

# POSITIVE EMOTIONS AS BUILDING BLOCKS FOR RESILIENCE

*A summary of Happiness unpacked: positive emotions increase life satisfaction by building resilience (Cohn et al., 2009)*

A CSCH Brief by Oscar Ruiz

## Introduction

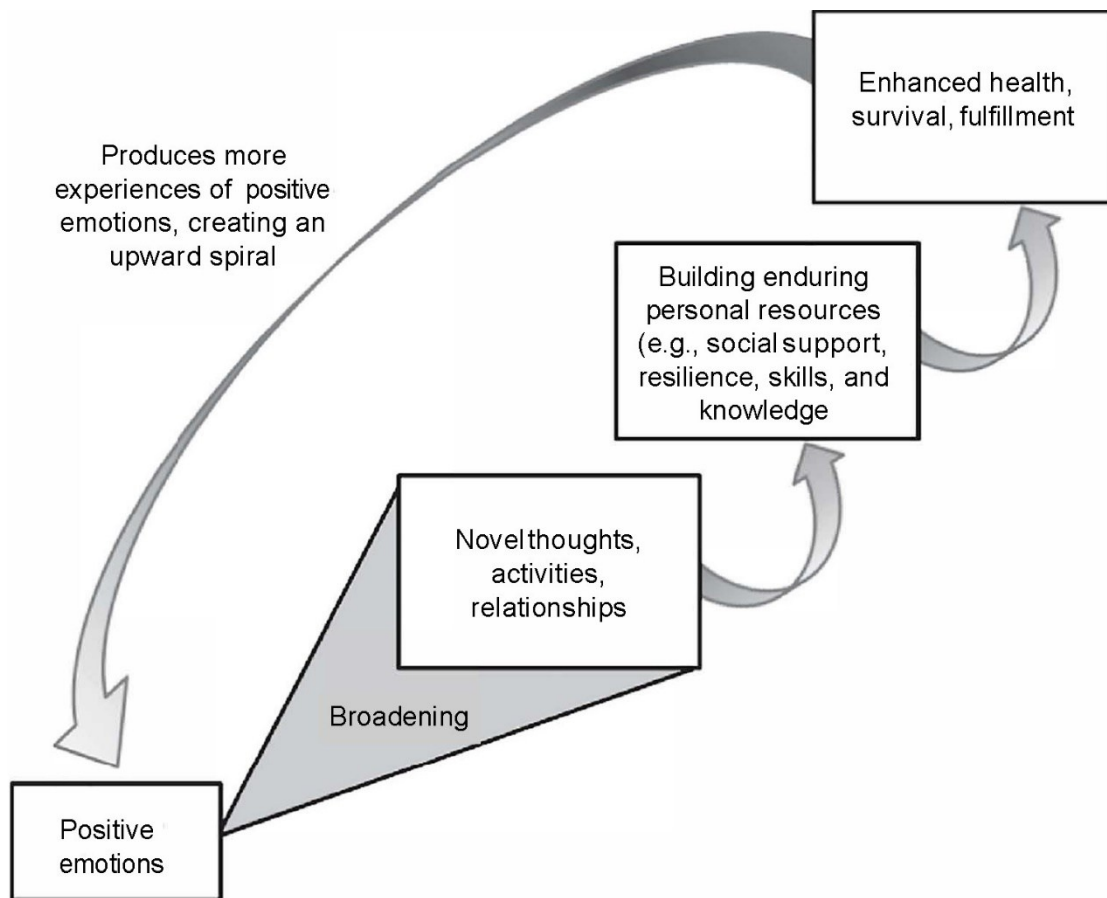
Step foot into any library or bookstore and you'll be sure to find a treasure trove of books promising the keys to happiness. While it's unlikely for any single work to provide a credible account of the complete inner workings of happiness that is both comprehensive and detailed, extensive research has revealed happiness to be connected to a broad spectrum of positive life outcomes, ranging from financial success to increased psychological resilience. Yet even though psychology books and self-help articles abound, the mystery often remains: how and why does happiness unlock such a diverse array of benefits?

While not exactly laying claim to a happiness theory of everything, Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions provides one such explanation that has proved useful for researchers interested in advancing the science of emotional well-being. This brief outlines a study conducted by Cohn and colleagues that sought to evaluate the mechanisms of this theory.<sup>1</sup>

## The Broaden-and-Build Theory

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, proposed by Fredrickson in 1998<sup>2</sup> and expanded upon by Fredrickson and Cohn in 2008,<sup>3</sup> put forward the idea that positive emotions function as evolved pathways for building a storehouse of high-value resources capable of facilitating thriving throughout life. In contrast to negative emotions which focus attention and bodily functioning on high-stakes needs and threats, positive emotions work to inspire a broad range of behaviors that might not seem immediately important at first glance. Take compassion and creativity, for example. Stopping to help someone at the side of the road or thinking about ways of being a better neighbor might not be the most life-changing of all human experiences. But with time, these small, seemingly insignificant moments begin to weave a rich tapestry of valuable resources capable of transforming life—not only for ourselves, but for others, too. Casual curiosity can transform into a highly sought-after job skill, whereas a simple act of kindness might lay the foundation for a fulfilling friendship or lifelong romantic partnership.

## Making Sense of the Broaden-and-Build Theory\*



\* Recreated from Fredrickson, B. L., & Cohn, M. A. (2008). Positive emotions. In *Handbook of emotions*, 3rd ed (pp. 777–796). The Guilford Press.

### Positive Emotions and Ego-Resilience

Cohn and colleagues assert that positive emotions like these aren't just predictive of desirable outcomes such as health, wealth, and longevity by way of luck or convoluted—they're predictive of these outcomes because they form the very building blocks necessary to get there.

The Cohn study defines ego-resilience as a trait that reflects a person's capacity to adapt to changing, difficult, and often unexpected environments.<sup>4</sup> This flexibility encompasses identifying opportunities, adjusting to constraints, and recovering from setbacks. Ego-resilience plays an important role in various life outcomes, including reducing behavioral problems in early childhood,<sup>5</sup> enhancing interpersonal and intrapersonal adjustment throughout life,<sup>6</sup> promoting faster cardiovascular recovery after stress,<sup>7</sup> and mitigating depression while fostering thriving in the aftermath of adversity<sup>8</sup>.

Cohn and colleagues theorize that positive emotions contribute to increased levels of ego-resilience, and that ego-resilience exerts its influence by, in part, eliciting positive emotions. When confronted with stressors, individuals high in ego-resilience experience higher levels of positive emotions compared to their less resilient counterparts, even though they may experience negative emotions at similar levels. The variance in positive emotions explains their enhanced ability to

bounce back from adversity and stress, prevent depression, and continue on a trajectory of personal growth.

## Happiness, Resilience, and Life Satisfaction

Happiness encompasses various facets, such as global life satisfaction, domain-specific satisfaction, positive beliefs about life, and a prevalence of positive emotions compared to negative ones<sup>9</sup>. While happiness researchers often combine these facets for a comprehensive well-being assessment, the broaden-and-build theory focuses specifically on the unique role of positive emotions. According to this theory, momentary positive emotions play a distinctive role in fostering growth and change over time, contributing to the development of resources. In the context of this study, these resources involve skills for identifying opportunities and recovering from adversity. Positive emotions, when utilized to navigate life's challenges and opportunities, can lead to an increase in global life satisfaction. Consequently, the broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotions have a more significant causal impact than life satisfaction in this regard.

## The Research Questions

In their study, Cohn and colleagues set out to examine three constructs: positive feelings, ego-resilience, and life satisfaction. Based on the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, they hypothesized that when people feel positive over the course of a month-long period, it should help them be more resilient, and that being more resilient should in turn help them be more satisfied with their lives. The study tested five specific hypotheses:

### Hypotheses

1. Daily positive emotions measured throughout the month predict increases in both ego-resilience and life satisfaction over the month. Daily negative emotions have no effect.
2. The relation between baseline ego-resilience and ego-resilience one month later is partially explained by daily positive emotions. Although life satisfaction is similarly valanced, it will not have the same impact.
3. The relation between positive emotions and increased life satisfaction is predicted by increased resilience.
4. Levels of negative emotions will not affect the associations among positive emotions, ego-resilience, and life satisfaction.
5. The models tested in Hypotheses 1-3 will not be improved by the addition of a variable that reflects change in positive emotions over a month.

## Methods

Cohn and colleagues recruited university students and studied their psychological adjustment levels for one month. Daily emotions were measured using a computer-validated diary method, where participants submitted daily emotion reports.—This approach allowed for the collection of day-to-day positive emotions with greater accuracy than broad retrospective ratings or paper diaries. Additionally, the study assessed life satisfaction and resilience using questionnaires completed by the participants at the beginning and end of the month-long study. The measures

included ego-resilience and life satisfaction assessments, which were used to evaluate changes over the course of the study.

## Key Findings

- **Question 1:** Do positive (but not negative) emotions predict increases in ego-resilience and life satisfaction?
  - Yes. Positive emotions, but not negative emotions, predicted increases in ego-resilience and life satisfaction.
  - Change in ego-resilience predicted change in life satisfaction.
- **Question 2:** Do positive emotions (but not life satisfaction) partially ~~mediate~~ explain the relation between initial and final ego-resilience scores?
  - Positive emotions partially explained the relationship between initial and final ego-resilience scores.
  - Life satisfaction did not explain this relationship.
- **Question 3:** Are increases in ego-resilience responsible for the relation between positive emotions and increased life satisfaction?
  - Yes. The relationship between positive emotions and increased life satisfaction was fully predicted by increases in ego-resilience.
- **Question 4:** Do negative emotions affect associations among positive emotions, ego-resilience, and life satisfaction?
  - Negative emotions did not predict change in ego-resilience or life satisfaction.
  - Negative emotions reduced the predictive value of positive emotions for ego-resilience, but not for life satisfaction.
  - High levels of positive emotions reduced the impact of increased negative emotions, while high negative emotions did not reduce the impact of positive emotions on ego-resilience.
- **Question 5:** Are rising levels of positive emotions necessary?
  - Increases in positive emotions over baseline did not significantly predict baseline, one-month, or change scores for ego-resilience or life satisfaction.
  - Change in positive emotions did not have a significant indirect effect on the relationship between initial and final ego-resilience.
  - Absolute levels of positive emotions mattered more than positive emotions relative to baseline for predicting ego-resilience and life satisfaction.

## Highlights

- Positive emotions buffer against the impact of negative emotions.
- Life satisfaction is dependent on growth in resilience

## Summary

The practical implications of this study suggest that individuals can enhance their overall well-being by focusing on cultivating positive emotions in their daily lives. The study indicates that positive emotions play a significant role in increasing resilience and life satisfaction, ultimately contributing to long-term well-being. Therefore, individuals may benefit from incorporating activities and practices that promote positive emotions, such as gratitude exercises, acts of kindness, and mindfulness, into their daily routines. Additionally, the findings emphasize the importance of recognizing and embracing positive emotions as a means to broaden and build personal resources for coping with life's challenges and fostering a sense of fulfillment.

**For more information about this research** see the full journal article:

Cohn, M. A., Fredrickson, B. L., Brown, S. L., Mikels, J. A., & Conway, A. M. (2009). Happiness unpacked: Positive emotions increase life satisfaction by building resilience. *Emotion*, 9(3), 361–368. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015952>

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<sup>1</sup> Cohn, M. A., Fredrickson, B. L., Brown, S. L., Mikels, J. A., & Conway, A. M. (2009). Happiness unpacked: Positive emotions increase life satisfaction by building resilience. *Emotion*, 9(3), 361–368. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015952>

<sup>2</sup> Fredrickson, B. L. (1998). What Good Are Positive Emotions? *Review of General Psychology: Journal of Division 1, of the American Psychological Association*, 2(3), 300–319. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.3.300>

<sup>3</sup> Fredrickson, B. L., & Cohn, M. A. (2008). Positive emotions. In *Handbook of emotions*, 3rd ed (pp. 777–796). The Guilford Press.

<sup>4</sup> Block, J. H., & Block, J. (1980). *The Role of Ego-Control and Ego-Resiliency in the Organization of Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315803029-7>

<sup>5</sup> Conway, A. M., & McDonough, S. C. (2006). Emotional resilience in early childhood: Developmental antecedents and relations to behavior problems. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1094, 272–277. <https://doi.org/10.1196/annals.1376.033>

<sup>6</sup> Klohnen, E. C. (1996). Conceptual analysis and measurement of the construct of ego-resiliency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(5), 1067–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.5.1067>

<sup>7</sup> Tugade, M. M., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2004). Resilient Individuals Use Positive Emotions to Bounce Back From Negative Emotional Experiences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 320–333. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.320>

<sup>8</sup> Fredrickson, B. L., Tugade, M. M., Waugh, C. E., & Larkin, G. R. (2003). What Good Are Positive Emotions in Crises? A Prospective Study of Resilience and Emotions Following the Terrorist Attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 365. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.365>

<sup>9</sup> Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., & Scollon, C. N. (2006). Beyond the hedonic treadmill: Revising the adaptation theory of well-being. *American Psychologist*, 61(4), 305–314. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.61.4.305>