

Psychologists warn that therapies based on positive emotions may not work for Asians

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Thinking happy thoughts, focusing on the good and downplaying the bad is believed to accelerate recovery from depression, bolster resilience during a crisis and improve overall mental health. But a new study by University of Washington psychologists reveals that pursuing happiness may not be beneficial across all cultures.

In a survey of college students, Asian respondents showed no relationship between [positive emotions](#) and levels of stress and [depression](#). For European-American participants, however, the more stress and depression they felt, the fewer positive emotions they reported.

The study indicates that psychotherapies emphasizing positive emotions, which can relieve stress and depression in white populations, may not work for Asians, who make up 60 percent of the world population.

The findings have implications for helping the Japanese recover from natural disasters and subsequent nuclear crisis in March, and for Chinese coping with post-traumatic stress following the 2008 Sichuan province earthquake.

"If we are to relieve some of the trauma from the tsunami and earthquakes, we have to be careful of imparting Western therapies," said Janxin Leu, UW assistant professor of psychology. "I worry that if a therapy which relies on positive emotions and thinking is used with Asian patients, it will not be effective and may even make patients feel

worse."

[Mindfulness](#) therapies that encourage patients to pay attention to the good and the bad will likely work better, she said.

Co-authors of the paper are Jennifer Wang and Kelly Koo, both UW psychology graduate students. The journal *Emotion* published the study online March 28.

The researchers asked 633 college students – a mix of Asian immigrants, Asian Americans and European Americans – to rate how much stress and depression they felt and how often they've been in a sad mood, felt worthless or had sleep or appetite changes.

The participants also rated the intensity of the positive emotions that they felt, including feelings of serenity, joy, confidence and attentiveness.

For European-American participants, there was a strong correlation showing that the more positive emotions they expressed, the less depression or stress they reported. The correlation was more subtle among Asian-Americans, but for Asians, there was no correlation between positive emotions and depression and stress.

The findings show that Asians interpret and react to positive emotions differently in regards to their mental health.

Upon winning an award, for instance, the researchers said that a typical response would be "I'm so happy that I'm afraid." The award would trigger feelings of happiness for the achievement combined with concern that others would be jealous.

This blend of emotions is common among Asians, Leu said, and it may

be shaped by Buddhist beliefs that happiness either leads to suffering or is impossible to obtain.

"Happiness signals that something bad will happen next; happiness is fleeting," she said. Similarly, yin-and-yang attitudes may instill views that life is a natural balance of good and bad.

For Asians with depression, therapies likely to work the best are those that encourage patients to "observe when they feel good and bad and notice that both will disappear. Everything passes," Leu said.

Provided by University of Washington

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