

The Impact of Trauma on Happiness

Brittany Welts

The University of New Hampshire College of Professional Studies Online

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Prof. Kirsten Kemmerer, Ph.D.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the multifaceted impact of trauma on happiness, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that pulls insights from psychology, neuroscience, and sociology. Trauma, defined as a deeply distressing experience that overwhelms an individual's coping mechanisms (SAMHSA, 2014), significantly diminishes happiness. Trauma is shown to disrupt emotional regulation, alter brain function, and undermine social support. Drawing on epidemiological data indicating the prevalence of traumatic experiences (Finkelhor et. Al., 2015) and conceptualizations of happiness as subjective well-being (Diener, 2018), this paper explores the psychological, neurobiological, and sociocultural dimensions of trauma's effect on happiness. An interdisciplinary understanding is crucial for developing effective, trauma-informed interventions that promote resilience and well-being.

The Impact of Trauma on Happiness

Trauma, as defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), encompasses deeply distressing or disturbing experiences that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, leading to lasting adverse effects on mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. These experiences can range from natural disasters and war to sexual abuse, neglect, physical abuse, exposure to violence, or accidents. The pervasiveness of trauma is underscored by studies indicating that a significant portion of the population experiences at least one traumatic event in their lifetime; for instance, the National Survey of Adolescents revealed that approximately 60% of U.S. adolescents have been exposed to at least one potentially traumatic event. (Finkelhor et. al., 2015) Given the prevalence and broad impact of trauma, it is crucial to understand how it affects overall well-being, particularly happiness.

In this paper, happiness is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing subjective well-being, positive affect, and life satisfaction. Diener (2018) defines subjective well-being as an individual's overall life evaluation, including cognitive judgments of satisfaction and affective experiences of positive and negative emotions. Research has consistently highlighted the importance of happiness levels associated with improved physical health, increased longevity, stronger social relationships, and enhanced productivity. (Lyubomirsky et. al., 2005)

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how trauma affects happiness, this paper will employ an interdisciplinary approach, examining the issue through the lenses of psychology, neuroscience, and sociology. Psychology offers a framework for understanding the mental and emotional processes involved in trauma, including the development of conditions like anxiety,

depression, and PTSD. (Resick et. al., 2008) Neuroscience provides insights into how trauma alters brain structure and function, particularly in areas related to emotional regulation, memory processing, and stress response. (Van der Kolk, 2014) Sociology considers the broader social contexts and cultural factors that influence the experience of trauma and the pursuit of happiness. (Beachboard, 2022) By integrating these perspectives, this paper aims to demonstrate how trauma significantly diminishes happiness by disrupting emotional regulation, altering brain function, and undermining social support. First, it is important to understand the psychological impact that trauma has on overall happiness.

Psychological Impact of Trauma

The psychological consequences of traumatic experiences are wide-ranging, encompassing anxiety, depression, PTSD, and difficulties with emotional regulation, identity, and self-esteem. (Resick et. al., 2008) These conditions often manifest as persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. (APA, 2013) Childhood trauma, in particular, has been shown to impair cognitive emotion regulation, leading to difficulties in managing emotions and an increased fear of happiness. (Ahi et. al., 2021) This can manifest as an inability to experience or sustain positive emotions, a tendency to suppress or avoid emotions, or difficulty identifying and expressing emotions. Furthermore, individuals who have experienced trauma may develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse or self-harm, in an attempt to manage their emotional pain and distress. (SAMHSA, 2014) As a result, the psychological impact of trauma can have long-lasting and devastating effects on an individual's overall well-being and happiness.

From a psychological perspective, individuals who have experienced trauma often exhibit difficulties in emotional regulation. Ahi et. al. (2021) found that childhood trauma specifically

impairs cognitive emotion regulation, leading to difficulties in managing emotions and an increased fear of happiness. This highlights the lasting impact of early trauma on one's ability to experience positive emotions later in life. Cognitive processing therapy can be utilized as an intervention for these individuals. Cognitive processing therapy, a specialized type of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), focuses on helping individuals understand and change their thoughts or beliefs surrounding traumatic events that contribute to their PTSD symptoms. By challenging maladaptive thought patterns and promoting more adaptive coping strategies, cognitive processing therapy can help individuals process their traumatic experiences and reduce the severity of their PTSD symptoms, ultimately improving their overall well-being and happiness. (Resick et. al, 2008) Moreover, recent research has highlighted the importance of trauma-informed care, which recognizes the prevalence of trauma and integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices to avoid re-traumatization and promote healing. (SAMHSA, 2014) The psychological effects of trauma on happiness closely mirror the neurobiological impact of trauma.

Neurobiological Effects of Trauma

Beyond the psychological manifestations of trauma, there are significant neurobiological effects that contribute to the reduction of happiness. Trauma reduces positive affects by impacting neural pathways related to positive emotions. Studies have shown that individuals with a history of trauma exhibit reduced activity in brain regions associated with reward processing, such as the nucleus accumbens and ventral tegmental area (VTA). (Fonzo, 2018) This can lead to a decreased ability to experience pleasure or motivation. The nucleus accumbens, a key structure in the brain's reward center, plays a crucial role in processing pleasure and motivation. When this region is less active, individuals may struggle to experience

joy or find motivation in everyday activities. Furthermore, the chronic stress associated with trauma can disrupt the delicate balance of neurotransmitters in the brain, such as dopamine and serotonin, which are essential for regulating mood and emotional well-being. (McEwen, 2007)

Neuroimaging studies reveal how trauma affects brain regions associated with reward processing and motivation. For example, individuals with PTSD have smaller hippocampal volumes and altered amygdala activity, which can contribute to difficulties in memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and the experience of positive emotions. (Shin et. al., 2006)

The hippocampus, a brain region critical for memory and learning, is often smaller in individuals with PTSD, potentially leading to difficulties in recalling positive memories and learning from past experiences. The amygdala, responsible for processing emotions such as fear and anxiety, may be hyperactive in individuals with PTSD, leading to a heightened emotional reactivity and difficulty regulating negative emotions. Trauma-induced changes in brain structure and function impair emotional regulation and contribute to chronic stress. This chronic stress can lead to increased levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that can damage brain cells and disrupt neural connections, affecting cognitive function and emotional well-being. (McEwen, 2007)

Fonzo (2018) advocates for a balanced approach that studies both negative and positive emotional systems in PTSD research. Understanding the neural mechanisms underlying positive affect can help create interventions that promote resilience and enhance well-being in individuals who have experienced trauma. By targeting specific brain regions and neural pathways affected by trauma, interventions such as neurofeedback and mindfulness-based therapies may help restore emotional balance and promote happiness. Neuroscience is a crucial component of understanding the effects trauma has on happiness. Still, it is essential that we also address the way that society and culture influence trauma and happiness.

Social and Cultural Influences on Trauma and Happiness

The social and cultural contexts in which trauma occurs and is experienced play a critical role in shaping its impact on happiness. Social support systems are particularly important, with a lack of social support exacerbating the adverse effects of trauma on happiness. Social isolation and loneliness can amplify the negative emotional consequences of trauma, leading to increased vulnerability to mental health disorders and decreased subjective well-being. (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). In fact, studies have shown that individuals who lack strong social connections are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems following a traumatic event. (Ozbay et. al., 2007) Conversely, strong social connections help buffer against trauma's impact and promote resilience. Supportive relationships provide a sense of belonging, validation, and emotional security, which helps individuals to cope with stress and build a more positive self-image. These relationships may also provide practical assistance, such as help with childcare, transportation, or financial support, which can alleviate some of the stressors associated with trauma.

Cultural norms and community resources also influence the experience of trauma and access to support. Cultural beliefs about mental health, stigma, and help-seeking behaviors can affect an individual's willingness to seek treatment and access social support. (Ozbay et. al., 2007) In some cultures, mental health problems are stigmatized, leading individuals to avoid seeking help for fear of being judged or ostracized. In other cultures, there may be a lack of awareness about mental health issues or a lack of culturally appropriate mental health services. In addition, marginalized communities often face higher rates of trauma and limited access to mental health services. Systemic inequalities, discrimination, and historical trauma can increase the vulnerability of marginalized groups to traumatic experiences and create barriers to accessing

culturally competent and affordable mental health care. (Evans-Campbell, 2008) Therefore, culturally sensitive interventions are needed to address the unique needs of diverse populations and ensure that mental health services are accessible and effective for all. Beachboard (2022) addresses that community resources are important in helping individuals with trauma pursue and achieve their own sense of happiness. These community resources are key in providing safe places for these individuals to build social connections and find help.

Discussion

This paper has explored the complex and multifaceted impact of trauma on happiness, drawing on insights from psychology, neuroscience, and sociology. Trauma significantly impairs cognitive and emotional regulation and alters brain function, while cultural norms and community resources influence trauma and access to support. These collectively lead to psychological, neuroscientific, and sociological effects on happiness. It is essential to have a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach to address trauma and promote happiness.

The psychological consequences of trauma, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Resick et. al., 2008), can significantly diminish an individual's ability to experience positive emotions and life satisfaction. From a neurobiological perspective, trauma-induced changes in brain structure and function, including reduced activity in reward processing regions (Fonzo, 2018) and altered amygdala activity (Shin et. al., 2006), can further impair emotional regulation and contribute to chronic stress. (McEwen, 2007) Moreover, the social and cultural contexts in which trauma occurs and is experienced play a critical role in shaping its impact on happiness. Lack of social support can exacerbate the negative effects of trauma (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009), while cultural norms and community resources can influence access to treatment and support. (Ozbay et. al., 2007)

The complexity of trauma demands a multifaceted approach that integrates psychological therapies, neurological interventions, and social support programs to facilitate healing and enhance well-being. Trauma-informed care is necessary as it involves creating safe and supportive environments that recognize the impact of trauma and promote empowerment and healing. (SAMSHA, 2014) Mental health support needs to include accessible and affordable mental health services, early intervention programs, and evidence-based treatments. Social support systems should provide individuals with a sense of belonging, connection, and emotional security, which can buffer against the adverse effects of trauma. In terms of future research, longitudinal studies are required to examine the long-term impact of trauma on happiness and identify protective factors that promote resilience. Culturally sensitive interventions should be developed to address the unique needs of diverse populations and ensure that mental health services are accessible and effective for all. Raising awareness about the prevalence and impact of trauma can help to reduce stigma, promote help-seeking behaviors, and advocate for policies and programs that support trauma-informed care and mental health services.

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