

Our best and worst moments occur within social relationships, research shows

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In the first study of its kind, researchers have found compelling evidence that our best and worst experiences in life are likely to involve not individual accomplishments, but interaction with other people and the fulfillment of an urge for social connection.

The findings, which run contrary to implications of previous research, are reported in "What Makes Us Feel the Best Also Makes Us Feel the Worst: The [Emotional Impact](#) of Independent and Interdependent Experiences." The study reports on research conducted at the University at Buffalo and will appear in the forthcoming print issue of *Self and Identity*.

Co-author Shira Gabriel, PhD, associate professor of psychology at UB, says, "Most of us spend much of our time and effort focused on individual achievements such as work, hobbies and schooling.

"However this research suggests that the events that end up being most important in our lives, the events that bring us the most happiness and also carry the potential for the most pain, are social events -- moments of connecting to others and feeling their connections to us."

Gabriel says that much research in [social psychology](#) has explicitly or implicitly implied that events experienced independent of other individuals are central to explaining our most intense emotional experiences.

"We found, however," she says, "that it was not independent events or individual achievements like winning awards or completing tasks that affected participants the most, but the moments when close relationships began or ended; when people fell in love or found a new friend; when a loved one died or broke their hearts. In short, it was the moments of connecting to others that that touched peoples' lives the most."

The researchers included principal author Lisa Jaremka, a doctoral student in psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Mauricio Cavallo, PhD, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, both graduates of UB.

A total of 376 subjects participated in the four studies that formed the basis of the researchers' conclusions.

Study 1 involved college students who were asked to describe the most positive and negative emotional experiences of their lives. Overwhelmingly, and without regard for the sex of participants, they were much more likely to describe social events as the most positive and negative thing they had ever experienced (as compared to independent events).

Study 2, replicated and extended Study 1, with similar results, and focused on middle-aged participants who were asked to report on a recent intense emotional experience.

Study 3 provided evidence that the strong emotional impact of interdependent (i.e., social) events reported in the first two studies was not due to the fact that social events were more salient than independent events.

Study 4 demonstrated that when thinking about both social and independent events, participants rate the social events as far more

impactful than independent events. Study 4 also demonstrated that social events gain their emotional punch from our need to belong.

Gabriel's research and expertise focuses on the social nature of the self, including social aspects of self-construal, the social functions of the self, the need to belong and gender differences in strategies for connecting to others.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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