

For happiness, remember the good times, forget the regrets

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Assistant Professor of Psychology Ryan Howell

(Medical Xpress) -- People who look at the past through rose-tinted glasses are happier than those who focus on regrets about the past, according to new research conducted by Assistant Professor of Psychology Ryan Howell.

Howell and recent psychology graduate Jia Wei Zhang surveyed more than 750 participants to examine how a person's personality and their approach to time affects their life satisfaction. Participants' personality traits were measured with the "Big Five" personality traits model, a tool

used by [psychologists](#) to assess how extraverted, neurotic, open, conscientious and agreeable a person is. Rather than categorize people as "an extrovert" or "a neurotic," the model gives individuals a high or low rating on each [personality trait](#).

"We found that highly extraverted people are happier with their lives because they tend to hold a positive, nostalgic view of the past and are less likely to have [negative thoughts](#) and [regrets](#)," Howell said. "People high on the neurotic scale essentially have the exact opposite view of the past and are less happy as a result."

Numerous studies over the last 30 years have suggested that personality has a powerful influence on a person's happiness, but Howell's findings help explain the reason behind this relationship.

"We found that personality traits influence how people look at the past, present and future and it is these different perspectives on time which drive a person's happiness," Howell said. "This is good news because although it may be difficult to change your personality, you may be able to alter your view of time and boost your [happiness](#), for example by savoring happy memories or reframing painful past experiences in a positive light."

The study's participants completed surveys about their personality, [life satisfaction](#) and "time perspective" -- a concept coined by Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo to describe whether an individual is past, present or future orientated. To assess time perspective participants were asked such questions as whether they enjoy reminiscing about the "good old days" or whether they believe their future is determined by themselves or by fate.

Extraverts, who tend to be energetic and talkative, were much more likely to remember the past positively and be happier as a result. People

high on the neurotic scale, which can mean being moody, emotionally unstable and fretful, were more likely to have an anguished remembrance of the past and to be less happy.

More information: Howell and Zhang's study was published in the June issue of the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* and can be found online at www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01918869

Provided by San Francisco State University

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