the original findings on extremely valuing happiness were

Figure 2

Statistical Mediation Model for Sample D

Indirect effect: **-0.12** [-0.20, -0.04]

a-path: **0.28** [0.21, 0.35]

Daily Diaries: Negative meta-emotions during positive events

b-path: **-0.44** [-0.72, -0.15]

Entrance Survey: Concern about happiness

c-path: **-0.26** [-0.35, -0.16]
c'-path: **-0.14** [-0.26, -0.01]

Exit Survey Six Months Later: Well-being
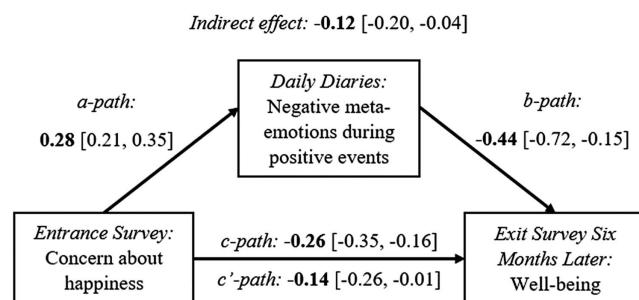
Note. Values represent unstandardized effects. Bolded values indicate significance at the 5% level. Well-being is a composite of satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, and reverse-scored depressive symptoms.

driven by concern about happiness. Thus, existing work is likely useful for understanding concern about happiness and its potentially harmful implications. In contrast, results for aspiring to happiness suggest that people can hold extreme values about happiness without inherent repercussions.

The results for concern about happiness indicate that this individual difference is consistently linked with worse well-being. Further examination found this was, in part, because people who enter positive situations with a tendency to be concerned about their happiness experience more negative meta-emotions in response to daily positive events. Beyond happiness, this finding contributes to the relatively novel literature on meta-emotions in a few key ways (Bailen et al., 2019; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2019). First, this work focused on negative meta-emotional responses during positive events, which are particularly important to study as they can dampen the overall positivity of positive events and accumulate to lower well-being over time. Indeed, negative meta-emotions in response to daily positive events were associated with lower well-being (Leahy, 2002; Mitmansgruber et al., 2009). Second, the results identified concern about happiness as a crucial individual difference that relates to negative meta-emotional experiences during daily positive events. Understanding individual differences that contribute to maladaptive meta-emotions provides opportunities for clinical intervention. Overall, the results found in the present work suggests that negative meta-emotions are involved in decreased well-being.

It is worthwhile to consider that a negative emotional response to one's goal progress can be informative and even adaptive in many contexts. For example, consider academic contexts: feeling disappointed in one's grade does not directly interfere with the goal of doing well in school and can even serve as motivation toward the goal. However, when happiness is one's goal, negative meta-emotions interfere with that very goal by infusing negativity into the current emotion and pulling one farther away from happiness.

The results for aspiring to happiness indicate that this individual difference is relatively innocuous overall. This could be because aspiring to happiness influences the goal of the pursuit, which takes place early in the process and merely sets the standard for the rest of the pursuit (Zerwas & Ford, 2021). Consequently, the link between aspiring to happiness and well-being could be influenced by moderating variables highlighted by the process of pursuing happiness. For example, if people can recruit successful strategies (e.g., they prioritize positivity in their daily lives; Catalino et al., 2014; Catalino & Tov, 2022), then their aspirations for happiness might be met, but if people are unable to recruit successful strategies (e.g., they spend money on themselves; see Dunn et al., 2011), then their aspirations for happiness might not be met.

In terms of practical considerations, the present findings suggest that the one-dimensional seven-item Valuing Happiness Scale (Mauss et al., 2011) should not be used in future work. Instead, we recommend researchers use the expanded eight-item scale we developed here, which distinguishes two facets related to the process of happiness pursuit.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current research addressed several questions, some limitations and directions for future research are important to note. First, we utilized a correlational approach, so we cannot make conclusions about causality. Additionally, we did not predict changes in well-being in our longitudinal samples, because the time span between measurements was 6 months, and it typically takes longer to observe significant changes in well-being. Accordingly, future research might experimentally manipulate concern about happiness and aspiring to happiness or study longer durations between measurements.

Second, the current work focused on examining how concern about happiness is related to well-being in the context of positive events, when happiness is within reach. While this approach is most relevant to our theorizing, it is possible that aspiring to happiness and concern about happiness are also activated in the context of negative events. Future research might consider whether and how these individual differences might function to influence emotional outcomes in different emotional situations.

Third, it would be interesting to consider the role that one's definition of happiness plays in the current work (Jayawickreme et al., 2012). Previous research found that valuing happiness was linked with greater well-being for participants from Russia and East Asia, and this link was explained by holding more social (vs. more individualistic) definitions of happiness (Ford, Dmitrieva, et al., 2015). Future research might consider how different types of happiness definitions (e.g., hedonic vs. eudaimonic definitions) influence the link between valuing happiness and well-being (Biswas-Diener et al., 2009; Kashdan et al., 2008).

Fourth, it is worth noting that there are residual correlations among some of the items, which we reported in Footnote 4. These residual correlations could be artifacts or could suggest that there are other constructs being measured. Future work might explore these residual correlations more systematically to improve upon the construct measurement.

Constraints on Generality

Our five samples were diverse in many ways, including gender, age, and geographic location within the United States; thus, the results have a fair degree of generalizability within a U.S. context. However, past work suggests that the patterns we observed might not extend to participants outside the United States (Datu et al., 2021; Ford, Dmitrieva, et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2020). Thus, applying a cross-cultural lens to this work will be an important next step to better understand generalizability. Similarly, our samples all consisted of adults, and an important next step will be to examine the proposed theoretical model in children and adolescents (Datu et al., 2021; Gentzler et al., 2019). Finally, although our samples were heterogeneous with regard to ethnicity, European Americans were overrepresented in all samples.

Concluding Comment

Extremely valuing happiness has been linked with lower well-being; however, the current work delved deeper to examine for whom this is the case and why. Replicated results showed that being concerned about one's happiness relates to lower well-being, and this is in part due to negative meta-emotional experiences during positive events in daily life. Conversely, aspiring to happiness was not consistently related to well-being. Ultimately, valuing happiness is not inherently problematic; instead, concern and judgment about one's happiness can undermine it.

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