Short Report:
Unpacking the Fear of Happiness: Implications for Positive Psychology Interventions in the Middle East/North Africa

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Abstract: Across individuals and regions, happiness holds a range of distinctive meanings as well as value. One characteristic that has been well researched is the fear of happiness despite the common assumption that the desire for happiness is universal. Part of a broader category of aversions to happiness, a fear of happiness as well as a belief in its fragility are more common than expected. The focus of this study was to explore perceptions of the fear of happiness among UAE-based university students from the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. The results revealed that a fear of happiness was present amongst students, although it was not a majority view. For those fearing happiness, underlying reasons included its unreliability, selectivity, and ability to bring unhappiness. A few participants felt happiness was dispensed by God and hence, not amenable to their own control. Our findings are not surprising in view of the literature suggesting that a fear of happiness exists; rather, what to do about it considering the growing global movement to implement positive psychology intervention programs for greater wellbeing is the more compelling question it raises.

عبر الأفراد والمجتمعات والمناطق ، تحمل السعادة مجموعة من المعاني المميزة بالإضافة إلى قيمتها الحقيقية ،إحدى السمات التي تم بحثها جيدًا هي الخوف من السعادة على الرغم من الافتراض الشائع بأن الرغبة في السعادة رغبة عالمية ،هنالك عدد لا يستهان به من الاشخاص لديهم نوع من النفور والخوف من السعادة وكذلك الإيمان بهشاشتها ،أكثر شيوعًا مما كان متوقعًا. تركزت هذه الدراسة على استكشاف تصورات الخوف من السعادة بين طلاب الجامعات في الإمارات العربية المتحدة الذين ينتمون إلى منطقة الشرق الأوسط / شمال إفريقيا (MENA). أظهرت النتائج أن الخوف من السعادة كان موجودًا بالفعل بين الطلاب ، على الرغم من أنه لم يكن رأي الأغلبية. بالنسبة لأولئك الذين أبلغوا عن خوفهم من السعادة ، تضمنت الأسباب الكامنة وراءها عدم موثوقيته وانتقائيته بالإضافة إلى تصوراته عن التنبؤ بالتعاسة. شعر عدد قليل من المشاركين أيضًا أن السعادة قد استغنى عنها الله ، وبالتالي لم تكن قابلة للانقياد او الخضوع لهذا المفهوم. اذا النتائج التي توصلنا إليها ليست مفاجئة في ضوء الأقتراحات او المفاهيم التي تشير إلى وجود خوف من السعادة في المنطقة. بدلاً من ذلك ، ما يجب فعله حيال ذلك بالنظر إلى الحركة العالمية المتنامية لتنفيذ برامج التدخل النفسي الإيجابي من أجل رفاهية أكبر هو السؤال الأكثر إلحاحًا الذي تثيره هذه الدراسة

Keywords: fear of happiness; university students; Middle East/North Africa; positive psychology interventions; aversion to happiness

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It is a long-standing assumption in positive psychology that individuals unanimously want to be happy (Delle Fave et al., 2011; Lu & Gilmour, 2006; Uchida & Ogihara, 2012). This common desire for and universality of happiness as a life goal is as prevalent in popular discourse as the scientific literature (Lutz & Passmore, 2019). Yet, many individuals do not value it as much, in the same way, or with the same urgency as is often purported. In Western nations, there is pressure to reduce negative emotional experiences: it is the aim of most psychological intervention. In contrast, Eastern cultures tend to be more tolerant of distress, which is sometimes construed as a spiritual test individuals are meant to undertake (e.g., Eloul et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2020). The presence of distress is neither pathologized nor psychologized, but spiritualized instead (Joshanloo et al., 2021).

What happiness means is also informed by cultural beliefs, as much as personal ones (Oishi et al., 2013; Veenhoven, 2012). The lay conceptualizations (Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015; Mathews, 2012) that individuals hold, that is, their personal beliefs about the source of happiness, its value, precursors, as well as outcomes of it, including its appropriateness as a goal to pursue, matter greatly for research (Diener et al., 2017; Joshanloo, 2017, 2019, 2022a; Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). A study done in the United Arab Emirates (UAE; Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015) showed that Arab university students defined happiness through that of others, such as parents and siblings, with few responses even containing the word "I". Helping to understand what matters to individuals, as well as how and whether such states are pursued (Ford et al., 2015) informs the development of interventions. It also makes the field of positive psychology more relevant to global demographics (i.e., Lambert, Lomas et al., 2020) where sociocultural contexts impact wellbeing in dissimilar ways (i.e., Kim et al., 2018; Lambert, Karabchuk et al., 2022). The need to develop conceptualizations of happiness within cultural constructions has been the subject of much work.

Aversion to Happiness

Inquiry in this area has explored constructs that challenge the assumption that happiness is universally desired, such as the fear of happiness, a belief in its fragility, as well as its externality. Joshanloo et al. (2014, 2015) showed that in more collectivistic nations, like those found in Asia and many African nations, as well as the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, there is a greater fear of happiness and a belief in its fragility. That negative events will ensue as a result of being happy and that happiness is controlled by, and subject to a higher power are common notions. There is equally a belief in its externality, whereby one's happiness is influenced by outside forces and not under one's direct control or free will (Joshanloo, 2017). Some individuals further avoid or fear happiness as they believe it brings negative outcomes, worsens individual character, and impacts interpersonal relationships unfavorably (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014).

Indeed, in Asia the fear of happiness is often explained by the belief that excessive happiness upsets social cohesion (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014; Oishi & Gilbert, 2016). In Islamic cultures, some believe that happiness arouses the evil eye, unnecessarily tempts fate, and facilitates a path to sin and material indulgences (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2019; Joshanloo et al., 2014). Yet, religiosity is not a predictive factor (Joshanloo, 2022a; Tekke & Özer, 2019); instead, attributions may have cultural roots or be used to fulfil a need for social order. Recently, loneliness, an unhappy childhood, a need for perfectionism, a belief in black magic and karma, and endorsing a collective versus individual form of happiness were identified as predictors of an aversion to happiness (Joshanloo, 2022a).

Gender may also play a role: females were more likely to fear the end of happy events, particularly those who had experienced childhood traumas, emotional abuse and neglect (Sar et al., 2019).

Such beliefs are not insignificant: they influence what individuals do, how they feel and whether they pursue or take action to remediate their own negative emotional states. For instance, a study (Lambert, Draper, Warren, Joshanloo et al., 2022) of UAE national university students showed that those fearing happiness had the lowest positive affect scores, while those holding a belief in its fragility had the lowest subjective wellbeing and highest negative affect scores. In contrast, those with the lowest fear and highest belief in its stability had the greatest positive affect, life satisfaction, and levels of flourishing. Not only impacting affective states, those with the greatest fear also reported the least amount of sleep and most smoking activity, while those believing happiness to be unstable were the least likely to exercise. Other studies have linked an aversion to happiness to the dampening of positive emotions (Joshanloo et al., 2014), lower experienced wellbeing and hope (Belen et al., 2020; Blasco-Belled et al., 2021), as well as stronger levels of neuroticism (Joshanloo, 2019) and depression (Bloore et al., 2020; Jordan et al., 2020).

Positive Psychology in the Region

Positive psychology interventions (PPIs) are designed to raise levels of subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction and positive emotion; they have been applied in a range of contexts and regions (Hendriks et al., 2019). A recent meta-analysis (Basurrah et al., 2022), reviews (Rashid & Al Haj Baddar, 2019), independent studies (i.e., Lambert et al., 2019), and scholarly inquiry confirm that PPIs are effective in the MENA region (i.e., Al-Ghalib & Salim, 2018; Al-Yamani et al., 2014; Basurrah et al., 2020; Elsayed, 2016; Salama-Younes, 2015; Ramadan, 2014). Yet, few have been culturally or religiously adapted (Basurrah et al., 2022), despite studies showing cultural differences in their efficacy (i.e., Layous et al., 2013; Titova et al., 2017). While being addressed, a lack of cultural diversity has also been well evidenced (Lambert et al., 2020; van Zyl & Rothmann, 2022).

Further, recent studies have questioned the efficacy of PPIs as more studies reveal null (i.e., Duan et al., 2021; Sarı Arasıl et al., 2020), or very small effect sizes (Carr et al., 2021; Hobbs et al., 2022; Hoppen & Morina, 2021; White et al., 2019). Many reasons account for this, such as the difference between clinical and classroom applications, the fidelity of, and quality with which PPIs are applied (van Zyl et al., 2019). Yet, less commonly discussed is the question of whether offering interventions in cultural contexts for which they were not designed be done at all (Ryff, 2022). Indeed, a study on four sections of a happiness and wellbeing class conducted in the UAE showed no observable effects on any wellbeing measure (Lambert, Draper, Warren, & Mendoza-Lepe, 2022), despite the same content showing positive outcomes in other UAE based groups. Might a fear of happiness be at play? While studies have explored the impact of a fear of happiness, few have discussed what to do about it. Hence, our aim in this exploratory study was to explore what the fear of happiness comprises in UAE-based university students and offer potential remediating actions.

The Present Study

Our focus was to explore the fear of happiness in UAE-based university students taking part in two happiness and wellbeing courses offered in one private and one public university. Specifically, the aim was to understand from those affirmed fearing happiness, what this belief comprised.

Participants

Qualitative survey data was gathered from students who attended a happiness and wellbeing class across two universities in the UAE from which a combined total of 81 participants responded. Seventy of these were female and their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, with two students aged 28 and 29 years. From the total, we removed students who were not from the MENA region, leaving 71 students. Of these, 26 affirmed a fear of happiness, with 20 of these being UAE nationals, and the remainder from Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan and Syria.

Method

Participants were given four questions to answer; from these, in the present study, we only include and explore the results related to one: "Does feeling happy scare you? Explain when, why, and how." Participants responded to this open-ended question as they wished. To identify patterns or themes of interest, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014) was used, with agreement expressed among all co-authors as to the categorization of participant statements.

Results

A range of themes emerged including that fact that happiness was (1) unreliable, but deeply desired; (2) unreliable, but accepted as it was; (3) predictive of unhappiness; (4) dispensed by God; and (5) highly selective in terms of who it was meant for, and finally given to. Only selected examples are provided to demonstrate each theme below.

Happiness is unreliable. The fact that happiness appeared to have independent whims and be in control of itself was the most frequent explanation for the fear of happiness. This belief seemed to elicit concern and anxiety alongside a desire to be happy, with individuals revealing an inability to control or maintain their happiness. Participants shared, "I've always viewed happiness as a temporary feeling. If I had a rough week and I felt happy in one of the days, it creates fear that I'll be disappointed and I'll never re-experience this feeling" (Jordan, 19, female), "[I'm] afraid of losing this temporary feeling" (UAE, 24, male), and "yes, it does, I mean we all have this little feeling of fear linked to happiness somehow, because I have this idea that this will not last and it will not end well" (UAE, 22, female). Participants also expected to lose their happiness: "knowing it won't last long scares me" (UAE, 21, female), "afraid to lose this happiness in the future" (UAE, 22, female), "feeling of dread that happiness will end which is frightening" (UAE, 22, female). "Yes. The fear of being happy comes from a belief that happiness cannot be stable or constant, and that joy will lead to disappointment or maybe it's just that I'm scared that the happiness will end soon" (UAE, 22, female). Another tied her fear to an inability to control negativity: "when things go so well in my life and I feel so happy, actually I do feel scared because I always feel it's a temporary feeling and no matter what I will still go back to my negative aspects of life and how I think negatively about it. Yes, feeling happy scares me because in my head, I always think about what's next? What's the next disappointment in my life?" (UAE, 20, female). Another attributed it to her inability to control thoughts about the future: "I am afraid to lose this happiness when I'm so happy because I think a lot about the future and get nervous, I wish I could [handle] this attitude" (UAE, 22, female).

Happiness is just like that. Here, respondents were less concerned about the nature of happiness. They seemed to have a greater acceptance of it having its own predestined path that

required little investment or attention on their part. They still feared its loss but intellectualized its irrational pattern. Participants explained their fears accordingly: "Sometimes yeah, because you know, what comes up must come down" (Lebanon, 21, female), "I don't think I'm scared of being happy rather I'm dreading the moment it runs out, because I do believe that you can't be happy all the time and a bit of sadness or neutrality can actually be healthy, happiness takes energy so its bound to run out and need a recharge" (Egypt, 19, female), "I believe I'm happy for a while so then I'll be sad for a while as well cause life is a balance" (UAE, 22, female), or "life must make me happy some days and sad some days" (UAE, 23, female). Another added, "sometimes I feel like after a long time of happiness there's a time where something unpleasant happens. Maybe it's life's balance" (Jordan, 19, female). A balance of positive and negative emotions was normalized, in some cases even preferred, with unhappiness considered a normal and necessary aspect of life.

Happiness brings unhappiness. For others, the presence of happiness was predictive of future unhappiness. Unlike participants who did not know how, but wanted to control happiness, respondents in this category did not seem to believe it was even possible to do so. Happiness was a sign of things to come and consequently, something to be wary of and displeased with. Responses included, "unhappiness always follows happiness" (UAE, 19, female), "being happy means something bad will happen to me" (UAE, 22, female), "I feel like after a long time of happiness eventually something unpleasant happens" (Jordan, 19, female), "it feels like something bad going to happen as always, that's why feel I scared when I am happy" (UAE, 22, female). A Sudanese (19, female) student adds: "It does, very much. I always feel scared when I'm happy because I tell myself, "Oh god, can't wait for something horrible to happen and ruin it."

Happiness is given by God. Religious beliefs also influenced feelings toward happiness, such that some participants considered God to be the dispenser of happiness: "As a religious person I strongly believe that God will provide me with what I deserve and need. Therefore, even when I do not get what I want, I believe that it is the best for me, so I just feel satisfied and thankful for whatever I have. I do not have to go though pain to achieve happiness" (Syria, 19, female), and "I believe that God will give me happiness" (UAE, 20, female). Others saw the pursuit of happiness as actively leading away from God's will, i.e., "I am afraid to seek after my happiness in life and forget to strive for the Lord... because life contains many temptations" (UAE, 22, female). Such beliefs may induce guilt if happiness is independently pursued or for the wrong reasons.

Only some are worthy. Perceptions of happiness were also affected by views of the self and whether one was worthy enough to receive it. Tied to self-worth, the spontaneous experience of happiness prompted ambivalence, self-examination and doubt. Three participants noted, "For me, to [be] happy for too long is a bit concerning because sometimes I wonder is there anything I did to deserve that feeling" (Jordan/Palestine, 18, female); "if I do something wrong in my life, I feel that I don't deserve to be happy" (UAE, 23, female); "I may be afraid of happiness if I think about it in an obsessive way and that it reflects negatively on me" (UAE, 21, female).

Discussion and Implications

Five themes emerged across responses exploring understandings related to a fear of happiness, which construed the state as something (1) unreliable, but desired; (2) unreliable, but accepted; (3) predictive of unhappiness; (4) dispensed by God; and (5) reserved for the special few.

Responses both align with, and support the notion of a fear of happiness, as well as a belief in its fragility and externality (Joshanloo, 2017; Joshanloo et al., 2014, 2015), broader versions of an aversion to happiness. Thus, our findings were not a surprise, but their implications merit discussion, particularly as such fears impact actions related to the pursuit and experience of happiness (Belen et al., 2020; Blasco-Belled et al., 2021; Bloore et al., 2020; Jordan et al., 2020; Joshanloo, 2019; Lambert, Draper, Warren, & Mendoza-Lepe, 2022). Thus, work on how to limit and/or manage the consequences of a fear of happiness are essential.

A more granular inquiry reveals that not all individuals are at the same starting point in achieving happiness or knowing how to explicitly do so. For instance, the fact that anxiety and worry were present around happiness counters the notion that it is considered aversive. Instead, happiness may be avoided not because it is "bad" but because individuals lack the skills to create, maintain or control it. Thus, their beliefs may reflect a lack of self-efficacy, agency and control (Joshanloo, 2017), as well as knowledge around emotional literacy and mental health more broadly known to be low in the region and university students especially (Sweileh, 2021a, b). One non-fearful participant shared: "I used to expect disaster if I was happy for too long. However, now I find it easy to find happiness in the smallest of things, especially in that of social interactions. Now that I have more control of my life it's become easier for me to push my life in whatever direction I think would make me happier. I tend to say yes to a lot more things and take more risks in the pursuit of that happiness" (Jordan, 21, male).

At the same time, while an internal locus of control is often associated with better mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Churchill et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2016; Kesavayuth et al., 2022), attributing more responsibility to external variables may not be in vain. An excessive focus on individual responsibility versus a more universal approach where circumstances, other people, and fate play a role removes the full burden of being responsible for one's life and may protect against negative affect when failures and disappointments arise (Churchill et al., 2020; Galvin et al., 2018; Gore et al., 2016; Joshanloo, 2022b; Specht et al., 2011). Incorporating a more balanced locus of control – in contrast to the West where an internal one is more highly valued – may be key to aligning more congruently with regional and local beliefs where collective social structures in fact, do and are expected to influence decision-making more heavily than in other parts of the world.

It may be wise to explore the starting point at which interventions also begin. Two PPI studies conducted on university students in the UAE (Lambert et al., 2019; Lambert, Draper, Warren, & Mendoza-Lepe, 2022) showed that education in positive psychology was successful in reducing the fear of happiness, despite not increasing life satisfaction or positive affect. It may be that reducing the fear of happiness becomes the primary goal as such individuals do not respond in the same way to PPIs designed to increase positive cognition and behaviour. The assumptions related to happiness, as well as its processes specific to individuals who have difficulty experiencing positive affect should be unpacked in such programs (Jordan et al., 2020). The same approach can be taken for those who are less tolerant of distress and for whom the experience of negative (as well as positive) affect may create distress (Lass & Winer, 2020). A two-step process may be warranted. First, introducing agency related constructs (i.e., resilience, self-efficacy, emotional self-regulation, distress tolerance, etc.) to manage negative emotions and gain control over one's affective state, only after

which a space for happiness can be contemplated and engineered, may be the preferred sequencing (Lambert, Draper, Warren, & Mendoza-Lepe, 2022).

Addressing cultural and social beliefs around the value of happiness, who is deserving of it, and where it can acceptably be found may also be needed. Promoting happiness interventions via social relationships and less through one's own individual volition may be more congruent with how collectivist societies function and how individuals in them seek it out (Ford et al., 2015; Ng & Lim, 2019). Describing the benefits of greater happiness and wellbeing and how these ultimately contribute to the greater social good may be a preferred narrative over more typical approaches that outline the benefits to individuals alone, which in collective societies may be less attractive as personal self-focused attention may come at a social cost. Tying such arguments to religious frameworks may also be fruitful. Islamic conceptions of wellbeing support the notion of happiness; but, only insofar as it does not tempt individuals away from religion and its related duties (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2019; Tekke & Özer, 2019). Integrating happiness interventions within a religious framework may alleviate fears of distraction, as well as reduce the ambivalence and guilt associated with its pursuit. Scholarly work being conducted in the development of a positive Islamic psychology (Pasha-Zaidi, 2021) is one example which directly addresses this notion.

Potential PPIs might also leverage individuals' ability and willingness to influence predestined fate itself. Negotiating with fate, especially when ingrained as part of a cultural narrative, can be useful in mitigating negative emotional outcomes in situations where individual control is constrained (Au & Savani, 2019). Yet, whether fate is a welcome receiver of influence or a punitive responder needs to be understood to inform how PPIs can be best framed for those fearing happiness. In fact, the role of fate in more religious individuals and countries does not appear to undermine life satisfaction (Joshanloo, 2022b) in the same way it does in secular nations; thus, its incorporation, rather than avoidance, is urged.

Finally, perhaps happiness itself is not the issue, but its excessive direct focus. Recent Gallup data (Lomas, Ishikawa, et al., 2022; Lomas, Lai, et al., 2022) show that a calm life defined by low arousal positive states, in contrast with the high positive arousal states more highly valued, sought out and promoted in Western cultures (Eid & Diener, 2001; Lutz & Passmore, 2019; Ryff, 2022), is a global preference. Dejonckheere et al. (2022) also showed across 40 nations that the social pressure to be happy (and not sad) is associated with lower wellbeing in nations with a higher happiness index. A non-fearful student summed it well, "I am not afraid of happiness, but I think that sometimes we have to be aware of too much happiness" (Egypt, female, 20). Promoting less overtly positive affective states or the acceptance and better management of negative emotions may produce healthier functioning (Ford et al., 2018) and be more palatable to those less enthusiastic about happiness.

Limitations

Only participants who affirmed having a fear of happiness are reflected in this study, which was less than a quarter of the total responses. It is not widespread but still a sizeable portion of respondents nonetheless, for whom the implications of being fearful may be the most impactful. Analyzing for whom and why a fear of happiness exists needs work, but further inquiry into the reasons for which non-responders do not fear happiness might be of greater value. Do they have a stronger sense of agency, greater self-esteem, or a deeper understanding of happiness and its causes

and contributors? Or do they come from, or ascribe to different cultural and/or religious beliefs, or have more favorable life circumstances as a whole? Deciphering the reasons for their lack of fear is critical. Our sample is also very small and heavily skewed by females, so it is possible that males have other reasons for their fears or fewer fears overall. Examining how gender roles, particularly within the MENA region, as well as age may contribute to such beliefs are avenues for future research. Finally, all respondents had English as a second language, potentially giving rise to misconstrued nuances in their responses or more limited ones than they might have provided if given the option to respond in Arabic.

Conclusion

The questions raised here are part of a broader mission to render positive psychology both more effective and relevant for individuals in all parts of the world. The "WEIRD" standard (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) from which most research findings are applied, needs challenging for better outcomes across the MENA region where attention to wellbeing and happiness continue to grow. Rather than dispense formalized (i.e., Western) PPIs as the antidote to greater wellbeing, a more effective route may be to promote a heuristic framework for the development of PPIs to reflect more appropriately religious, cultural and/or other influencing factors instead (i.e., Smith et al., 2019; van Zyl et al., 2019; Yaaqeib, 2021). Adding caveats to Western research given that it is consumed globally and often without care for where it originates, can help the steer the application of PPIs across the region more sensitively and successfully and should be heeded by Western researchers (Lambert, Yaaqeib et al., 2021). In line with the proliferation of research being conducted across the region to render positive psychology more pertinent (Lambert et al., 2020; Rashid & Al-Haj Baddar, 2019), as well as efforts paralleled across the globe to render it more equitably effective, our findings raise possibilities for the development of PPIs for individuals that are more averse to happiness.

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