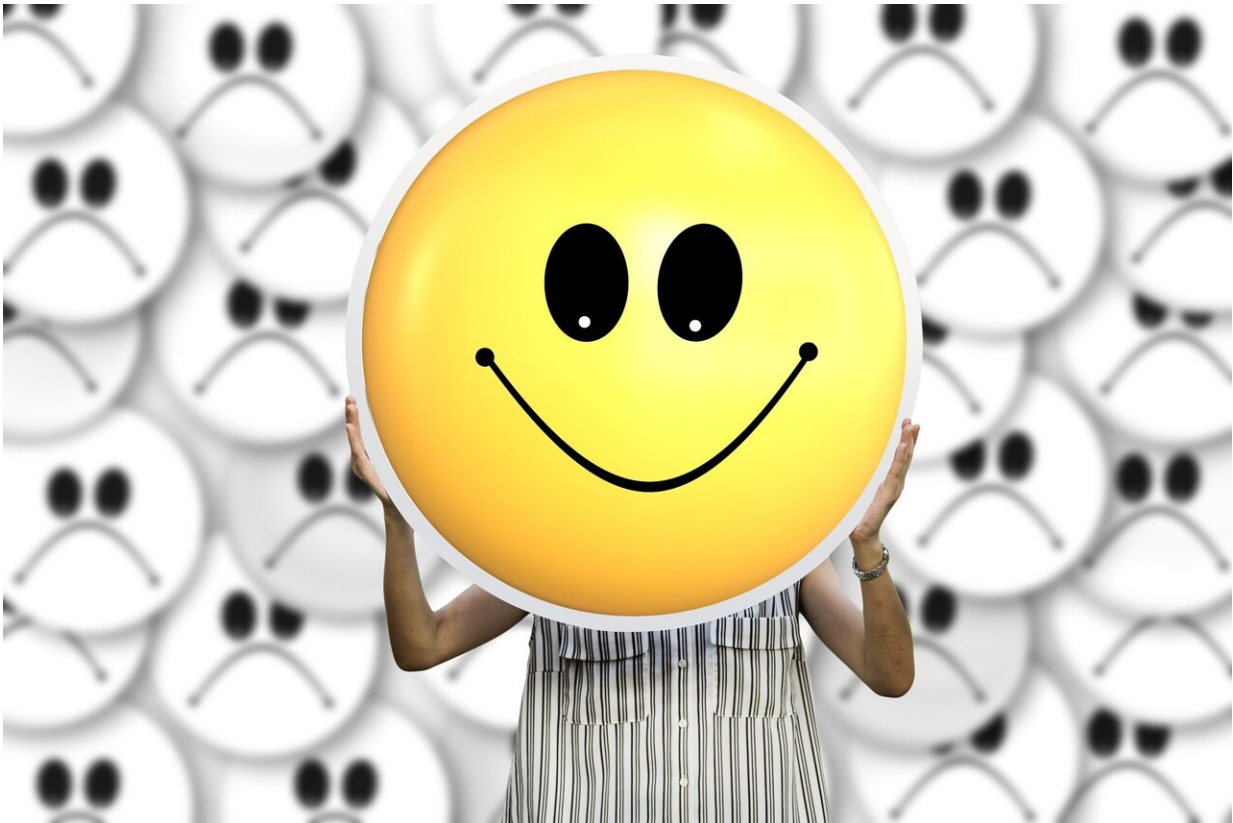


Don't worry, be happy? It's not that simple, according to research

May 29 2023, by Bert Gambini



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Is happiness something to work hard towards and accumulate over time or is it something transient and fleeting that should be savored in the moment?

Past research has examined who, when and why some people favor feeling happy now versus later, but those studies don't address how this preference for immediate versus delayed [happiness](#) relates to behavior and well-being.

Now, a University at Buffalo psychologist is filling that knowledge gap with a study that approaches happiness from a novel research angle.

The findings, published in the journal *Emotion*, suggest that people's beliefs about happiness matter in shaping their everyday goal pursuits and well-being.

"People can think of happiness as an investment, similar to how one might put money into a savings account and watch it grow over time. When people view happiness as a cumulative resource, they are likely to believe in 'delaying happiness'—the idea that working hard and making sacrifices toward their important long-term goals will make them happier in the future," says Lora Park, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and director of the Self and Motivation Lab in the UB College of Arts and Sciences.

"On the other hand, people can think of happiness as fleeting, similar to how one might put money into the [stock market](#) and watch it fluctuate from day to day, not knowing when the market will be up or down. When people view happiness in this way, they are likely to believe in 'living in the moment,' seizing opportunities to feel happy now, rather than postponing happiness into the unknown future. "

Park led a research team that conducted studies with samples that included both college-aged and adult community participants. They first established a new scale to measure delaying happiness versus living in the moment beliefs, and then examined the costs and benefits of endorsing these beliefs about happiness.

Results suggest that delaying happiness to pursue important long-term goals is associated with greater anticipated happiness and pride upon achieving that goal, but there is a downside, according to Park.

"Although delaying happiness has benefits, it is also related to feeling more guilty, anxious and regretful when engaging in activities that take time or energy away from one's long-term goals," says Park.

Western society often admires those who pursue goals at the expense of immediate happiness, while living in the moment can be seen as indulgent or impulsive.

But we shouldn't be dismissive. Living in the moment has benefits, too.

"People who believe in living in the moment engage in more fun and enjoyable activities, even if they are unrelated to their long-term goal pursuits, which contributes to more [positive emotions](#) and greater overall well-being," Park says. "These individuals don't see these activities of experiences as wasted time, as something to regret or feel guilty about."

Park's research found that while beliefs about happiness are relatively stable, they can also shift and be influenced by societal messages that place differential value on happiness being cumulative or fleeting.

"Happiness is often viewed as something to enjoy now or later, but our research suggests that there are costs and benefits to both, and that these beliefs are malleable as well," she says. "If you know you're graduating in a few weeks, it may be advantageous to live in the moment, rather than delaying happiness till a later point in time. You can shift to living in the moment and enjoy non-goal related pursuits now, without feeling bad about it."

There's no question that [long-term goals](#) often require persistence and

focus. People give up a lot in that regard.

"But there are costs associated with this pursuit, such as passing up on opportunities to seize happiness right now, which can boost positive emotions and feelings of closeness and connection with others," says Park.

Ultimately, one belief about happiness is not necessarily better than the other, according to Park.

"Simply being aware of these different beliefs about happiness—and that one can be flexible in these beliefs—is something to consider in maximizing happiness and well-being in one's everyday life."

More information: Lora E. Park et al, Happiness—To enjoy now or later? Consequences of delaying happiness and living in the moment beliefs., *Emotion* (2023). DOI: [10.1037/emo0000850](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000850)

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