MEASURING EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

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This is a brief related to the series, Emotional Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Feeling Well. This brief contains information on how emotional well-being is measured.

Throughout this series, we use the following definition of emotional well-being.

> Emotional well-being has many parts that capture how positive an individual feels generally, and about their life overall. It includes:
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> - **Experiential features:** emotional quality of everyday experiences
> - **Reflective features:** life satisfaction, sense of meaning, and goal pursuit
>
> These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and age[1].

Why measure emotional well-being?

Emotional well-being is something people want because it can lead to good things in life.[2,3,4] But to improve emotional well-being, we need to know how much we currently have. That is, we need to be able to measure it. We might think that doing three kind things each week could help someone feel better emotionally. To find out if this is true, we have to measure how their emotional well-being changes over time. Does being kind actually help people feel better? Who does it help, and when does it work best?

We also have to consider how we are measuring emotional well-being across cultures and communities. Emotional well-being is not a one-size-fits-all. Cultural context shapes what it means to feel well and the factors that affect well-being in one culture may not play as large of a role in another culture. Much of the research on emotional well-being worldwide has been done through a WEIRD lens – a lens of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies. In doing so, the way we have measured emotional well-being in the past has been built on Western, individualistic ideas of the self, and has often overlooked culturally valued domains like harmony. Looking at how emotional well-being is measured around the world can help. For example, in non-Western countries, there is greater emphasis on prosocial behaviors (social harmony, interdependence, and respect) and collective welfare.

In order to be able to make more precise, meaningful comparisons of well-being across cultures, we need measures of emotional well-being that reflect diverse cultural values and worldviews.

How do we measure emotional well-being?

The most common way to measure emotional well-being is by asking people questions. This is called subjective report data. These questions are usually on a survey or questionnaire. People can fill them out about themselves (self-report), or someone else—like a parent, teacher, or partner—can fill them out for them (proxy-report). Proxy-reports are helpful when the person being studied is too young or has trouble answering questions on their own, like someone with memory problems. Researchers and clinicians like subjective report measures because they don't typically take a lot of time or money to complete.

Component of Emotional Well-Being	Sample Self-Report Item	Same Proxy-Report Item
Positive Emotions	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	Lately, my life had purpose.[6]	My child thinks their life has meaning.[8]
Goal Pursuit	I have a clear sense of direction in life.[6]	My child has goals for themselves.[8]

What makes measuring emotional well-being hard?

Over 135 surveys have been developed to measure aspects of emotional well-being. Although this offers options, it also creates confusion. Some surveys look broadly at quality of life—including emotional, physical, and financial well-being—while others focus only on one part, like happiness or life satisfaction. These differences make it hard to compare results.

Terms like "emotional well-being" and "psychological well-being" are sometimes used interchangeably, though they may not mean the same thing. That adds to the challenge of knowing what each survey really measures.

Another issue is defining emotional well-being. Just because someone doesn't have anxiety or depression doesn't mean they are emotionally well. They may still feel empty or unmotivated. On the other hand, someone with managed mental health challenges can still have high emotional well-being. To address this, experts suggest a "dual-factor model" of mental health, which sees mental health issues and emotional well-being as related but separate.[9,10,11] For example, when stress is low, feeling good and bad are less connected—but under high stress, they often go hand in hand.

Because of these challenges with subjective measures, scientists have explored alternate ways to measure emotional well-being. One way is through brain scans (called neuroimaging). In these

studies, people might look at emotional pictures while their brain is being scanned to see which parts of the brain react.

Another way is by looking at the body's responses—like heart rate, breathing, or sweating. For example, people might watch an emotional video, and researchers check how fast their heart beats and how long it takes to return to normal afterward.

A third way is called ecological momentary assessment (EMA). This means people get reminders on their phone a few times a day to record how they feel right then. This helps researchers understand how emotions change throughout the day instead of just reporting them later.

Where do we go next?

To improve how we measure emotional well-being, a few key steps can be taken. First, we need to find out whether the current definition of emotional well-being makes sense for people of all ages. Many existing surveys were designed for adults but are used with children, even though feelings like happiness or sense of purpose may change across different stages of life. Next, we should review surveys to see how well they match the current definition of emotional well-being. Some focus on only one part, like life satisfaction, while others include topics beyond emotional well-being. Understanding what each survey actually measures – and where the gaps are – can help improve measurement . Finally, instead of creating more surveys, the focus should be on improving and using a few strong ones. Too many tools and terms create confusion. A smaller set of clear and accurate measures would make it easier to better understand how to support emotional well-being.

For a Deeper Dive

To learn more, check out these additional resources:

Mechanisms Underlying Mind-Body Interventions & Measurement of Emotional Well-Being: M3EWB
EWB Subjective Measures Repository
This webpage includes a repository of subjective measures of emotional well-being.

Gallup
What is the World's Emotional Temperature?
This interactive webpage shows the findings from Gallup's 2023 World Poll on the emotional state of people across 100+ countries and areas.

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