

EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING: NEXT STEPS IN RESEARCH

Brief No. 4 in a Series

A CSCH Brief by Jessica B. Koslouski, Oscar Ruiz, Helene M. Marcy, and Sandra M. Chafouleas

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. The [third brief](#) discusses options for measuring emotional well-being. **This fourth brief** considers next steps in advancing the science of 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.

Reactions to this working definition have been strong and varied, and point to several future directions for research.² Future research will continue to improve our understanding of what emotional well-being is and how we can improve emotional well-being to promote overall population health. In this brief, we discuss three important directions for future research:

1. How do specific emotions, including negative emotions, affect emotional well-being?
2. Can we apply a universal definition of emotional well-being to individuals of varying ages around the world? and
3. How do we promote emotional well-being?

How do Specific Emotions Affect Emotional Well-Being?

There has been a surprising lack of research focused on how specific emotions affect emotional well-being.¹ Instead, research has primarily focused on positive affect as a broad concept. What positive emotions can you think of? There are many: happiness, contentment, desire, joy, love, gratitude, pride, amusement, and awe are just some examples. How do each affect emotional well-being? We do not yet understand enough about the individual contributions of different positive emotions to emotional well-being. Are each of these emotions equally valuable in promoting emotional well-being – or do some make stronger contributions? Does experiencing a wider variety of these emotions improve emotional well-being, or is a regular feeling of contentment enough?

We also do not yet have a strong understanding of how negative emotions affect emotional well-being. Experiencing negative emotions, such as sadness, fear, or anger, is expected. For example, feeling anger in the face of unfairness or discrimination or grief after the loss of a loved one is healthy. But how do these emotions affect emotional well-being? If everyone experiences positive and negative emotions, what helps some people to have higher levels of emotional well-being? The answer may at least partially have to do with the frequency and persistence of negative emotions. Those regularly experiencing sadness, regret, or frustration are likely to have lower levels of emotional well-being than those with less frequent negative emotions.

But because emotional well-being includes both experiential and reflective features, it is likely more than just the frequency of emotional experiences that contribute to emotional well-being. Some researchers hypothesize that even when experiencing these negative emotions, individuals with high levels of emotional well-being still have an overall positive evaluation of their lives.² These individuals can recognize their emotions as temporary and still feel an overall sense of being okay. It may also be that these individuals are able to return to their normal emotional states more quickly. We need more research to understand the effects of positive and negative emotions on emotional well-being.

Can We Apply a Universal Definition of Emotional Well-Being?

We also need research to understand if the definition of emotional well-being introduced above can be applied across ages and cultures around the world.¹ Ideally, a definition would be universal. However, consider young children or those with cognitive impairment (e.g., dementia). These individuals may not be able to make reflective judgments about their life satisfaction or their ability to pursue goals. But does this mean they cannot experience emotional well-being? The short answer is no – both children and individuals with cognitive impairment can experience emotional well-being.¹ The question then becomes whether the definition can still apply to these individuals using the varied measurement techniques we mentioned in the [third brief](#) (for example, to assess their life satisfaction through proxy-report, observational, or ecological momentary assessment methods) or with varied attention to the experiential and reflective features of the definition.¹

Another question is whether the definition holds true across cultures and around the world. For example, in more collectivist cultures that value group cohesion and interdependence,^{3,4} is goal pursuit as important? Can an individual be separated from their family members' well-being? Some have argued that social connections are critical to emotional well-being and should be part of the definition. Think back to the [second brief](#) where we separated contributors and consequences of emotional well-being from the definition itself. Do social connections *contribute to* and *result from* emotional well-being? Or are they emotional well-being itself?

How Do We Promote Emotional Well-Being?

Lastly, the goal in clearly defining emotional well-being is to learn how to improve it. With a clear definition of emotional well-being, we can investigate how various interventions might improve emotional well-being. Consider the activities in your life that boost your spirits or contribute to a sense of meaning and purpose. Maybe it is spending time with friends or family, playing sports, or volunteering. What is it about these activities that boosts your spirits or helps you to feel your best? Researchers are investigating the links between a number of activities and emotional well-being. In recent years, a major focus of the work has examined mind body interventions, such as yoga, tai chi, meditation, and breath regulation techniques. Other examples include physical activity, volunteering, and spending time in nature. Once we are able to more precisely identify how to improve emotional well-being, we are better positioned to intervene in cases where emotional well-being is low and to maintain high levels of emotional well-being through the ups and downs of life.

For ideas of simple and effective strategies to improve how you feel, see [Supporting Well-Being: Six Tips Anyone Can Use During Times of Uncertainty](#).

Finally, we invite you to consider these questions about future directions for research on emotional well-being. What resonates with you as applied to your life and the lives of those around you? For example, what strategies or activities do you rely on to “bounce back” when you are feeling down? How about those around you? Reflect on your answers to help you identify actions to promote emotional well-being for yourself and those around you.

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¹ Park, C. L., Kubzansky, L. D., Chafouleas, S. M., Davidson, R. J., Keltner, D., Parsafar, P., Conwell, Y., Martin, M. Y., Hanmer, J., & Wang, K. H. (2023). Emotional Well-Being: What It Is and Why It Matters. *Affective Science*, 4(1), 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00163-0>

² Park, C. L., Kubzansky, L. D., Chafouleas, S. M., Davidson, R. J., Keltner, D., Parsafar, P., Conwell, Y., Martin, M. Y., Hanmer, J., & Wang, K. H. (2023). A Perfect Storm to Set the Stage for Ontological Exploration: Response to Commentaries on "Emotional Well-Being: What It Is and Why It Matters". *Affective Science*, 4(1), 52–58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00169-8>

³ Markus, & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224–253. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224>

⁴ Campos, B., & Sanchez Hernandez, H. (2022). Well-being: Strengthening and Broadening a Key Psychological Construct. *Affective Science*, 4(1), 21–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00154-1>

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