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## Four Ways Happiness Can Hurt You

By [June Gruber](#) | May 3, 2012 | [32 comments](#)

Can feeling good ever be bad? New research says yes—and points the way to a healthier, more balanced life.

**In recent years, we've seen an explosion of scientific research revealing precisely how**

positive feelings like happiness are good for us. We know that they motivate us to pursue important goals and overcome obstacles, protect us from some effects of stress, connect us closely with other people, and even stave off physical and mental ailments.



This has made happiness pretty trendy. The science of happiness made the covers of *Time*, *Oprah*, and even *The Economist*, and it has spawned a small industry of motivational speakers, psychotherapists, and research enterprises. This website, *Greater Good*, features roughly [400 articles about happiness](#), and its parenting blog is specifically about [raising happy children](#).

Clearly, happiness is popular. But is happiness always good? Can feeling too good ever be bad? Researchers are just starting to seriously explore these questions, with good reason: By recognizing the potential pitfalls of happiness, we enable ourselves to understand it more deeply and we learn to better promote healthier and more balanced lives.

Along with my colleagues Iris Mauss and Maya Tamir, I have reviewed the emerging scientific research on the dark side of happiness, and we have conducted our own research on the topic. These studies have revealed four ways that happiness might be bad for us.

### 1. Too much happiness can make you less creative—and less safe.

Happiness, it turns out, has a cost when experienced too intensely.

For instance, we often are told that happiness can open up our minds to foster more creative thinking and help us tackle problems or puzzles. This is the case when we experience moderate levels of happiness. But according to Mark Alan Davis's 2008 meta-analysis of the relationship between mood and creativity, when people experience intense and perhaps overwhelming amounts of happiness, they no longer experience the same creativity boost. And in extreme cases like mania, people lose the ability to tap into and channel their inner creative resources. What's more, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has found that too much positive emotion—and too little negative emotion—makes people inflexible in the face of new challenges.

Not only does excessive happiness sometimes wipe out its benefits for us—it may actually lead to psychological harm. Why? The answer may lie in the purpose and function of happiness. When we experience happiness, our attention turns toward exciting and positive things in our lives to help sustain the good feeling. When feeling happy, we also tend to feel less inhibited and more likely to explore new possibilities and take risks.

Take this function of happiness to the extreme. Imagine someone who has an overpowering drive to attend only to the positive things around them and take risks of enormous proportions. They might tend to overlook or neglect warning signs in their environment, or take bold leaps and risky steps even when outward signs suggest gains

are unlikely.

People in this heightened 'happiness overdrive' mode engage in riskier behaviors and tend to disregard threats, including excessive alcohol consumption, binge eating, sexual promiscuity, and drug use. In a 1993 study, psychologist Howard S. Friedman and colleagues found that school-aged children rated as "highly cheerful" by parents and teachers had a greater risk of mortality when followed into adulthood, perhaps because they engaged in more risk-taking behaviors.

All these results point to one conclusion: Happiness may be best when experienced in moderation—not too little, but also not too much.

## 2. Happiness is not suited to every situation.

Our emotions help us adapt to new circumstances, challenges, and opportunities. Anger mobilizes us to overcome obstacles; fear alerts us to threats and engages our fight-or-flight preparation system; sadness signals loss. These emotions enable us to meet particular needs in specific contexts.

The same goes for happiness—it helps us to pursue and attain important goals, and encourages us to cooperate with others. But just as we would not want to feel angry or sad in every context, we should not want to experience happiness in every context.

As psychologist Charles Carver has argued, positive emotions like happiness signal to us that our goals are being fulfilled, which enables us to slow down, step back, and mentally coast. That's why happiness can actually hurt us in competition. Illuminating studies done by Maya Tamir found that people in a happy mood performed worse than people in an angry mood when playing a competitive computer game.

In my own laboratory, we've found that individuals who experience happiness in inappropriate contexts—such as watching a film of a young child crying or that scene from *Trainspotting* when Ewan McGregor digs through a disgusting feces-covered toilet—were at greater risk for developing the emotional disorder of mania.



Josh Gosfield/Corbis

Happiness has a time and a place—it's not suited for every situation!

## 3. Not all types of happiness are good for you.

"Happiness" is a single term, but it refers to a rainbow of different flavors of emotion: Some make us more energetic, some slow us down; some make us feel closer to other people, some make us more generous.

But do all types of happiness promote these benefits? It seems not. In fact, a more nuanced analysis of different types of happiness suggests that some forms may actually be a source of dysfunction.

One example is pride, a pleasant feeling associated with achievement and elevated social rank or status. As such, it is often seen as a type of positive emotion that makes us focus more on ourselves. Pride can be good in certain contexts and forms, such as winning a difficult prize or receiving a job promotion.

However, my research with Sheri Johnson and Dacher Keltner finds that when we experience too much pride or pride without genuine merit, it can lead to negative social outcomes, such as aggressiveness towards others, antisocial behavior, and even an increased risk of mood disorders such as mania. Work underway in my laboratory, led by graduate student Hillary Devlin, supports the tantalizing notion that self-focused positive emotions like pride may actually hinder our ability to empathize, or take another person's perspective during difficult emotional times.

The bottom line: Certain kinds of happiness may at times hinder our ability to connect with

those around us.

#### 4. Pursuing happiness may actually make you unhappy.

Not surprisingly, most people want to be happy. We seem hardwired to pursue happiness, and this is especially true for Americans—it's even ingrained in our Declaration of Independence.

Yet is pursuing happiness healthy? Groundbreaking work by Iris Mauss has recently supported the counterintuitive idea that striving for happiness may actually cause more harm than good. In fact, at times, the more people pursue happiness the less they seem able to obtain it. Mauss shows that the more people strive for happiness, the more likely they will be to set a high standard for happiness—then be disappointed when that standard is not met. This is especially true when people were in positive contexts, such as listening to an upbeat song or watching a positive film clip. It is as if the harder one tries to experience happiness, the more difficult it is to actually feel happy, even in otherwise pleasant situations.

My colleagues and I are building on this research, which suggests that the pursuit of happiness is also associated with serious mental health problems, such as depression and bipolar disorder. It may be that striving for happiness is actually driving some of us crazy.

#### How to find healthy happiness?

But how exactly can we attain a healthy dose of happiness? This is the million-dollar question.

First, it is important to experience happiness in the right amount. Too little happiness is just as problematic as too much. Second, happiness has a time and a place, and one must be mindful about the context or situation in which one experiences happiness. Third, it is important to strike an emotional balance. One cannot experience happiness at the cost or expense of negative emotions, such as sadness or anger or guilt. These are all part of a complex recipe for emotional health and help us attain a more grounded perspective. Emotional balance is crucial.

Finally, it is important to pursue and experience happiness for the right reasons. Too much focus on striving for happiness as an end in itself can actually be self-defeating. Rather than trying to zealously find happiness, we should work to build acceptance of our current emotional state, whatever it may be. True happiness, it seems, comes from fostering kindness toward others—and toward yourself.

*To read the academic paper on which this essay is based, go [here](#).*

#### About The Author

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