



## Positive emotion regulation and well-being: Comparing the impact of eight savoring and dampening strategies

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### ABSTRACT

Although previous research has uncovered various ways people can savor or dampen their positive emotional experiences, the *unique* impact of each of these strategies on well-being remains unknown. The present study examines the relative impact of the main positive emotion regulation strategies on two components of well-being: positive affect (PA) and life satisfaction (LS). A total of 282 participants completed measures of PA, LS, overall happiness, and the savoring and dampening strategies they typically used. Results show that when experiencing positive events, focusing attention on the present moment and engaging in positive rumination promoted PA, whereas telling others promoted LS. In contrast, being distracted diminished PA, while focusing on negative details and engaging in negative rumination reduced LS. As the strategies targeted different components of well-being, our results further show that regulatory diversity (i.e., typically using various strategies rather than a few specific ones), was beneficial to overall happiness. Our findings suggest that there are several independent ways to make the best (or the worst) out of our positive emotions, and that the cultivation of multiple savoring strategies might be required to achieve lasting happiness.

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### 1. Introduction

Is there an optimal approach to maximize our positive emotions? Recent scientific research has identified different strategies that can be utilized to maintain and increase one's positive emotional experience (i.e., *savoring*; Bryant, 1989, 2003), but also how certain strategies can decrease positive affect (i.e., *dampening*; Parrott, 1993; Wood, Heimpel, & Michela, 2003). Whereas previous studies have shown that, overall, the way we regulate our positive emotions can have a crucial impact on our well-being – savoring being beneficial while dampening detrimental (Bryant, 1989, 2003; Bryant & Veroff, 2007; Eisner, Johnson, & Carver, 2009; Gross, Richards, & John, 2006; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007), little is known about the relative utility of specific strategies. The present paper aims to address this gap by examining the unique impact of the main savoring and dampening strategies on well-being.

Important individual differences exist in the way people typically regulate their positive emotions (Gross & John, 2003). For instance, Wood et al. (2003) showed that high self-esteem individuals are more likely to savor positive experiences, whereas low self-esteem individuals tend to dampen them. Similarly, peo-

ple with lower incomes exhibit a stronger tendency to savor than their wealthier counterparts (Quoidbach, Dunn, Petrides, & Mikolajczak, in press). Such individual differences in the propensity to savor or dampen positive emotions may play an important role for one's overall well-being. Indeed, the broaden-and-build theory suggests that the cultivation of positive emotions helps to build lasting resources that, in turn, enhance life satisfaction, increase the likelihood of experiencing future positive emotions, and foster resilience to negative one's (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

What strategies do people use to regulate their positive emotions? In a recent article validating a new general measure of emotion regulation, Nelis, Quoidbach, Hansenne, and Mikolajczak (in press) reviewed the literature on positive emotion regulation over the last 30 years. Their review suggests that individuals typically engage in four broad categories of dampening behaviors and four categories of savoring behaviors. Given that these strategies are the focus of the present paper, we will briefly detail them hereafter (for more information on the different strategies, see Nelis et al., in press).

#### 1.1. Savoring strategies

The first approach to prolonging and increasing positive emotional experiences is through *Behavioral Display*, that is, by

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expressing positive emotions with non-verbal behaviors. Studies have shown that the facial expression of emotion may play a causal role in the subjective experience of emotion (see e.g., Adelman & Zajonc, 1989; Finzi & Wasserman, 2006; McIntosh, 1996; Strack, Martin, & Stepper, 1988).

A second strategy consists of efforts to *Be Present*, by deliberately directing attention to the present pleasant experience. Both correlational and experimental studies have shown that this strategy is linked with the increased intensity and frequency of positive emotions (Bryant, 2003; Erisman & Roemer, 2010).

A third strategy implies communicating and celebrating positive events with others – a strategy labeled *Capitalizing* (Langston, 1994). Capitalizing is associated with increased daily positive affect, over and above the impact of the positive event itself (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Langston, 1994) and improved immune response (Labott, Ahleman, Wolever, & Martin, 1990).

Finally individuals can engage in *Positive Mental Time Travel* (Positive MTT) by vividly remembering or anticipating positive events – two abilities that are very closely related (see e.g., Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). Indeed, both cross-sectional and experimental studies have shown that positive MTT predicts happiness (Bryant, Smart, & King, 2005; Havighurst & Glasser, 1972; Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; MacLeod & Conway, 2005; Quoidbach, Wood, & Hansenne, 2009).

### 1.2. Dampening strategies

Not all reactions to positive events increase positive emotions. Sometimes purposely, often automatically, individuals can dampen their positive emotional experiences.

One such reaction is that of *Suppression* (i.e., repressing or hiding positive emotions due to shyness, sense of modesty, or fear, for example). Gross and John (2003) showed that the tendency to suppress positive emotions is negatively associated with trait positive affectivity, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being. The expressive suppression of positive emotions also bears physiological costs and leads to a decrease in the subjective enjoyment of a positive experience (Gross & Levenson, 1997).

Individuals can also dampen their positive experiences through *Distraction*, that is, by engaging in activities and thoughts – often worries – unrelated to the current positive event. The propensity to experience lapses of attention has been associated with negative consequences in terms of long-term affective well-being (Carriere, Cheyne, & Smilek, 2008).

*Fault Finding* – paying attention to the negative elements of otherwise positive situations or focusing on what could be even better – is another strategy that has been found to negatively correlate with happiness, optimism, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Larsen & McKibban, 2008; Polman, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2002).

Finally, people can engage in *Negative Mental Time Travel* (Negative MTT), which encompasses negative reminiscence such as reflecting on the causes of a positive event with an emphasis on external attribution (e.g., “I got an A because the exam was really easy”) and negative anticipations of its future consequences (e.g., “My streak of luck is going to end soon, I’d better be careful”, “These positive feelings won’t last”). This type of cognition has been associated with lower self-esteem, greater rumination, and more severe depressive symptoms (Feldman, Joormann, & Johnson, 2008; see also Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986).

### 1.3. The present study

Are all of these strategies equally beneficial or detrimental to our well-being? Are they interchangeable or do they uniquely and specifically target different aspects of well-being? Whereas previous research on positive emotion regulation have examined

either the effectiveness of a limited number of specific strategies (e.g., Bryant, 2003; Bryant et al., 2005; Langston, 1994; Nezlek & Kuppens, 2008) or the consequences of the overall savoring and/or dampening abilities (e.g., Feldman et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2003), no study has compared the unique contribution of the main positive emotion regulation strategies to well-being. Yet, the cultivation of positive emotion has recently been promoted by an explosion of research on happiness enhancing interventions (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Therefore assessing which positive emotion regulation strategies are the most effective (or detrimental) could provide valuable insights in designing optimal well-being interventions.

Moreover, whereas well-being is typically referred as being composed of two different elements – emotional well-being (i.e., positive affect) and cognitive well-being (i.e., life satisfaction) – whose relative independence has been extensively emphasized (see Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999 for a review), little is known about how savoring and dampening strategies could specifically target one of these two components. Indirectly supporting this speculation are studies showing that emotional and cognitive well-being can fluctuate independently from each other (see Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006 for a review). For example, positive affect tends to decrease over the life span while life satisfaction tends to increase (Diener et al., 2006). If certain strategies were found to be more efficient to increase emotional well-being while others more efficient to increase cognitive well-being, then *regulatory diversity* (i.e., typically using various savoring strategies) would lead to a greater general sense of happiness than *regulatory specificity* (i.e., typically using a few specific strategies). This intuitive – yet previously untested – hypothesis has been originally suggested by Mikolajczak (2009) with regards to the regulation of negative emotions: By simultaneously or successively using different categories of regulation strategies (e.g., physio-relaxing techniques, cognitive re-appraisal, problem-focused coping...), one acts on the different components of negative emotional experiences which improves the effectiveness of emotion regulation.

Consequently, the purpose of the present paper is twofold. We first examined the unique predictive validity of the main savoring and dampening strategies previously reviewed on both emotional and cognitive well-being. We then investigate whether regulation diversity is associated with higher overall happiness than regulation specificity.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 282 participants were recruited via the Intranet of a Belgian University (73% females;  $M_{age} = 33.6$ ;  $SD = 13.9$ ) and asked to complete online measures of general happiness, positive affect, and dispositional positive emotion regulation strategies. Among these participants, 82 also completed measures of life satisfaction. Participants included students (25%) and university employees (75%), ranging all the way from custodial staff to senior administrators. Students and employees did not differ in any of the study variable.

### 2.2. Measures

*The Typical Use of Savoring and Dampening Strategies* was assessed through the emotion regulation profile-revised (ERP-R), a vignette-based instrument measuring individuals’ typical ability to regulate both negative and positive emotions (Nelis et al., in press). Of interest in the present study was the savoring positive

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