

Childhood Trauma, Self-Esteem, and HEXACO Personality Dimensions as Predictors of Fear and Fragility of Happiness

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Abstract

Conceptions of happiness have real-life consequences and are associated with well-being. The study aimed to examine whether childhood trauma, self-esteem, personality predicted fear and fragility of happiness. A convenient sample of 332 college students aged 18-25 completed self-report measures of fear of happiness, fragility of happiness, childhood trauma, self-esteem, and HEXACO personality dimensions. Multiple linear regression analyses revealed that self-esteem and honesty-humility dimension of personality negatively predicted fear of happiness. Gender did not predict fear or fragility of happiness. Further, childhood trauma positively and self-esteem negatively predicted fragility of happiness. This study provides support that childhood trauma has long lasting effects extending to adulthood. Self-esteem may have implications for happiness and wellbeing. Future research may focus on factors beyond personality that are associated with conceptions of happiness like fear and fragility of happiness.

Keywords: fear of happiness, fragility of happiness, childhood trauma, self-esteem, HEXACO personality

The beneficial impact of positive emotions on sustaining mental health is well established (Cohn et al., 2009; Silton et al., 2020). Happiness is positively correlated with various positive outcomes (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Nevertheless, pursuing happiness may have counterproductive effects (Mauss et al., 2011). Fear of happiness refers to a feeling of unease or distressed in response to experiencing or showing happiness, arising from the belief that happiness may result in negative outcomes (Joshnloo, 2024). Individuals may refrain from pursuing happiness in scenarios where they foresee negative consequences, which may be reflecting an underlying superstitious belief that being overly happy may attract a bad event (Joshnloo & Weijers, 2014). Cultural norms and societal values shape individuals' perceptions of happiness and influence their wellbeing (Oishi & Diener, 2003). Other reasons why individuals fear of happiness include concerns about attracting the evil eye, inviting rivalry or envy, or facing punishment in the afterlife (Lyubomirsky, 2000). Besides cultural factors, contextual and individual influences also shape the fear of happiness (Joshnloo, 2024).

In ancient times, it was believed that happiness is what just happens to us over which we have no control (McMahon, 2006). The notion that everything contains the seed of its opposite (Chen, 2006; Peng et al., 2006), implies a constant oscillation between happiness and unhappiness. Fragility of happiness implies the belief that extreme happiness may be followed by tragedy (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). In other words, it is seen as the belief that happiness is fleeting and may turn into less favourable states easily (Joshnloo et al., 2015). Historical perspective on happiness suggests a cyclical nature in which happiness and unhappiness interplay, shaping perceptions of control and fragility. External locus of control is reflected in viewing life

in general and happiness to be fragile and difficult to control (Joshnloo et al., 2017).

Studies show that individuals who have experienced adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect, or family dysfunction, are more likely to exhibit difficulties in experiencing and accepting happiness later in life (Nanni et al., 2012). The fear of happiness appears to manifest as a cognitive reenactment of childhood trauma that has not been integrated, resembling a trauma-related or post-traumatic obsession (Ozturk & Sar, 2016). Ahi et al. (2021) study findings revealed that experiences of abuse and neglect during childhood could contribute to fear of happiness among students by promoting the use of maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies such as self-blaming, rumination, catastrophizing, and other-blaming while also decreasing the utilization of adaptive strategies like acceptance, positive refocusing, and positive reappraisal. Childhood emotional neglect predicted fear of happiness in women (Şar et al., 2019). Self-esteem is one of the most dominant and powerful predictors of happiness (Furnham & Cheng, 2000), and higher fear of happiness was linked to lower self-esteem (Yildirim et al., 2018). Fear of happiness is found to have weak to moderate associations with personality traits (Joshnloo, 2024). Fear of happiness was found to be weakly correlated with high neuroticism and low openness and extraversion in African sample (Agbo & Ngwu, 2017). Study by Joshnloo (2019) on Canadian sample found that fear of happiness had weak to moderate correlation with high neuroticism, and low levels of traits like extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. Weak correlation of fear of happiness with low extraversion but high agreeableness was found in an American sample (Frosch et al., 2023). Among the Big Five personality traits, neuroticism was found to be the

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strongest predictor of fear of happiness (Frosch et al., 2023; Joshanloo, 2019). Low self-esteem contributes to fear of happiness (Joshanloo, 2024); those with low self-esteem may believe that they do not deserve to experience happiness (Parrott, 1993) and may find it difficult to enjoy pleasant experiences. Fear of happiness is negatively associated with self-esteem (Joshanloo & Yildirim, 2025) and positively associated with feelings of inadequacy (Gilbert et al., 2012) and shame (Satici et al., 2024). Fear of happiness is associated with diminished life satisfaction, lower self-esteem, reduced resilience, and an increased externality of happiness, which is considered a negative life outcome (Yildirim & Aziz, 2017). It is found to increase dampening and reduce savouring of positive emotions, thereby resulting in lower levels of personal wellbeing (Lee et al., 2025).

Conceptions of happiness have implications for wellbeing, and is shaped by cultural, contextual, and individual factors (Joshanloo, 2024). The present study investigates if childhood trauma, self-esteem, and personality predict fear and fragility of happiness in young adults.

Method

Participants

The study used a convenient sample of 332 (Males = 153, Females = 179) young adults, aged between 18 and 25 years, sampled from two colleges in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The participants with physical and psychiatric health concerns were not included in the study.

Measures

Fear of Happiness Scale (FOHS; Joshanloo et al., 2014) consists of 5 items that assess individuals' fear of experiencing happiness. Each item is rated on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The scale is unidimensional. Higher scores indicate a higher level of fear of happiness.

The Fragility of Happiness Scale (FRHS; Joshanloo et al., 2015) measures the belief that happiness is transient and could transform into negative states. It consists of 4 items. Each item is rated on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The scale is unidimensional. Higher scores indicate higher fragility of happiness beliefs.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The scale consists of 10 items, measuring how people generally feel about their own worth as a human being. Responses are evaluated using a 4-point

Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem.

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988) consists of 6 items and assesses the prevalence and severity of traumatic experiences that individuals might have encountered during their childhood. It is rated on a 7-point rating scale. The response options ranged from 1 (*not at all traumatic*) to 4 (*somewhat traumatic*) and 7 (*extremely traumatic*). Higher scores indicate a higher level of childhood trauma.

HEXACO Personality Inventory-Revised (HEXACO-PI-R; Lee & Ashton, 2004). The scale consists of 60 items and measures the 6 broad factors of the HEXACO model: Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. Each item is evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*).

Procedure

Institutional approval was obtained from the colleges where the data was collected. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants before collecting the data. The survey was group administered to the participants in their classroom.

Results

Multiple linear regression was used to examine the predictors of fear and fragility of happiness, and the results are presented below.

As may be seen from the Table 2, self-esteem and honesty-humility dimension of HEXACO personality negatively predicted fear of happiness. The multiple linear regression analysis for overall predictor variables accounted for $R^2 = .157$, $F(9, 322) = 6.68$, $p < .001$. Self-esteem ($\beta = -.317$, $p < .001$) and honesty-humility ($\beta = -.120$, $p = .029$) dimension of HEXACO personality significantly and negatively predicted fear of happiness. The remaining predictors did not significantly predict fear of happiness.

As may be seen in the Table 3, childhood trauma positively and self-esteem negatively predicted fragility of happiness in young adults. The multiple linear regression analysis for overall predictor variables accounted for $R^2 = .075$, $F(9, 322) = 2.91$, $p = .003$. Childhood trauma significantly and positively predicted fragility of happiness ($\beta = .160$, $p = .004$), whereas self-esteem significantly and negatively predicted fragility of happiness ($\beta = -.159$, $p = .010$). The remaining predictors did not significantly predict fragility of happiness.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Internal consistency coefficients, and Intercorrelations of the Study Variables (n=332)

Var.	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Fear of Happiness	19.73	7.18	0.78	1	.32**	.05	-.34**	-.13*	.08	-.17**	.01	-.17**	-.15**
2. Fragility of Happiness	21.30	5.26	0.73	.32**	1	.17**	-.12*	.08	.15**	.01	.06	-.04	.04
3. Childhood Trauma	3.87	4.68	0.67	.05	.17**	1	.06	-.03	.22**	.06	.03	.07	.11*
4. Self-Esteem	33.24	4.09	0.36	-.34**	-.12*	.06	1	.02	-.04	.45**	-.05	.26**	.15**
5. Honesty-Humility	32.99	4.98	0.39	-.13*	.08	-.03	.01	1	.15**	-.07	.17**	.10	.21**
6. Emotionality	32.49	5.49	0.59	.08	.15**	.22**	-.04	.15**	1	-.13*	.08	-.04	.10
7. Extraversion	31.90	5.03	0.59	-.17**	.01	.06	.45**	-.07	-.13*	1	-.12*	.24**	.12*
8. Agreeableness	32.05	4.79	0.45	.01	.06	.03	-.05	.17**	.08	-.12*	1	-.13*	.01
9. Conscientiousness	31.75	4.68	0.51	-.17**	-.04	.07	.26**	.10	-.04	.24**	-.13*	1	.18**
10. Openness	33.36	4.76	0.46	-.15**	.04	.11*	.15**	.21**	.10	.12*	.01	.18**	1

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Predictors of Fear of Happiness

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
Gender	.675	.852	.047	.792	.429
Childhood Trauma	.099	.082	.064	1.208	.228
Self-esteem	-.555	.103	-.317	-5.376	.001
Honesty-Humility	-.173	.079	-.120	-2.197	.029
Emotionality	.076	.077	.058	.992	.322
Extraversion	-.011	.084	-.008	-.130	.897
Agreeableness	-.002	.079	-.001	-.022	.982
Conscientiousness	-.100	.085	-.065	-1.186	.237
Openness	-.126	.082	-.084	-1.549	.122

Note. $R^2 = .157$, $Adj R^2 = .133$, $F(9, 322) = 6.68$, $p < .001$

Table 3. Predictors of Fragility of Happiness

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
Gender	-.494	.655	-.047	-.754	.451
Childhood Trauma	.180	.063	.160	2.871	.004
Self-esteem	-.205	.079	-.159	-2.582	.010
Honesty-Humility	.087	.061	.082	1.438	.151
Emotionality	.114	.059	.119	1.931	.054
Extraversion	.109	.065	.104	1.685	.093
Agreeableness	.042	.061	.038	.696	.487
Conscientiousness	-.035	.065	-.031	-.544	.587
Openness	.016	.063	.014	.251	.802

Note. $R^2 = .075$, $Adj R^2 = .049$, $F(9, 322) = 2.908$, $p = .003$

Discussion

Gender did not predict fear or fragility of happiness in the present study. Previous studies have mixed findings where some reported gender difference (Dobos et al., 2024; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Joshanloo, 2019), while others did not find any gender differences (Carlquist et al., 2017; Saini et al., 2021; Şar et al., 2019; Tafarodi et al., 2012) in the conceptions of happiness. Thus, it is possible that the effect of gender on conceptions of happiness varies across different cultures.

The findings of the present study show that childhood trauma positively predicted fragility of happiness. This is in line with previous studies on fear of happiness. Fear of happiness is associated with attachment styles and relationship quality (Joshanloo, 2024). Childhood emotional neglect predicted fear of happiness (Şar et al., 2019). Those exposed to childhood psychological maltreatment experience fear of happiness through external shame and family communication (Satıcı et al., 2024). During childhood, individuals develop an understanding of emotions and internalize societal norms (Tsai et al., 2007). Parents also play a significant role in shaping how children think, feel, and behave as they grow. When children are brought up in a dysfunctional family with exposure to negative parenting, such as psychological maltreatment, they may begin to develop harmful beliefs like linking happiness with negative consequences, creating an idea of aversion to happiness (Arslan, 2023). Self-criticism often stems from unhealthy relationships with parents or caregivers. Parenting styles that are rejective or restrictive, as noted by Koestner et al. (1991) and McCranie and Bass (1984), can intensify this self-critical mindset of an individual as they grow. The fragility of happiness may result from their self-critical aspect and perfectionist tendencies stemming from their childhood experiences. This may lead them to fall into a cycle of negative emotions, where they link positive feelings like happiness with being less productive (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). People with high levels of self-criticism are more prone to experiencing aversion towards happiness (Gilbert et al., 2012).

The findings of the present study show that self-esteem is a negative predictor of the variables fear and fragility of happiness. Individuals with lower self-esteem tend to experience more negative moods (Pritchard et al., 2007). These negative feelings can increase fear of happiness, as individuals may perceive happiness as unattainable. Beck (1967) highlighted how self-esteem shapes the way people think, either pulling them towards or helping them avoid negative thoughts. Thus, when self-esteem is low, individuals are more likely to expect bad outcomes even from positive experiences. In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem tend to see happiness as a positive outcome. Optimism, as described by Lopez and Snyder (2003), is a way of approaching life that lets individuals feel happier, healthier, and more successful. Since self-esteem was positively correlated with

optimism (Baumeister et al., 2003), individuals with low self-esteem may have difficulties staying optimistic. As a result, they might doubt their abilities or feel undeserving of good things, including happiness.

Further, people tend to adopt a specific emotional state if they regard it as consistent with their self-concept (Wood et al., 2003). Those with low self-esteem may perceive themselves to be undeserving of the experience of happiness (Parrott, 1993), which may explain why they have a high fear of happiness. Addressing low self-esteem can play a crucial role in mitigating the negative outcomes associated with the fear and fragility of happiness. Self-esteem and happiness are positively correlated (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Jauhri, 2022; Rema & Rajendra, 2022), which may possibly be mediated by fear and fragility of happiness.

The findings of the present study show that the honesty-humility dimension of personality negatively predicted fear of happiness. Individuals high on honesty-humility trait do not manipulate others for their personal gain, refrain from breaking rules, and are uninterested in materialistic things. Honesty-humility trait is positively associated with gratitude (Newman et al., 2024), which in turn is associated with happiness (Hemarajareswari & Gupta, 2021). Hence, those high on honesty-humility trait may be less aversive to happiness. In the present study, only honesty-humility trait was associated with fear of happiness. This finding draws support from a previous study where HEXACO model out predicted Big Five model in relation to eudaimonic wellbeing, and honesty-humility were associated with higher levels of eudaimonic wellbeing (Aghababaei & Arji, 2014).

The pivotal role of fear and the fragility of happiness beliefs on an individual's well-being, as well as its association with childhood trauma, self-esteem, and personality factors, underscores the urgent need for extensive research into effective intervention strategies. Understanding an individual's experiences of childhood trauma, self-esteem, and personality factors can help in the development of targeted preventive strategies within the early stages to promote well-being among those who may be vulnerable. Future studies should also consider exploring how individual, social, and environmental factors interact with fear and fragility of happiness, which may help to reinforce the desired outcome of well-being and resilience.

Conclusion

The present study aimed at examining the predictors of fear and fragility of happiness. Individual factors, including childhood trauma, self-esteem, and the honesty-humility personality dimension of HEXACO, predict fear and fragility of happiness among young adults. This indicates that the experiences of childhood trauma can have a long-lasting influence on an individual's well-being in adulthood. Improving one's self-esteem can have implications for developing the

potential for experiencing happiness. As seen in the findings of the present study, personality differences seem to have no major influence on attitude towards happiness. However, future studies could explore how other personality factors other than HEXACO personality dimensions relate to one's attitude towards happiness. It was also found that gender did not significantly predict fear or fragility of happiness.

The present study did not examine sociodemographic factors, such as income, educational level, or other possible variables that might significantly influence an individual's belief about happiness, therefore, it limits the generalisability of the findings to other subsets of the population. Future studies could focus on understanding those demographic variables in relation to an individual's fear and fragility of happiness. Additionally, the use of self-report measures may have introduced response bias, as the individuals may tend to provide socially desirable responses. Similarly, asking participants to share their memories of childhood trauma may introduce memory recall bias, which in turn might affect the accuracy and reliability of the data. Addressing these limitations in future studies may provide better insights on beliefs about happiness and related factors.

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