

# Chapter 13

## Means, Ends, and Happiness: The Role of Goals for Subjective Well-Being

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**Abstract** Through the pursuit of goals people take charge of their own lives. Unsurprisingly, personal goals also have important implications for subjective well-being. The current chapter reviews the conditions under which and the processes through which goal pursuit fosters or hinders the experience of subjective well-being. It provides answers to questions like: Does pursuing goals make people happy? And is the pursuit of all kinds of goals conducive of happiness or what is the role of goal content for happiness? Does it matter whether individuals try to avoid bad outcomes or try to approach good outcomes through their goals? Does it make people happier to pursue concrete goals and to focus on the process or to pursue abstract goals and have the desired outcome in mind? Should individuals always stick to their goals or can it be useful to disengage? And finally: Does what we know about goals and well-being hold universally across all cultures?

### Introduction

Along with life and liberty, the pursuit of happiness is considered one of the “unalienable rights” of all human beings in the United States’ Declaration of Independence. How happiness may be pursued and ultimately achieved has occupied the minds of philosophers such as Aristotle, Confucius, or William James for centuries. Even the physicist Albert Einstein has spoken out about the topic. Allegedly, he once said “If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things” (Straus, 1979). Einstein was probably right most of the time when it came to physics. But what about the validity of his statement on happiness? The current chapter reviews what psychologists have found out about how and under which circumstances the selection and the pursuit of goals have positive effects on a person’s subjective well-being (SWB). (For an overview, Table 13.1 at the end of this chapter summarizes some of the most important findings in this area of this research.) But let us first introduce the main constructs in this chapter.

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A *goal* can be defined as a cognitive representation of a desired endpoint that guides behavior (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996). This representation bears information about the outcomes that a person desires to attain and the means by which the person can attain these outcomes (e.g., Kruglanski et al., 2002). The concept of goals encompasses other constructs like current concerns (Klinger, 1977), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), or personal projects (Little, 1983). As goals are generally consciously accessible, they can be assessed through self-report. Typically, a mixed approach of idiographic and nomothetic techniques for their assessment is taken: People first report which goals they currently pursue and then evaluate these goals on different dimensions in order to assess, for example, their thematic content (e.g., achievement, affiliation, power) or expectancy of success (e.g., Emmons, 1986; Little, 1983; Pöhlmann & Brunstein, 1997).

Goals determine how we attend to world around us (e.g., Vogt, De Houwer, Moors, Van Damme, & Crombez, 2010), they determine what information we keep in our memory (Goschke & Kuhl, 1993), they influence the way we think and feel about physical objects and social partners (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008), and they give structure and meaning to our lives (Klinger, 1977). Their consequences on our lives are well-documented in multiple domains of human behavior, including health (e.g., Mann, De Ridder, & Fujita, 2013), work (e.g., Lee, Locke, & Latham, 1989), relationships (e.g., Impett et al., 2010), and personality development (e.g., Hudson & Roberts, 2014).

The present chapter contends that goal pursuit is also a core determinant of SWB. In this research, usually, two major components of SWB are considered: First, there is the hedonic component of SWB. It is composed of a person's experience of positive affect and negative affect, both of which are independent at the trait level (Diener & Emmons, 1984; Lucas, Diener, & Suh, 1996). Second, there is the cognitive component of SWB, a person's judgment of his or her life satisfaction (e.g., Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect can all be empirically distinguished from each other while also loading onto a single higher-order factor of SWB (Lucas et al., 1996). Most of the research that we will refer to in this chapter has used indicators of life satisfaction, and/or positive and negative affect. Note, however, that some of the studies we review have looked at other indicators, such as depression or physical symptoms.

## **Good Goals, Bad Goals? The Role of Goal Content**

One person might strive for a better golf handicap, another for weight loss, one person might work hard to get a promotion, another to save his marriage from breaking up. As Ryan and colleagues (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996, p. 7) adequately put it: "All goals are not created equal." As a consequence, not all goals have the same consequences on their pursuer's SWB.

Self-determination theory and one of its sub-theories, basic needs theory (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985), provide one theoretical framework that deals with the role of

goal contents for SWB. According to these theories, the degree to which peoples' goals allow them to satisfy three psychological needs is crucial for their well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991 Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). First, people need to feel autonomous when pursuing their goals, that is, experience that their behavior is self-chosen and meaningful instead of pressured and coerced (deCharms, 1968). Second, they need to feel competent, that is, experience themselves as effective and able rather than ineffective and inept (White, 1959). Third, they need to feel socially related, that is, connected to important others rather than lonely and alienated (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Several studies have supported the theoretical notion that, in order to have positive effects on people's well-being, goals need to be able to satisfy basic needs. In one study, Emmons (1991) asked students to generate lists of 15 personal strivings, objectives that they "are typically trying to accomplish or attain." To assess the impact of goal content on the goal pursuers' SWB in the next 21 days, four coders categorized the goals into the content classes of *achievement* (excelling oneself), *affiliation/intimacy* (bonding with others), and *power* (having impact on others), a thematic categorization proposed by McClelland (1985). Overall, power strivings were associated with higher levels of negative affect and affiliation strivings were correlated with higher levels of positive affect, a fact that supports the importance of social relatedness. A different study furthermore found that striving for financial success, a goal that might detract from need satisfaction, has a negative impact on SWB, in particular on self-actualization, vitality, symptoms of depression and anxiety. In contrast, goals related to self-acceptance, affiliation and community were related to greater well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

While beneficial effects of affiliative goals on SWB may be explained by the need for social relatedness, self-determination theory emphasizes that the need for autonomy also needs to be satisfied. According to self-determination theory, goal-directed behavior may be more or less autonomous: it may be located anywhere on a continuum ranging from high external control, when a person feels pressured and coerced, to intrinsic motivation, when a person feels self-determined or autonomous and engages in an activity because it brings fun and enjoyment (in other words, pursues a self-concordant goal, Deci & Ryan, 1985). An external locus of causality ("You pursue this striving because somebody else wants you to or because the situation demands it") reduces the effort individuals invest into their goal and ultimately, their progress. Low investment and unsuccessful goal attainment, in turn, are related to decreases in well-being over time (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; see also Sheldon et al., 2004; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Overall, in an upward spiral, choosing self-concordant goals might lead to better goal attainment and better psychological adjustment at one point in time, and in turn, foster greater self-concordance for future goals. This, in turn, might promote psychological adjustment (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001).

Additionally, goals that are not self-concordant also make individuals feel more ambivalent about them (Koletzko, Herrmann, & Brandstätter, 2015). Goal ambivalence is experienced if a person feels conflicted about a goal because its attainment is hoped for and feared at the same time. Being promoted at work, for example, may

imply a desirable pay rise but also undesirable effects on a person's work-life balance. Such an internal conflict may inhibit goal progress and cause feelings of depression and distress (Emmons & King, 1988). Goal ambivalence, furthermore, accounts for effects of goal self-concordance on people's life satisfaction through perceptions of goal progress (Koletzko et al., 2015). In sum, individuals feel more conflicted about less self-concordant goals, which in turn undermines their progress on these goals and their subsequent SWB.

Altogether, goals that are not self-concordant but rather extrinsically motivated and that do not support the experience of autonomy, competence, and social relatedness may be detrimental to a person's well-being. But it is not just the content that matters: Without actually experiencing progress on these goals, even the best goals will fail to make people happier.

## Slow or Fast: The Role of Goal Progress

With their cybernetic feedback model, Carver and Scheier (1990) have presented a highly influential theory about the role of goal progress for SWB. Applying principles of cybernetic control systems to human self-regulation, the theory assumes that the direction and intensity of behavior are controlled by the output of two feedback loops (Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Powers, 1973). The "action loop" compares the desired state (the goal state) to the current state. Unless the current state already matches the desired state, behavior is instigated to get closer to the desired state. At the same time, the "meta loop" monitors the rate of discrepancy reduction between the current and the desired state. If the rate of discrepancy reduction is below a necessary, desired, or expected rate of progress, the person experiences negative affect. This negative affect, in turn, signals that the person has to increase his effort. If, in contrast, the rate of discrepancy reduction is above the criterion rate, the person experiences positive affect. This positive affect, in turn, signals that the person may reduce his or her effort ("coast") to save resources (Brehm & Self, 1989; Gendolla & Richter, 2010) or to temporarily prioritize other goals (Carver, 2015).

Notably, a premise of the theory is that specific affective reactions to goal progress or the lack thereof also depend on whether goals are directed at approaching positive outcomes (e.g., pass the exam) or at avoiding negative outcomes (e.g., not fail the exam). Approach efforts in fact cause approach-related emotions such as elation, excitement or joy if progress is high and anger, frustration, or sadness if progress is low (e.g., Carver, 2004; Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). In contrast, avoidance goals cause avoidance-related emotions such as relief or calm if progress is high (Carver, 2009) and anxiety, guilt, or fear if progress is low (Carver, 2015).

In sum, the theory predicts that affective experiences depend on the velocity of goal progress in comparison to a desired or necessary velocity. To our knowledge, research has not yet tried to predict affective outcomes by comparing participants' expected to their actual goal progress, hence, this specific prediction has never been

tested directly. Rather, previous studies have either relied on items assessing perceived progress (e.g., “I have made a great deal of progress concerning this goal”, Brunstein, 1993) or measured goal pursuers’ satisfaction with their goal progress (e.g., Koletzko et al., 2015). These studies nevertheless converge to show that goals require progress to positively affect a person’s well-being.

The assumption that goal progress determines well-being is also in the center of Brunstein’s (1993) model of goal-dependent well-being that, in addition, also discusses the antecedent conditions of goal progress. The model predicts that individuals will progress on their goals given high commitment to the respective goals as well as high goal attainability (e.g. through sufficient opportunities to act, through social support). A longitudinal study with students supported this assumption. Students who were highly committed to a goal progressed on it, given that goal attainability was high. Goal progress, in turn, was a strong predictor of students’ well-being (here: an aggregate of positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction). Conversely, being highly committed to goals with subjectively low goal attainability was detrimental to students’ well-being because progress on these goals was lower (Brunstein, 1993). The importance of goal attainability for SWB is furthermore supported by research showing that life satisfaction depends on the availability of goal-relevant resources, in particular social resources like family support and social skills (Diener & Fujita, 1995).

Altogether, studies converge to show that progress on important personal goals increases SWB. Still, there is a qualification to this statement – progress on goals that do not serve affective needs may even undermine subjective well-being.

## **Goals Have to Satisfy Affective Needs: The Role of Implicit Motives**

Above, we have argued that goal progress makes people happy. However, people also differ with regard to which goals they enjoy pursuing the most. Such individual differences are captured in the concept of implicit motives. Implicit motives are defined as “enduring non-conscious needs that drive humans’ behavior toward the attainment of specific classes of incentives” (Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2010, p. 9). According to McClelland (1985), on evolutionary grounds, three implicit motives are to be distinguished: the achievement motive, the affiliation/intimacy motive, and the power motive. The achievement motive directs people towards excelling when confronting challenges, chasing the affective experience of thrill during task completion and pride after success. The affiliation motive directs people towards establishing and maintaining positive relationships with other people, chasing the affective experience of interpersonal trust, warmth, and belonging. The power motive directs people towards striving for a mental, emotional, or physical impact on other people, chasing the affective experience of feeling strong and self-efficacious (Schultheiss, 2008).

In contrast to self-determination theory which assumes happiness derives from the fulfillment of three universal psychological needs, the theory of implicit motives postulates individual differences with regard to how strongly people are implicitly motivated to achieve, affiliate with others, and be in power. It is hypothesized that individual differences in motive strength are acquired in early childhood and that their development depends on pre-verbal affective experiences (McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). For example, the early experience of influencing another person and the enjoyment derived from it may foster a desire to again gain pleasure from exerting power over others.

Extending Brunstein's (1993) study on goal progress and well-being, Brunstein, Schultheiss, and Grässmann (1998; see also Schultheiss, Jones, Davis, & Kley, 2008) provided evidence that well-being results from goal progress only to the extent that the respective goal is relevant for the satisfaction of implicit motives. While consciously accessible goals are considered to give direction, implicit motives are often assumed to energize and "fuel" behavior. Moreover, SWB can suffer in situations when goals and implicit motives clash. For example, there may be negative consequences for SWB if someone strives to become a manager who, at the same time (due to weak power motive), does not actually enjoy the experience of having influence over other people. In this case, goal pursuit is experienced as depleting and has negative consequences on SWB (e.g., Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2005; Hofer & Chasiotis, 2003; Job, Oertig, Brandstätter, & Allemand, 2010; Kazén & Kuhl, 2011; Kehr, 2004; Schüler, Job, Fröhlich, & Brandstätter, 2008). This negative effect of discrepancies between goals and implicit motives on well-being is explained by stress that results from conflicting behavior tendencies (Baumann et al., 2005; Kehr, 2004).

## How or Why: The Role of Level of Abstraction

Apart from content, other qualities of a goal may also affect the goal pursuer's SWB. One of these qualities is a given goal's level of abstraction: Goals are often described as forming a hierarchy, with abstract goals on higher-levels (e.g., "being a moral person") that are served by more specific goals on lower-levels (e.g., "recycling a soda can") (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Research suggests that SWB is influenced by individual differences with regard to whether people "frame their goals in concrete, specific, and more superficial terms" (lower-level goals) or in "primarily broad, abstract, and expansive ways" (higher-level goals) (Emmons, 1992, p. 292). Whereas lower-level goals are manageable, they may not be experienced as very meaningful (Little, 1989). In contrast, high-level goals are meaningful but rated as more difficult to accomplish and lower in clarity of means (Emmons, 1992). Accordingly, high-level goals may impact negatively on SWB because they are, by definition, more difficult to attain. They have longer time-lags and encompass many steps or sub-goals that need to be accomplished before the more general goal is met. That is, with the larger time frame and higher level of aspiration, a person might feel like her progress is low. Moreover, less feedback may be available to evaluate

whether one has made progress. For example, it is easier to tell whether, at the end of a week one has accomplished the goal of “recycling” than to tell whether one has been “a moral person” (Emmons, 1992). Indeed, a study supports that participants who pursue many abstract high-level strivings are vulnerable to higher levels of distress, especially depressive symptoms (Emmons, 1992).

Freund et al. (2010) extended this research by showing that within a personal goal, focusing on the more concrete (low level) means of goal pursuit (e.g., how to eat better during a diet) rather than its more abstract (high level) desired outcomes (e.g., the desired weight loss) also has positive affective consequences. Freund and Henneke (2012) showed that during a low-calorie diet, a process focus was, through its positive effect on goal progress, associated with higher affective well-being. In a different study, for both younger and older adults, a stronger process focus predicted positive goal-related development and higher affective well-being during the pursuit of an exercise goal (Freund et al., 2010).

## **Approach vs. Avoidance: The Role of Goal Orientation**

SWB is also tied to whether goals are directed towards the approach of positive outcomes or gains (e.g., “achieving a grade of C or better”) or towards the avoidance of negative outcomes or losses (e.g., “avoiding any grade worse than a C”), notions that were previously introduced in Carver and Scheier’s cybernetic control model (e.g., 1990). Most research converges to show that avoidance goal regulation relates to several negative outcomes. Such outcomes involve lower levels of performance and intrinsic motivation (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1994; McGregor & Elliot, 2002; Sideridis, 2005), depletion (Oertig et al., 2013) and most notably in this context, negative effects on SWB: Persons with many avoidance goals tend to evaluate themselves more negatively on measures of SWB, as well as on measures of self-esteem, optimism, and depression (Coats et al., 1996; Elliot et al., 1997), and they also perceive to suffer from more physical symptoms (Elliot & Sheldon 1998). Moreover, clients in psychotherapy who, before the therapy, had indicated pursuing avoidance goals (e.g., “to be less shy”) rather than approach goals (e.g., “to be more confident in social situations”) reported smaller increases in their SWB during the course of therapy (Elliot & Church, 2002).

Several processes may underlie the effects of avoidance goal pursuit on SWB (Roskes, Elliot, & De Dreu, 2014). Avoidance goal pursuit may be detrimental for SWB because it sensitizes the individual to negative information, and puts negative, undesired possibilities at the center-point of self-regulation (Derryberry & Reed, 2008; Urdan & Midgley, 2001). This focus on negative possibilities then leads to multiple undesirable psychological processes, such as anticipatory anxiety or the desire to escape from the critical goal-relevant situation (Derryberry & Reed, 2002; Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Öhman, Flykt, & Esteves, 2001). Moreover, by defining what to stay away from but not what to move toward, avoidance goal pursuit does not provide clear guidance or standards against which progress can be gauged (Carver & Scheier, 1998).



Note that whereas pursuing avoidance goals is detrimental to the SWB of young adults, the same is not true for older adults. As the ratio of gains and losses becomes less positive across adulthood (e.g., due to declines in cognitive or physical abilities or social status; Baltes, 1997), it becomes increasingly important to prevent resource losses. In fact, older adults' goals more often reflect the desire to prevent losses (e.g., illness) and maintain the status quo (Ebner et al., 2006; Heckhausen, 1997; Ogilvie, Rose, & Heppen, 2001). Older adults who report pursuing goals that are directed at attaining stability rather than at attaining positive changes moreover show higher levels of SWB (Ebner et al., 2006). Accordingly, by shifting one's goal orientation from promoting gains to achieving stability in the face of losses may foster adaptation to changes in opportunities and to the constraints imposed by aging (Freund, 2006).

In the goal research reported so far, the focus was on single goals with their specific characteristics. In the following, we address the fact that individuals strive for multiple goals at the same time and consider the implications for SWB.

## **Goals Don't Come as Singles: The Role of Intergoal Relations**

Individuals do not pursue one goal at a time. In fact, it has been reported that most persons can easily list up to 15 strivings at a time (e.g., Emmons, 1992). Some goals a person pursues may be in conflict with each other, for example, because resources like time or money are limited. Other goals might facilitate each other, for example, because they are pursued with the same means (Riediger & Freund, 2004).

The degree to which goals conflict with each other or facilitate each other is related to both a person's life satisfaction (Emmons, 1986) as well as their affective well-being (Emmons & King, 1988). For example, students who reported greater amounts of conflict between their goals also experienced higher levels of negative affect, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms. Conflict even predicted health center visits and illnesses over 1 year. To some degree, these associations were mediated by the amount of progress students experienced on their goals, as individuals with conflicting goals tend to put less effort into the pursuit of these goals (Emmons & King, 1988). Riediger and Freund (2004) have furthermore shown that conflict may not simply be the opposite of facilitation and that the two have distinguishable consequences: In their studies, interference between person goals was primarily related to reductions in a person's SWB. In contrast, facilitation was more important in predicting the extent to which an individual was involved in goal pursuit. To date, the reason for this dissociation is not clear. The authors argue that when it comes to SWB the potential losses that result from interference between goals may loom larger than the potential gains from intergoal facilitation (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). With regard to goal involvement, however, individuals may actively counteract the potential costs of goal conflict (e.g., by investing more resources), thereby reducing its impact on the goals at hand.



## Stay or Go: Action Crises and Goal Disengagement

The usual theoretical emphasis on persistence in goal pursuit and goal progress obscures the fact that there are instances when it is better to disengage from a goal than to tenaciously cling to it. SWB may benefit, for example, if one disengages from an unhappy intimate relationship or from investing in an unprofitable economic endeavor (e.g., Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Fleeson, 2001; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003; Wrosch, Scheier, & Miller, 2013). Goal disengagement, by reducing the subjective severity of losses (e.g., in old age; Dunne, Wrosch, & Miller, 2011) and preventing repeated failure when faced with limited prospects of success, has been shown to alleviate emotional distress, and, thereby, decrease the vulnerability to physical health problems (Castonguay, Wrosch, & Sabiston, 2014; Wrosch, Miller, Scheier, & Brun de Pontet, 2007). Wrosch and colleagues conceive of goal disengagement capacities as an individual difference variable that is measured and defined as an individual's tendency to (a) withdraw *behavioral efforts* (e.g., "If I have to stop pursuing an important goal in my life, it's easy for me to reduce my effort toward the goal.") as well as to (b) reduce *psychological commitment* to goals (e.g., ". . . it's easy for me to stop thinking about the goal and let it go") (Wrosch et al., 2003).

Whereas Wrosch and colleagues focus on individual goal adjustment tendencies, Brandstätter and colleagues (e.g., Brandstätter & Schöler, 2013), with the concept of an *action crisis*, scrutinize the dynamic affective, physiological, and cognitive micro-processes in the course of goal disengagement. An action crisis denotes the critical phase in which individuals have already invested a great deal into their goal, but suffer from a substantial loss in the perceived attainability (e.g., due to setbacks) and/or desirability of the goal. An action crisis therefore occurs when the individual becomes caught between further goal pursuit and disengagement from the goal. Most relevant in the present context, an action crisis has been found to be accompanied by a decline in subjective health (e.g., sleeping disorders) and SWB. Furthermore, in a field study with marathon runners, an action crisis was predictive of a stronger cortisol secretion (a sign of stress) during the race (Brandstätter et al., 2013; Herrmann & Brandstätter, 2013).

Evidently, well-being can not only be secured by promoting but sometimes also by letting go a goal – a perspective that to a considerable extent contradicts a societal norm illustrated in famous US national football coach Vince Lombardi's saying "Winners never quit, and quitters never win."

## Same, Same But Different: The Role of Cultural Differences

The data from the studies we presented so far are usually based on "WEIRD" samples: Samples from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic societies (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) such as the US or Germany. Many

of the presented results, e.g., that goal progress on important personal goals feels good rather than bad, may also hold across different populations. Nevertheless, intercultural generalizability should not be taken for granted.

This is suggested by Oishi and Diener's (2001) examination of the role of *independent* (here: for fun and enjoyment) and *interdependent* (here: to please parents and friends) goal pursuits in the SWB of European American college students and Asian American college students. Whereas the life satisfaction of European Americans benefitted from progress on independent goals, the same was not true for Asian Americans. Japanese students experienced increases in their affective well-being if they progressed on interdependent goals. Presumably, pursuing independent goals in an Asian culture might cause psychological conflict with the traditional cultural values of conformity and deference to authority figures (e.g., Bond, 1988; Schwartz, 1994). Conversely, the expectations of close others may be such an integral part of Asians' self-concepts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) that progress on goals that primarily serve others also increases how satisfied Asians are with themselves.

Research on avoidance goals also suggests that the pursuit of avoidance goals negatively predicts SWB in individualistic cultures like the US but not in more collectivistic cultures like South Korea or Russia (Elliot et al., 2001). Avoidance goals – with their defensive orientation – may stand in conflict with the emphasis individualistic cultures place on “standing out,” and on distinguishing oneself based on the positive outcomes of personal accomplishments (Elliot et al., 2001). In contrast, collectivistic cultures emphasize “fitting in” and the person is successful only to the extent that fitting in succeeds in maintaining group harmony. Being able to fit in should, in turn, foster a focus on avoiding negative outcomes and, in particular, avoiding relational discord (Heine & Lehman, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

## **The Pursuit of Happiness: Consequences of Wanting to Be Happy**

We started this chapter with referring to the right to pursue happiness as it is formulated in the United States' Declaration of Independence. But we then turned to reviewing the consequences of all kinds of goal pursuits for happiness. Little is known about the consequences of viewing happiness as the goal itself.

On the one hand, holding a goal is usually conducive to actually moving forward toward the desired end state. As such, the goal of being happier may cause behavior that ultimately increases the person's happiness. However, goals also serve as standards against which people compare their status quo (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998). And as such, the goal to be happy may, on the other hand, paradoxically lead to disappointment and discontent, especially if the person cannot blame an external factor for not being very happy.

Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, and Savino (2011) tested these ideas. They found that the more individuals valued happiness, the less happy they tended to be, unless an external factor could explain their lack of happiness. In one of their experiments, the degree to which participants valued happiness was manipulated by presenting participants with a fake newspaper article emphasizing the benefits of being happy for social relationships, professional success, health, and well-being. In the control group, the same article emphasized the benefits of “making accurate judgments.” Participants were then assigned to watch either a happy or a sad film clip. As predicted, participants who had been primed to value happiness reported more negative and less positive emotions after watching the happy clip, as compared to participants who were primed to value accuracy in their judgments. These participants were also more disappointed than those who had watched the sad clip, presumably because they could not blame the film for not being as happy as they would have liked to be.

Note that in these studies the value of happiness was manipulated but participants had no opportunity to actively engage in behaviors to pursue the goal of being happy. In fact, people who are unhappy with their lives also desire to actively change their lives (Luhmann & Hennecke, 2017), a desire they could not translate into action in Mauss et al.’s study but that, under different conditions, might turn into instrumental and ultimately successful behavior.

## Final Remarks

So was Einstein right? Should we, if we want to be happy, tie our lives to goals and not to people or things? First of all, goals themselves can be tied to things or to people, a fact that complicates scrutinizing Einstein’s statement. As we have reported, committing oneself to goals that concern establishing or maintaining relationships with other people is in fact conducive of happiness and the happiest people also tend to be highly social (Diener & Seligman, 2002). As suggested by Einstein, committing to material goals, however, does not seem to be beneficial for happiness (Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

On a general level, the research evidence agrees with Einstein: Pursuing personal goals can be a source of happiness, if it is successful. However, the statement requires qualifiers as the association of goals and SWB is moderated by other factors, like the goals’ concordance with needs and implicit motives, their orientation towards approaching positive or avoiding negative outcomes or their level of abstraction (see Table 13.1 for an overview). Finally, maintaining a good mood and good health may follow not just from the engagement in personal goals but also the ability to disengage from unfruitful pursuits.

Einstein was definitely onto something when he prescribed that tying one’s life to a goal can be a source of happiness. After all, goal pursuit is how people can take charge of their own lives and move them into a personally desirable direction.

**Table 13.1** Overview of factors influencing the role of goals for subjective well-being

Predictors	Effects on SWB	Key article(s)
<b>Goal content</b>		
<b>Consistency with basic psychological needs/ self-concordance</b>	Pursuing goals that are consistent with the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness increases a person's SWB	Sheldon and Elliot (1999); Sheldon and Houser-Marko (2001)
<b>Intrinsic vs. extrinsic goal content</b>	Pursuing intrinsic goals (e.g., for self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling) increases a person's SWB. Pursuing extrinsic goals (e.g., to achieve financial success, an appealing appearance, social recognition) decreases a person's SWB	Kasser and Ryan (1993)
<b>Goal progress</b>	Experiencing goal progress increases a person's SWB	Brunstein (1993); Carver and Scheier (1990)
<b>× Consistency with basic psychological needs</b>	Experiencing goal progress more strongly increases a person's SWB if the goals are consistent with basic psychological needs	Sheldon and Kasser (1998)
<b>× Consistency with implicit motives</b>	Experiencing goal progress only increases a person's SWB if the goal is consistent with that person's implicit motives for power, autonomy, and affiliation/intimacy	Brunstein et al. (1998)
<b>Availability of goal-relevant resources</b>	The availability of goal-relevant resources, in particular social ones, increases a person's SWB	Diener and Fujita (1995)
<b>Level of goal abstraction</b>	Pursuing highly abstract as opposed to more concrete goals decreases a person's SWB	Emmons (1992)
<b>Goal focus</b>	Focusing on the process of goal pursuit increases a person's SWB over time, in contrast to focusing on the desired outcomes of the goal	Freund, Hennecke, and Riediger (2010)
<b>Goal orientation towards</b>		
<b>Approach vs. avoidance</b>	Pursuing avoidance (relative to approach) goals decreases levels of SWB	Coats, Janoff-Bulman, and Alpert (1996); Elliot, Sheldon, and Church (1997)
<b>Change vs. stability</b>	In older age, pursuing stability decreases a person's SWB	Ebner, Freund, and Baltes (2006)
<b>Intergoal relations</b>	Experiencing goal conflict between one's goals decreases a person's SWB	Emmons and King (1988); Riediger and Freund (2004)

(continued)

**Table 13.1** (continued)

Predictors	Effects on SWB	Key article(s)
<b>Goal ambivalence</b>	Pursuing a goal that encompasses at the same time positive as well as negative aspects decreases a person's SWB	Emmons and King (1988); Koletzko et al. (2015)
<b>Action crisis</b>	Dwelling doubtfully upon the question whether to continue goal striving or disengaging from the goal decreases a person's SWB	Brandstätter, Herrmann, and Schüler (2013); Herrmann and Brandstätter (2013)
<b>Culture</b>		
× <b>Interdependent vs. independent goal pursuit</b>	Experiencing progress on interdependent goals increases the SWB of Easterners, whereas the SWB of Westerners benefits from progress on independent goal	Oishi and Diener (2001)
× <b>Approach vs. avoidance goal orientation</b>	Pursuing avoidance goals negatively predicts SWB in individualistic cultures like the US but not in more collectivistic cultures like South Korea or Russia	Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, and Sheldon (2001)

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