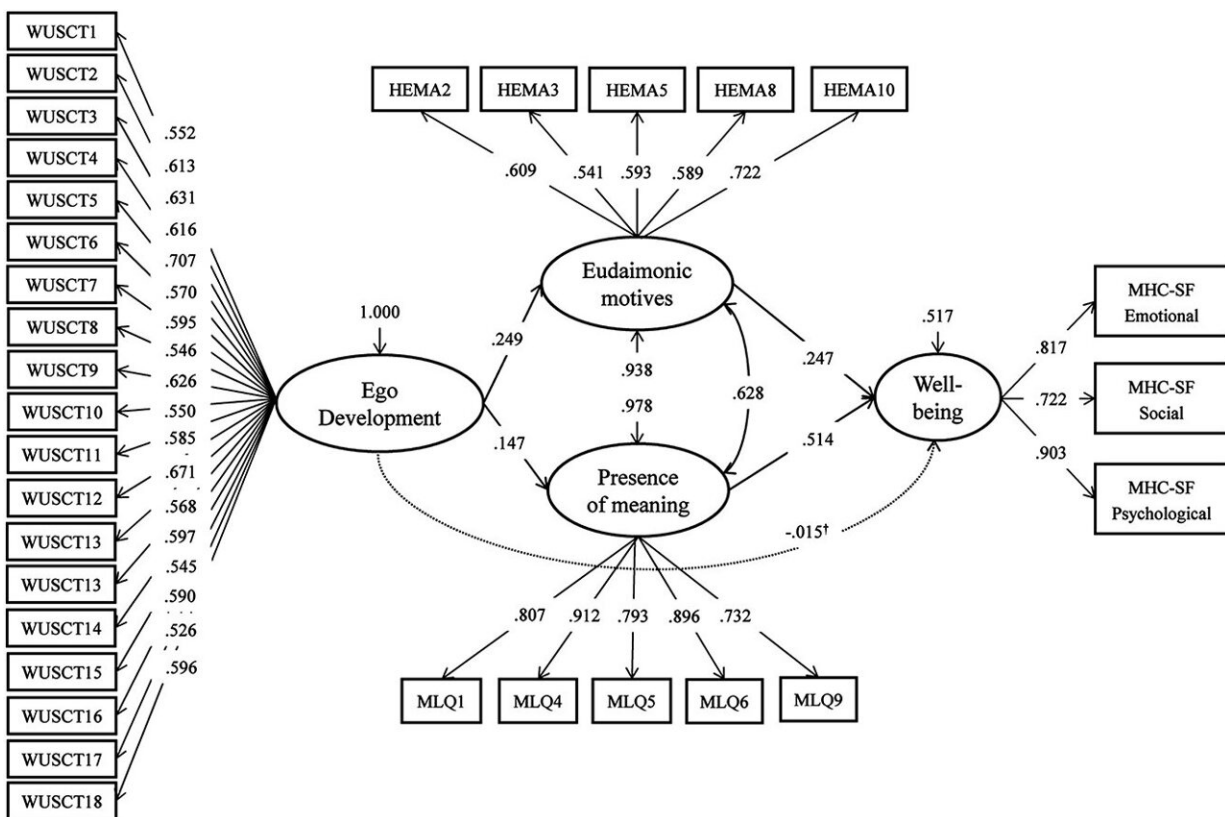


# Attainment of happiness in psychologically mature individuals linked to pursuit of meaning

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Parameters of the parallel mediation model.  $\chi^2 = 627.22$ ,  $df = 428$ ,  $p$  CI (0.030; 0.042); SRMR = 0.048. Standardized coefficients are shown; all the parameters are significant at  $p^\dagger$ . Credit: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2023). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.958721

The desire for happiness is universal, yet each person has their own recipe for attaining happiness. While a delectable chocolate bar may be enough to bring joy to one person, another may find true satisfaction only in conquering Mount Everest. Some individuals live by the principles of hedonism, seeking simple pleasures and striving for comfort and tranquility. In contrast, others find fulfillment in overcoming challenges, fostering personal growth, and nurturing others. The latter mindset is often associated with a more mature personality, but does inner growth really bring us more happiness?

A study conducted at the HSE International Laboratory of Positive Psychology of Personality and Motivation indicates that there is only a weak correlation between an individual's level of well-being and their psychological maturity. While anyone can experience happiness, its nature and quality can vary significantly across individuals with different levels of maturity. It appears that the primary determinant of well-being at advanced levels of personal development is the pursuit of meaning in life.

"Emotional well-being functions like a thermometer: we can measure a person's temperature to assess their overall state—does their life go well?—but the temperature alone is insufficient to make a diagnosis—what kind of life is it?" asks Evgeny Osin, Head of the study, Associate Professor of the HSE School of Psychology.

The study authors, Evgeny Osin, Elena Voevodina and Vasily Kostenko, conducted an [online survey](#) of more than 360 individuals aged 18 and older to assess their levels of personal development based on Jane Loevinger's theory of ego development. At the core of Loevinger's approach lies the notion of 'ego', which describes an individual's level of maturity, which manifests in one's strategies for making sense of life experiences, establishing relationships, exercising [self-regulation](#), and one's conscious preoccupations.

Ego development involves a progressive acquisition of greater autonomy and enhanced flexibility in one's behavior. Earlier and more basic levels of ego formation include the Impulsive and Self-protective stages, when individuals are mostly preoccupied with their own desires and emotions. At the more advanced levels, which include the Conscientious, Individualistic, and Autonomous stages, individuals become aware of their autonomy and difference from others, learn to cope with their feelings, and to make difficult decisions while taking into account various perspectives.

A projective sentence completion test was used to determine the study participants' ego development levels. The respondents were asked to complete open-ended sentences, such as 'Being with other people...' or 'Education is...', which were then interpreted by the experts with a focus on each respondent's relationship with the world, other people, and themselves.

"For example, completed sentences such as 'Being with other people is cool', '... is something I enjoy' or '... is awful' indicate an early stage of ego development. In contrast, sentences like 'Being with other people can be tiresome but often useful' or '...means observing their personality and learning from them' suggest a more advanced stage of ego development and higher complexity of self-perception," says Osin.

This quantitative assessment of the ego development stage was then compared to the participants' psychological well-being and the significance of different behavioral motives. The participants were asked how often they experienced happiness and life satisfaction, what kind of relationships they had with people around them, whether they felt their life had meaning, whether they were actively seeking to fill it with meaning, and whether they were more likely to pursue pleasure or to strive for [personal growth](#), conquer obstacles, or embrace new challenges.

Researchers discovered that individuals at higher levels of ego development do not give up hedonic motives, such as pursuing pleasure and seeking comfort. However, the cultivation of awareness and the pursuit of meaning assume greater significance in their behavioral patterns. For them, the meaning of life serves as a goal to be pursued, an experience to be embraced, and a guiding force for personal development. Their quest for meaning is an ongoing process, where the question of meaning transforms from an abstract philosophical inquiry into a tool for self-regulation and a framework that guides making choices and decisions in various life situations.

"Interestingly, in adults, the level of ego [development](#) is no longer contingent upon age. While some individuals progress to higher levels of psychological maturity as they age, others remain at the impulsive or self-protective stages without further advancement. The study demonstrates that the meaning of life is not an abstract notion, but a real-life challenge that individuals encounter as they attain a higher level of personal maturity. It is highly likely that everyone, at some point in their life, will confront this challenge," says Osin.

The researchers emphasize that one of the practical domains where knowledge about personal maturity and primary motives of behavior finds application is in the realm of business. For instance, in order to pick a CEO for a large corporation, it is critical to identify a mature individual capable of conceptualizing and advocating a shared objective, while exhibiting sufficient flexibility to consider the interests of individuals with diverse perspectives and values.

This person needs to be able to seek rational and creative compromises, while refraining from acting solely upon their own ideas or emotions and from imposing their narrow vision of problems onto others.

The study is published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

**More information:** Evgeny N. Osin et al, A growing concern for meaning: Exploring the links between ego development and eudaimonia, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.958721](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.958721)

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