

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING: HOW DO WE MEASURE IT?

Brief No. 3 in a Series

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This four-part series of briefs about emotional well-being was created by [CSCH](#) and the [M3EWB Network](#) at the University of Connecticut. The [first brief](#) describes challenges in defining emotional well-being, and shares a working definition of emotional well-being generated by a diverse network of researchers striving to advance the science of emotional well-being.¹ The [second brief](#) reviews the components to emotional well-being along with exploration of its contributors and consequences. **This third brief** discusses options for measuring emotional well-being, and the [fourth brief](#) considers next steps in advancing the science of emotional well-being.

What is Emotional Well-Being?

Throughout this series, we use the following definition of emotional well-being. This definition was recently developed by a diverse network of researchers working to advance the science of emotional well-being. To learn more about the development of this definition, see the [first brief](#) in this series.

Emotional well-being is a multi-dimensional composite that encompasses how positive an individual feels generally and about life overall.

It includes:

- **Experiential features:** emotional quality of everyday experiences
- **Reflective features:** judgements about life satisfaction, sense of meaning and purpose, and ability to pursue goals that can include and extend beyond the self.

These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and life course.

Why Measure Emotional Well-Being?

Emotional well-being is desirable and can lead to many positive outcomes.^{2,3,4} But to evaluate if our strategies to improve emotional well-being are working, we need to be able to **measure** emotional well-being. For example, we might think that engaging in three acts of kindness each week could improve someone's emotional well-being. To confirm this, we need to measure emotional well-being over time. Does engaging in these acts of kindness actually improve emotional well-being? For whom and under what conditions?

How Do We Measure Emotional Well-Being?

To date, emotional well-being has been measured through neuroimaging, physiological, ecological momentary assessment (EMA), and subjective report data. Neuroimaging involves taking images of the brain through various types of scans. In the case of emotional well-being research, participants might be shown emotional images while in a scanning machine to see which areas of the brain become activated. Physiological data include heart rate, breathing rate, and sweating. Emotional well-being research might look at participants' heart rate during emotional video clips and then see how quickly elevated heart rates return to baseline after the video clip ends. Lastly, EMA data are collected by prompting participants to record how they are feeling in the moment at intervals throughout the day or week. For example, participants might receive a notification on their phone at 9am, 1pm, and 4pm each day asking them to record their current emotions. These data provide a "snapshot" of participants' emotional experiences over time and allows participants to record their emotions in the current moment rather than having to recall them later.

To date, the most common way to measure emotional well-being has been through subjective report data. These data are most commonly collected through questionnaires (also referred to as *measures*) that ask a person various questions about their emotional well-being. Subjective report measures are typically self-report or proxy-report. Self-report measures are completed by an individual about themselves. Proxy-report measures are filled out by another person, most commonly a parent, teacher, or partner. Examples of self-report and proxy-report questions assessing the various components of emotional well-being are shown in the table below. Proxy-report measures can be particularly helpful when assessing young children, individuals with cognitive delays or impairment (e.g., dementia), or to gain an additional perspective on someone's emotional well-being.

Example Items to Measure Emotional Well-Being

Component of Emotional Well-Being	Sample Self-Report Item	Sample Proxy-Report Item
Positive affect	In the past 7 days, I smiled and laughed a lot ⁵	In the past 7 days, my child was cheerful. ⁵
Life satisfaction	My life is going well. ⁶	Thinking about the past 4 weeks, my child was happy with the way things were. ⁷
Sense of meaning and purpose	Lately, my life had purpose. ⁶	My child thinks his/her life has meaning. ⁸
Goal pursuit	I have a clear sense of direction in life. ⁶	My child has goals for himself/herself. ⁸

Note. Measures typically use a 5-point scale (for example, ranging from strongly disagree to strong agree) Subjective report measures of emotional well-being can be explored on UConn's [Emotional Well-Being Repository](#).

Subjective report measures are highly appealing to researchers and clinicians because they typically do not require a lot of time or money to complete. For example, it is typically much easier to collect and analyze subjective report data than neuroimaging, physiological, or EMA data.

Subjective report measures might have between 5-30 questions assessing emotional well-being and usually include scoring guidance. However, as we discuss next, there are limitations with existing subjective report measures of emotional well-being.

Challenges in Assessing Emotional Well-Being with Subjective Report Measures

Over the years, researchers have developed more than 135 subjective report measures of emotional well-being. This can be seen as both a blessing and a curse. There is variation in what these measures assess. Some measures broadly assess *quality of life* with a subset of questions assessing emotional well-being and others assessing physical well-being, financial well-being, and more. In these measures, questions assessing emotional well-being are only a portion of the questions asked.

Other measures focus on a specific aspect of emotional well-being, such as positive affect or life satisfaction. These measures are more specific, but do not cover all of the elements introduced in the definition of emotional well-being on page 1. In some cases, measures are clearly labeled with the elements they assess. But, in other cases, it is unclear whether terms are being used interchangeably or to mean slightly different things. Take psychological well-being and emotional well-being, for instance. Would you expect a measure of psychological well-being and a measure of emotional well-being to be assessing the same thing? Or slightly different things?

This variation in the available measures makes it difficult to compare results across studies. For example, if a study finds improved psychological well-being as the result of an intervention but another study finds no improvement in emotional well-being from a similar intervention, how do we interpret these results? Is the issue that the studies were measuring different things? Or was there something about the intervention or participants that made the results different? The many available measures, and variations in the breadth and depth of each measure, make it difficult to know whether we are comparing apples to apples or apples to oranges when comparing results from different studies.

Another persistent challenge exists in measuring emotional well-being. Does the absence of mental health challenges, such as anxiety or depression, mean that someone is emotionally well? In many instances, measures of anxiety and depression have been used to evaluate emotional well-being.⁹ The argument has been that the absence of mental health challenges means that someone is emotionally well. This does not consider that a person can have well-managed anxiety or depression, for example, and high levels of emotional well-being. It also does not consider apathy, or a void of emotion, that would not show up on an anxiety measure, but is also not reflective of emotional well-being.

In response to this challenge, some researchers and clinicians have advocated for a dual-factor model of mental health.^{10,11,12} In a dual factor model of mental health, mental health challenges and emotional well-being are understood to be related, but distinct from one another. For example, some research has shown that when people are under low amounts of stress, positive and negative affect are less related.¹³ Under higher amounts of stress, positive and negative affect are much more highly related. As we discuss in our [fourth brief](#), greater research is needed to understand the relationships between positive and negative affect, and connection to overall emotional well-being.

Next Steps in Emotional Well-Being Measurement Research

There are several important next steps in research on emotional well-being measurement. First, as introduced in the first brief, we need to understand if the above definition of emotional well-being applies across the lifespan. A common practice has been to adapt adult measures for children. It is not yet understood how effective this is. If, for example, the various components of emotional well-being (e.g., positive affect, sense of meaning and purpose) have different significance in childhood, certain measures may be more appropriate for adaptation than others. In some cases, it may not be appropriate to adapt adult measures.

An important next step is to map existing emotional well-being measures to the working definition of emotional well-being. As described above, some measures assess one aspect of emotional well-being (positive affect or life satisfaction, for example) whereas others extend beyond just assessing emotional well-being. Having a clearer picture of which domains each measure assesses, and of current gaps in the available measures, would help to advance the science of emotional well-being.

Finally, researchers need to strengthen or harmonize current measures, rather than continuing to create new measures.¹⁰ The number of current measures and various terms used contributes to the confusion about what is being measured in each study. Determining a small number of strong and valid measures of emotional well-being would allow for more coordinated research that strengthens our collective understanding of how to improve emotional well-being.

To learn more about measuring emotional well-being, read the following:

[Measuring emotional well-being through subjective report: A scoping review of reviews.](#)

Finally, we invite you to reflect on the options in emotional well-being measurement. Which components of emotional well-being do you find more useful to measure? What methods might you use? Consider your answers to help you identify actions to promote emotional well-being for yourself and those around you.

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