

Study sheds light on how cultures differ in their happiness beliefs

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Why is being happy, positive and satisfied with life the ultimate goal of so many people, while others steer clear of such feelings? It is often because of the lingering belief that happiness causes bad things to happen, says Mohsen Joshanloo and Dan Weijers of the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. Their article, published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, is the first to review the concept of aversion to happiness, and looks at why various cultures react differently to feelings of well-being and satisfaction.

"One of these cultural phenomena is that, for some individuals, [happiness](#) is not a supreme value," explain Joshanloo and Weijers in their review.

The researchers believe that being raised in a culture that does not value happiness could encourage a person to back away from it. However, an aversion to happiness exists in both Western and non-Western cultures, although happiness is more valued in the West.

In American culture, it is almost taken for granted that happiness is one of the most important values guiding people's lives. Western cultures are more driven by an urge to maximize happiness and minimize sadness. Failing to appear happy is often a cause for concern. Its value is echoed through Western positive psychology and research on subjective well-being.

In non-Western cultures, in contrast, it is a less valued emotion. The

ideals of harmony and conformity are often at odds with the pursuit of [personal happiness](#) and the endorsement of individualistic values. For instance, studies have shown that East Asians are more inclined than Westerners to think that it is inappropriate to express happiness in many social situations. Similarly, Japanese are less inclined to savor positive emotions than Americans.

The review points out that many cultures shy away from happiness. These cultures hold the belief that especially extreme happiness leads to unhappiness and other [negative consequences](#) that outweigh the benefits of such positive feelings. In both Western and non-Western cultures, some people side-step happiness because they believe that being happy makes them a worse person and that others may see them as selfish, boring or shallow. People in non-Western cultures, such as Iran and neighboring countries, worry that their peers, an "evil eye" or some other supernatural deity might resent their happiness and that they will eventually suffer any number of severe consequences.

"Many individuals and [cultures](#) do tend to be averse to some forms of happiness, especially when taken to the extreme, for many different reasons," the researchers conclude. "Some of the beliefs about the negative consequences of happiness seem to be exaggerations, often spurred by superstition or timeless advice on how to enjoy a pleasant or prosperous life. However, considering the inevitable individual differences in regards to even dominant cultural trends, no culture can be expected to unanimously hold any of these beliefs."

More information: Joshanloo, M. & Weijers, D. (2014). Aversion to Happiness Across Cultures: A Review of Where and Why People are Averse to Happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, [DOI: 10.1007/s10902-013-9489-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-013-9489-9)

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