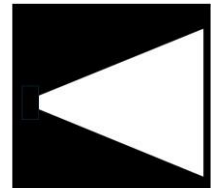


# The Pursuit of Happiness



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## Research Papers

Zerwas et al. (2024). *Unpacking the pursuit of happiness: Being concerned about happiness but not aspiring to happiness is linked with negative meta-emotions and worse well-being*. *Emotion*.

Zerwas & Ford (2021). *The paradox of pursuing happiness*. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 39, 106–112.

Huang, K. J. (2024). Does Valuing Happiness Lead to Well-Being?. *Psychological Science*, 35(10), 1155-1163.

## Overview

We all want to be happy but could focusing too much on happiness actually make us less happy? These three papers explore the surprising downsides of pursuing happiness, showing that *how* we value happiness matters as much as *whether* we do. They also offer a clearer picture of when valuing happiness is helpful, when it backfires, and for whom.

## Key Findings & Insights

Zerwas et al. (2024) distinguish between two traits:

- Aspiring to happiness (valuing happiness as a goal)
- Concern about happiness (judging one's happiness % feeling anxious)

Only *concern about happiness* was consistently linked to *lower well-being*, both cross-sectionally and over time. Those who monitored their own happiness too closely often experienced *negative meta-emotions* (e.g., disappointment during happy moments), which reduced overall well-being. However it's also notable that aspiring to be happy is also NOT positively related to well-being !

Huang (2024) used data from over 8,000 Dutch adults and did find that valuing happiness is associated with *higher life satisfaction and more positive affect* at the time. However, these benefits did not necessarily last: increases in valuing happiness *did not predict* higher well-being one year later, and were sometimes accompanied by *increased negative emotions*.

Valuing happiness was consistently high (6.1 on 7 point scale) over a 4 year period, but was linked with both positive and negative emotional experiences over time, suggesting an underlying mix of emotional outcomes, rather than just a pure positive high.

Zerwas & Ford (2021) offer a model of why the pursuit of happiness sometimes backfires. Their cybernetic framework shows that:

- Overly intense happiness goals can be hard to reach
- Trying to regulate emotions for happiness often fails
- Monitoring progress can trigger *meta-emotions* that undermine the goal

It seems the very act of trying too hard to be happy can sabotage happiness, especially for people prone to worry or perfectionism.

## Conclusion

Wanting to be happy is natural but how we go about it matters. Aspiring to happiness without over-monitoring it may be relatively harmless, but obsessing over how happy we feel, especially in the moment, can erode our joy. The trick may be to pursue happiness *indirectly*, by focusing on meaningful experiences, connection, or gratitude, rather than happiness itself. In short, pursue what matters to you and let happiness follow as a by-product.

