



Up-regulating positive emotions in everyday life: Strategies, individual differences, and associations with positive emotion and well-being

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to identify strategies people use to up-regulate positive emotions, and examine associations with personality, emotion regulation, and trait and state positive experience. In Study 1, participants reported use of 75 regulation strategies and trait emotional experience. Principal component analysis revealed three strategy domains: engagement (socializing, savoring), betterment (goal pursuit, personal growth), and indulgence (substance use, fantasy). In Study 2, participants reported state-level regulation and emotional experience. Engagement correlated with greater state and trait positive emotion, and overall greater well-being. Betterment correlated with less state, but greater trait, positive emotion. Indulgence correlated with greater state, but less trait positive emotion and overall lower well-being. This research suggests trade-offs between short-term and long-term emotional consequences of different strategies.

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1. Introduction

Happiness is an important goal for most people (e.g., Diener, 2000), and central to the pursuit of this goal are the ways in which people seek out and maintain positive experiences. The goal of the present research was to investigate the up-regulation of positive emotions—the strategies that people use to create, maintain, and enhance emotions such as joy, contentment, and pride. Broadly, emotion regulation is defined as the set of processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998b). Although people occasionally decrease positive emotions or increase negative ones (Parrott, 1993; Tamir, 2005), the majority of emotion regulation efforts in everyday life aim to decrease negative or increase positive (Gross, Richards, & John, 2006). To date, research on the former has far outpaced the latter. There is now a substantial body of research that investigates the strategies by which individuals cope with or regulate their negative feelings in everyday life (e.g., Morris & Reilly, 1987; Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994), but we know relatively less about strategies by which people seek out or increase positive emotions.

A person may up-regulate positive emotions to offset or reduce negative emotion, or to increase positive emotion for its own sake. To the extent that positive up-regulation has been studied, much of that research has focused on how people do so in the context of

repairing negative moods and emotions. Positive emotions can buffer people from stress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000) and help people recover from the physiological and psychological effects of negative emotions (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998). Mood regulation strategies such as humor and finding positive meaning (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004) and coping strategies such as positive reappraisal and creating positive sensory events (Shiota, 2006) can be used to mitigate negative emotions by introducing or increasing positive emotions.

People also up-regulate positive emotions for their own sake, however, and such processes may have their own distinctive characteristics. For example, savoring is a form of positive emotion up-regulation that involves paying attention to and appreciating past, present, or future positive experiences (Bryant, 2003). Savoring is distinct from negative emotion down-regulation, and people have related but separate beliefs regarding their abilities to avoid and cope with negative experiences and their abilities to obtain and savor positive experiences (Bryant, 1989).

Why would people use emotion regulation to increase or maintain their positive emotions? Positive emotions are pleasurable, of course. But in addition, research suggests that the frequent experience of positive affect has short and long-term benefits for psychological adaptation. Fredrickson's (1998) Broaden-and-Build model of positive emotions proposes that positive emotions such as joy, interest, and contentment serve to broaden the scope of attention, cognition, and action, and build long-term physical, cognitive, and social resources. Not only can positive emotions serve to “undo” the physiological and psychological consequences of negative emotion (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998), but the

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cultivation of positive emotions may also initiate an “upward spiral” that enhances resilience and well-being in the long-term (Fredrickson, 2000). In other words, not only do personal and social successes cause happiness, but happiness can also cause personal and social success (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Successful positive emotion up-regulation, therefore, should be associated with both short- and long-term well-being.

The purpose of the research presented here is to begin to build an integrative framework for the diverse ways that people go about trying to increase positive emotions in their daily lives. Previous, related efforts have sought to derive a classification system of mood repair strategies (Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999; Thayer et al., 1994) and strategies to increase happiness, broadly defined (Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006; see also Henrickson & Stephens, 2012). Our broad aim was to complement this previous research with a more specific focus on strategies for up-regulating positive emotions. We organized our efforts around three goals: identifying positive emotion up-regulation strategies, examining associations with personality traits and related emotion regulation constructs, and exploring relationships with trait and state positive experience and well-being.

First, to identify a diverse set of positive emotion up-regulation strategies that people use in everyday life, we drew both upon psychological theories and research and on the actual experiences of participants. We began with a top-down approach, examining psychological theories and research on emotion regulation, mood repair, and happiness-seeking, and looking for activities and strategies that were specifically relevant to the up-regulation of positive emotions. From this review we created a set of items representing strategies that have already been identified in the psychological literature.

However, this top-down, theory-driven approach might not be sufficient on its own. Research in the coping domain has been criticized for being “theory saturated,” imposing a finite list of theory-driven strategies on participants (Coyne & Gottlieb, 1996). Moreover, research and theory on positive emotion regulation are relatively new, and a review of the literature was unlikely to yield a comprehensive list of positive up-regulation behaviors. We therefore expanded this list by also taking a bottom-up approach: asking research participants to nominate strategies that they use in everyday life. We anticipated that there would be some overlap with our top-down list, but that participants might also identify strategies that have not yet received empirical attention and therefore help make our list more comprehensive.

We then sought to organize these concrete strategy items into broader strategy domains and compare their associations with personality traits, emotions, and well-being. We asked a second group of participants to rate how frequently they use each of these strategies in their daily lives. We used principal components analysis to see whether we could identify a higher-order structure that represents more general strategy domains that people use to up-regulate their positive emotions. Research in related areas (e.g., Tkach & Lyubomirsky, 2006) have empirically identified several different strategies by which people seek to manage their moods and emotions. Therefore, we expected that there might be several distinguishable (though perhaps correlated) strategy domains by which people seek out and increase positive emotions.

The second goal was to begin to establish a nomological network for positive up-regulation – to establish that positive up-regulation is distinct from negative down-regulation, and to examine relationships with theoretically relevant individual difference variables. At the outset, it was important to establish that up-regulation of positive emotions is a distinct construct, and not merely a component of negative emotion regulation or negative mood repair. Because individuals can draw upon positive emotions in order to cope with negative experiences (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000;

Shiota, 2006; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), we did not expect positive up-regulation and negative down-regulation to be wholly unrelated. On the other hand, the processes by which negative and positive emotions are regulated are not conceptually redundant, and we hypothesized that they would be empirically distinguishable. Specifically, the ways in which people down-regulate their negative emotion should be correlated with the ways in which they up-regulate positive emotion, but the correlations should not be so strong as to imply redundancy (i.e., the correlations should be moderate in size, and lower than the internal consistency of a given scale).

To help map positive up-regulation in relation to other individual differences, we examined differential associations between the positive up-regulation strategies and the Big Five personality factors. Of particular interest was extraversion, which is broadly associated with experiencing greater positive emotions (Watson & Clark, 1997). Several studies have suggested that extraverts derive at least some of their positive experiences through social interactions (Ashton, Lee, & Paunonen, 2002; Srivastava, Angelo, & Vallereux, 2008). Moreover, other research suggests that extraverts are more likely to maintain a positive mood, compared to introverts (Lisetzke & Eid, 2006). These findings suggest that extraversion will be associated with greater use of positive up-regulation strategies that involve socializing with others, but may also be related to up-regulation in general.

We also examined individual differences in optimism and self-esteem. Optimism is of interest because optimists maintain more favorable outcome expectancies than pessimists, which may be a way to maintain positive affect (Carver & Scheier, 2002). When measured as a trait, however, optimism represents an enduring cognitive pattern, and should therefore be related to, but not redundant with, positive up-regulation, which is a process that is theorized to alter emotions. Self-esteem is of interest because people who have lower self-esteem dampen positive emotions more than those with higher self-esteem. Evidence that people with higher self-esteem are more likely to savor their positive emotions is mixed (Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003), however, so we sought to examine whether self-esteem is related to everyday positive emotion up-regulation. Again, we predicted that relationships between strategy domains and individual differences (Big Five traits, optimism, and self-esteem) would be moderate in size.

The third goal was to examine relationships between positive emotion regulation strategies and emotional experience and well-being. One distinction that might emerge is differences among positive up-regulation strategies in their relationship to the positive emotions they are intended to increase. Differences in effectiveness are important to document. For example, research on the down-regulation of negative emotions has shown that not all strategies are equal in their effects. Cognitive reappraisal is generally an adaptive way to change a negative emotional state, whereas expressive suppression can actually increase the experience of negative emotions (e.g., Gross & John, 2003). Likewise, different coping strategies (e.g., positive sensory events vs. distraction) have different relationships with positive and negative affect (Shiota, 2006). We hypothesized that something similar might be true of positive up-regulation – that is, that some strategies might be strongly correlated with positive emotions, whereas others only weakly or inversely correlated. Some activities, such as spending time socializing with others, already have well-established links with greater experience of positive emotion (e.g., Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009). In particular, those strategies that build long-term personal and social resources (Fredrickson, 2000) should be related to both state and trait positive emotion. In addition, the experience of positive emotion is one important component of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984), and therefore, those strategy domains that are more closely related to trait

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