



# CAN FREQUENT POSITIVE EMOTIONS LEAD TO SUCCESS?

*A summary of findings from Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener (2005)*

A CSCH Brief by Michael Weiner, Sandra M. Chafouleas, and Helene M. Marcy

## Introduction

It is commonly thought that success leads to positive emotions such as happiness. In fact, higher income, longer life, and fulfilling relationships are associated with happiness. This often leads researchers to assume that success leads to happiness.<sup>1,2,3</sup> However, what if the direction is the opposite? Might people’s happiness be leading to their success? This question was posed by Lyubomirsky and colleagues. Their review of the literature and subsequent meta-analysis (a study statistically analyzing effects across multiple studies) highlights the relationship between happiness and success. They suggest that one explanation for the association between the two variables is that people’s happiness leads to their success. This brief serves to summarize that meta-analysis.<sup>4</sup>

People often believe that success leads to happiness. What if their happiness leads to success?

The Lyubomirsky study examined the body of evidence demonstrating that people who are happy oftentimes achieve success across a diverse set of life measures. An explanation for this occurrence was given by the researchers; they propose that **positive affect**, which is the experiencing of positive emotions, elicits success. As Frederickson elaborates, when individuals are in good life circumstances and mood, they can further develop their lives in advantageous ways.<sup>5,6</sup> Frederickson asserts that there is value in positive emotions because they prepare a person for upcoming obstacles. Lyubomirsky and colleagues extend Frederickson’s work by proposing that those experiencing positive emotions take advantage of this by seeking goals not yet accomplished. Specifically, they propose that the success of happy people rests on two main ideas:

1. “Because happy people experience frequent positive moods, they have a greater likelihood of working actively toward new goals while experiencing those moods.”
2. “Happy people are in possession of past skills and resources, which they have built over time during previous pleasant moods.”

## The Evidence

Their systematic review included 225 papers, totaling over 275,000 participants. Each study was grouped into a particular class of evidence.

The first class of evidence (Type A) used in their review came from cross-sectional studies. This form of research measures associations between variables during a single period. If there is an association present, one variable's measure will increase or decrease as a corresponding variable's measure increases or decreases along with it. An example of a cross-sectional study in the systematic review is Staw and Barsade, which examined affect and its relationship with work performance.<sup>7</sup> Note that Type A studies can be found in Table 1 of the Lyubomirsky article.

The second class of evidence (Type B) used in their review came from longitudinal research, which entails collection of multiple data points over an extended period of time. Longitudinal research designs are strong given their ability to tell researchers how relationships between variables might influence each other over time. An example of a longitudinal study in the systematic review is a study by Cohen et al. that looked at the susceptibility of getting a cold and its relationship with emotional style.<sup>8</sup> To look at further longitudinal studies included in the systematic review, see Table 2 in the Lyubomirsky article.

### Four Classes of Evidence

- Cross-sectional studies (Type A)
- Longitudinal studies (Type B)
- Experimental studies (Type C)
- Long-term Experimental Intervention Studies (Type D)

The third class of evidence (Type C) used in their review came from experimental research. Experimental research involves the manipulation of variables, meaning that the researchers alter conditions within the study to test their hypotheses. By manipulating variables, researchers can determine which variables are affecting outcomes. An example of an experimental study in the systematic review is a study by Adaman and Blaney, which induced moods in participants by playing music and then measured their creativity.<sup>9</sup> More experiments can be found in Table 3 of the Lyubomirsky article.

A fourth class of evidence (Type D) is long-term experimental research. Examples of this type of research were not included in the systematic review because of a lack of existing studies. Similar to Type C, long-term experimental research can offer a strong way to evaluate relationships among variables, including establishing causality.

## Questions to Ask

Lyubomirsky and colleagues used the various types of studies to examine different questions. These questions are shown in the table below.

Types of Evidence	Questions for Each Type of Evidence
<b>Cross-sectional studies (Type A)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Are happy people successful people?</li> <li>2. Are long-term happiness and short-term positive affect associated with behaviors paralleling success—with adaptive characteristics and skills?</li> </ol>
<b>Longitudinal studies (Type B)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Does happiness precede success?</li> <li>4. Do happiness and positive affect precede behaviors paralleling success?</li> </ol>
<b>Experimental studies (Type C)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Does positive affect lead to behaviors paralleling success?</li> </ol>

## How Authors Define Happiness

Lyubomirsky and colleagues define happiness as the “frequent experience of feeling positive emotions.” The authors cite the findings of Diener et al. in support of this definition.<sup>10</sup> Diener et al. found that *consistent* feelings of positive emotions is a better indicator of happiness than frequent, short, and intense feelings of happiness. With that in mind, Lyubomirsky and colleagues state that happy people are people who, on average, experience a high amount of positive affect. Among the literature in their systematic-review, measures included a wide range of long-term positive affect, happiness, and well-being, with the authors concluding that there is validity to these measures.

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## Key Findings:

### Question 1: Are Happy People Successful People?

- People with higher subjective well-being (i.e., they felt their well-being was high) tended to be more likely to attain job interviews, score higher in job evaluations by supervisors, have better productivity, and handle managerial roles well.
- Chronic happiness was positively associated with the total amount of friends and people they can rely on.<sup>11,12</sup> Additionally, friendship is one of the highest predictors of self-rated happiness.<sup>13</sup>

The cross-sectional correlational articles included multiple success measures. Overall, these data suggested that high subjective well-being is associated with positive life outcomes. Moderately high associations were present across three life factors: work, relationships, and health.

**Question 2:** Are long-term happiness and short-term positive affect associated with behaviors paralleling success—with adaptive characteristics and skills?

- Happy people participated in more activities than less happy people.
- Happy people were more likely to say they were healthier.
- Chronically happy people scored higher on measures of creativity.

The cross-sectional studies showcased that long-term happiness and short-term positive affect were associated with multiple characteristics and skills parallel to success. These associations included positive perceptions of self and other, prosocial behavior, popularity, healthy behavior, and high immune functioning. There were also associations between chronic happiness and cheerful moods with better problem solving and conflict resolution.

**Question 3:** Does happiness precede success?

- There was evidence that happiness leads to marriage.<sup>14</sup>
- Happiness was associated with better physical health including a lower risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>15</sup>

In the longitudinal studies, happiness consistently preceded measures of success such as fulfilling and productive work, satisfying relationships, and higher mental and physical health and longevity.

**Question 4:** Do happiness and positive affect precede behaviors paralleling success?

- Happiness preceded extraversion and engagement in activities.
- Happiness and good mood preceded measures of physical well-being.

The evidence from the longitudinal studies showed that chronic happiness and short-term positive affect preceded the desirable traits and behaviors with which they were associated. It is important to note, however, that there were fewer longitudinal studies than cross-sectional studies.

**Question 5:** Does positive affect lead to behaviors paralleling success?

- Short happy moods led to engagement with the external environment with greater openness and greater sensitivity to others.<sup>16</sup>
- Individuals in happy moods had higher pain tolerance.<sup>17</sup>
- Those with positive affect were less likely to avoid conflict and were more likely to collaborate to end conflict.<sup>18</sup>

Positive affect developed sociability and activity, altruism, liking of self and others, strong immune systems and bodies, effective conflict resolution, and original thinking. On the other hand, positive affect had mixed results with regard to problem solving.

## Overall Summary

Lyubomirsky and colleagues note that some areas of inquiry were not able to fully be analyzed given the literature that existed at the time of their review. Nevertheless, the large amount of existing literature enabled them to answer many questions. There were numerous studies showing positive associations between happiness and successful life outcomes across a wide variety of life

factors. Cross-sectional studies supported the idea that happiness and positive affect were associated with many desirable traits and behaviors. The longitudinal studies supported the authors' hypothesis that happiness preceded success. Lastly, experimental studies showcased the idea that positive affect may be an important variable influencing the connection between happiness and success. Ultimately, the evidence from the review supports the notion that frequent positive emotions may precede successful life outcomes.

**For more information about this research** see the full journal article: Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success?. *Psychological Bulletin*, 131(6), 803-855.

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