

Emotion Motives Predict the Mood States of Depression and Happiness

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Abstract : A new self-report measure named the General Emotion Regulation Measure (GERM) assesses four key goals for experiencing broad valenced groups of emotions: 1) trying to experience positive emotions (e.g., joy, pride, liking a person); 2) trying to avoid experiencing positive emotions; 3) trying to experience negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, contempt); and 4) trying to avoid experiencing negative emotions. Although individual differences in GERM motives have been identified, evidence of validity with common mood outcomes is lacking. In the present study, whether GERM motives predict self-reported subjective happiness and depressive symptoms (CES-D) was tested with a community sample of 833 young adults. It was predicted that the GERM motive of trying to experience positive emotions would positively predict subjective happiness, and analogously trying to experience negative emotions would predict depressive symptoms. An initial path model was constructed in which the four GERM motives predicted both subjective happiness and depressive symptoms. The fully saturated model included three non-significant paths, which were subsequently pruned, and a good fitting model was obtained (CFI = 1.00; RMR = .007). Two GERM motives significantly predicted subjective happiness: 1) trying to experience positive emotions ($\beta = .38, p < .001$) and 2) trying to avoid experiencing positive emotions ($\beta = -.48, p < .001$). Thus, individuals who reported high levels of trying to experience positive emotions reported high levels of happiness, and individuals who reported low levels of trying to avoid experiencing positive emotions also reported high levels of happiness. Three GERM motives significantly predicted depressive symptoms: 1) trying to avoid experiencing positive emotions ($\beta = .20, p < .001$); 2) trying to experience negative emotions ($\beta = .15, p < .001$); and 3) trying to experience positive emotions ($\beta = -.07, p < .001$). In agreement with predictions, trying to experience positive emotions was positively associated with subjective happiness and trying to experience negative emotions was positively associated with depressive symptoms. In essence, these two valenced mood states seem to be sustained by trying to experience similarly valenced emotions. However, the three other significant paths in the model indicated that emotional motives play a complicated role in supporting both positive and negative mood states. For subjective happiness, the GERM motive of not trying to avoid positive emotions, i.e., not avoiding happiness, was also a strong predictor of happiness. Thus, people who report being the happiest are those individuals who not only strive to experience positive emotions but also are not ambivalent about them. The pattern for depressive symptoms was more nuanced. Individuals who reported higher depressive symptoms also reported higher levels of avoiding positive emotions and trying to experience negative emotions. The strongest predictor for depressed mood was avoiding positive emotions, which would suggest that happiness aversion or fear of happiness is an important motive for dysphoric people. Future work should determine whether these patterns of association are similar among clinically depressed people, and longitudinal data are needed to determine temporal relationships between motives and mood states.

Keywords : emotions motives, depression, subjective happiness, path model

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