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# Negative mood regulation expectancies moderate the association between happiness emotion goals and depressive symptoms\*



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### ABSTRACT

Research suggests that happiness emotion goals (i.e., cognitive representations that happiness is the desired emotional endpoint) may confer risk for depression. Based upon prior speculations that emotion regulation could be important for understanding the association between happiness emotion goals and depression, in Study 1, we examined whether expressive suppression moderated the association between happiness emotion goals and depressive symptoms using a sample of community adults located in the United States (N = 465). Contrary to study predictions, expressive suppression did not moderate that association. In Study 2, we proposed and examined whether negative mood regulation (NMR) expectancies moderated the association between happiness emotion goals and depressive symptoms among an independent sample of community adults located in the United States (N = 439). Along with replicating Study 1 findings, we found support for the proposed moderating effect of NMR expectancies in Study 2. Happiness emotion goals were only associated with depressive symptoms when individuals held low NMR expectancies. Conceptual and therapeutic implications are discussed. © 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

#### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this two-part study was to extend preliminary findings linking happiness emotion goals to depressive symptoms (Ford, Shallcross, Mauss, Floerke, & Gruber, 2014). Mauss and Tamir (2014) defined an emotion goal "as the cognitive representation of a particular emotional state that is the desired endpoint" (p. 361). Whereas individuals in the United States strongly value happiness (Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011), some individuals hold unrealistic happiness emotion goals (e.g., "I value things in life only to the extent that they influence my personal happiness;" Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, 2011). Mauss et al. (2011) developed a seven-item self-report measure to assess individual differences in happiness emotion goals, titled the Valuing Happiness Scale (VHS). Ford et al. (2014) found that the VHS correlated with depressive symptoms (rs of .27 and .28), such that an extreme desire to experience happiness was associated with greater depression. Moreover, experimental research suggests a temporal relationship between valuing happiness and negative emotions. Specifically, higher levels of valuing happiness, induced through experimental manipulation, resulted in relatively lower levels of happiness in response to a positive mood induction (Mauss et al., 2011, 2012). Thus, happiness emotion goals may confer risk for depression (Ford et al., 2014).

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Emotion regulation has been posited to be important for understanding the association between happiness emotion goals and depression (Ford et al., 2014). Gross's (1998) process model defines emotion regulation as "the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" (p. 275). A plethora of emotion regulation strategies have been identified in the extant literature. In the context of Gross's (1998) model, emotion regulation efforts that seek to change the interpretation of an emotion-eliciting event (cognitive reappraisal) and inhibit emotion-expressive behavior (expressive suppression), respectively, have received an overwhelming amount of attention as they relate to negative emotions (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). Although Gross and Thompson (2007) note that they make no assumptions about whether specific strategies are adaptive or maladaptive, typically cognitive reappraisal has been considered an adaptive strategy and expressive suppression a maladaptive strategy (John & Gross, 2004). In fact, the chronic and inflexible use of expressive suppression increases the likelihood that one will experience psychopathology, including depression (Aldao et al., 2010; Gross & Levenson, 1997).

Individuals differ in the degree to which they use expressive suppression (Gross & John, 2003), which has led to investigations examining whether individual differences in expressive suppression moderate the relationship between psychopathology and emotional states (Kashdan & Breen, 2008). Kashdan and Breen (2008) suggest that the chronic and inflexible use of expressive suppression leads individuals prone to psychopathology to experience a cycle of diminished positive emotions, heightened negative emotions, and the use of avoidance

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behaviors that reduce opportunities for positive emotions or events. Following from Kashdan and Breen (2008), the purpose of Study 1 was to examine whether expressive suppression moderates the relationship between happiness emotion goals and depression.

More precisely, in the case of emotion goals, evidence suggests that overvaluing, or having unrealistic expectations about, happiness decreases the likelihood that one will actually experience happiness and increases the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions (Ford et al., 2014; Mauss et al., 2011, 2012). However, the strength of the relation between happiness emotion goals and emotional outcomes may depend, at least in part, on the strategies that one uses to up- or downregulate affective states. That is, the inflexible use of emotion regulation strategies that are commonly associated with negative outcomes, in combination with high levels of happiness emotion goals, may have a joint effect in which one is more likely to experience prolonged negative affective states and psychopathology. As such, the association between happiness emotion goals and depression could be stronger when individuals chronically and inflexibly use expressive suppression. To test this hypothesis, we examined whether expressive suppression moderated the association between happiness emotion goals and depressive symptoms in Study 1. We expected that happiness emotion goals would only relate to depressive symptoms when coupled with the heightened use of expressive suppression.

#### 2. Study 1

#### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

A total of 465 participants were recruited from across the United States through an online crowd sourcing website. The average age was 35.9 years (SD = 11.7, range 19–65). The sample was primarily female (64.9%), White (83.7%), not Hispanic or Latino (92.7%), and currently not married (57.2%). The majority of the sample reported completing an associate degree or higher (86.2%) and being employed at least part time (71.4%). The median household income was between \$40,000 and 49.999 (USD).

### 2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. VHS. As reviewed, the VHS (Mauss et al., 2011) is a seven-item self-report measure that assesses happiness emotion goals. Items are rated using a 7-point scale (ranging from 1 to 7). The VHS shares a moderate correlation (r = .39) with a measure assessing the valuing of positive emotion (Ford et al., 2014). The VHS has evidenced adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s of .76 and .79; Ford et al., 2014; Mauss et al., 2011). Following Ford et al. (2014), the VHS items were summed and averaged to create a total scale score. Higher scores on the VHS indicate greater happiness emotion goals.

2.1.2.2. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 item version (DASS-21). The DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is a 21-item measure that consists of three seven-item scales that assess symptoms of depression (e.g., "I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything"), anxiety, and stress over the past week using a 4-point scale (ranging from 0 to 3). The depression scale has demonstrated adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and correlates strongly (r = .79) with another measure of depression (Antony, Bieling, Cox, Enns, & Swinson, 1998). Higher scores on the depression scale indicate greater depressive symptoms.

2.1.2.3. Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ). The ERQ (Gross & John, 2003) is a 10-item self-report measure that assesses the propensity to use cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Of particular interest is the four-item ERQ scale that assesses expressive suppression (e.g., "I control my emotions by not expressing them"). Items are rated

on a 7-point scale (ranging from 1 to 7). The expressive suppression scale has shown adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha$ s ranging from .68 to .76) and shares a moderate correlation (r = .39) with a measure of negative affect (Gross & John, 2003). Higher scores on the expressive suppression scale indicate greater use of this emotion regulation strategy.

## 2.1.3. Procedure

Participant recruitment took place using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online crowd sourcing website where researchers can recruit general population adults to complete questionnaires. Studies support the quality of MTurk data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014; Shapiro, Chandler, & Mueller, 2013) and MTurk samples tend to be more demographically diverse than American undergraduate samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011). Participation was restricted to MTurk workers located in the United States and with approval ratings above 95%, a method shown to increase data quality (Peer, Vosgerau, & Acquisti, 2014). Participants were paid \$1.5 (USD) in exchange for their participation, an amount consistent with precedence for MTurk participant payment (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

#### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 1. There are few established standards for interpreting skew and kurtosis statistics (Kline, 2011), with the skew and kurtosis statistics in this study falling well below cutoffs identified by Kline (2011) for indicating "extreme" skew (>3.0) or kurtosis (>10.0). Consistent with prior research, happiness emotion goals shared a moderate correlation with depressive symptoms.

#### 3.2. Main and interactive effects

Multiple linear regression was used to examine study predictions. The maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) among the predictors was 1.10, well below conventional guidelines (>10; Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) for indicating problems with multicollinearity. Following Aiken and West (1991), the statistical predictors (VHS and ERQ-Suppression) were mean-centered and entered into Step 1 to examine main effects. DASS-21-Depression was the criterion variable. Collectively, the VHS ( $\beta = .29$ , p < .01) and ERQ-Suppression ( $\beta = .24$ , p < .01) accounted for a significant amount of unique variance in DASS-21-Depression scores ( $R^2 = .19$ , p < .01). An interaction term was computed between VHS and ERQ-Suppression scores (calculated as the product of the centered predictors; Aiken & West, 1991) and entered into Step 2. Contrary to our primary prediction, the interactive effect did not account for a significant amount of unique variance in DASS-21-Depression scores ( $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $\beta = .08$ , ns).

#### 4. Study 1 summary

In Study 1, we found further evidence of an association between happiness emotion goals and depressive symptoms. This association was independent of expressive suppression, an emotion regulation strategy related to depression (Aldao et al., 2010). Consistent with prior research (e.g., Gross & John, 2003), expressive suppression shared a positive association with depressive symptoms. Although expressive suppression evidenced an additive effect in relation to depressive symptoms, it did not evidence the predicted moderating effect in relation to happiness emotion goals and depressive symptoms. In a reconceptualization as to how happiness emotion goals contribute to depressive symptoms, we propose it is important to consider one's perceived ability to effectively regulate emotional distress. Download English Version:

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