



A Joy Intervention

Lanaya Wade, MA, Marie-Christine Goodworth, PhD
Kathleen A. Gathercoal, PhD, Winston Seegobin, PsyD
Graduate School of Clinical Psychology of George Fox University

Introduction

Joy is examined in all the major world religions and is integral to religious life within some traditions. Joy is also important to human flourishing, however, to date the psychological study of joy has been very limited. Recent research has yielded a joy measure and delineated joy as a distinct emotion from happiness, but no prior research had tested an intervention to increase joy (Watkins et al., 2017). The current research designed and investigated such an intervention. This intervention incorporated both religious and psychological dimensions in conceptualizing joy. Concepts of joy from Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, and Christian traditions were examined and found to include components of connection to another, lack of engagement with the temporal, lack of envy, and the physical act of expressing joy (Arbel, 2016; Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho et al., 2014; Close, 1981; Esposito, 1998; Langis, 1990; Nasr, 2014; Tyagananda, 2005; Volf, 2014; Yale Center for Faith and Culture, 2018). Concepts of joy from a psychological perspective were found to include social engagement, reward, and the capacity to reflect and appreciate (Meadows, 2014, Dearborn, 1899, Watkins et al., 2017).

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that an online intervention would increase joy and changes in joy would be distinct from changes in happiness. As joy increased, it was further hypothesized that some of the constructs related to religious views of joy (e.g., lovingkindness, compassion toward self and others, equanimity, loneliness, envy, and daily spiritual experiences) would also change in a more joyful direction.

Methods

Participants were recruited from George Fox University, a Christian school of approximately 4,000 students. Participants ranged in class from freshman through the final year of graduate school and ranged in age from 22 to 48 (mean age = 27.5). They were randomly assigned into one of two categories, with one being a control period (5 participants) and one being an immediate intervention period (15 participants) (n=20). Notably, the groups were initially comparable in size. Post-test group sizes reflect high participant attrition. The overall attrition rate was .50, with an experimental group attrition rate of .25, control group attrition rate of .75, and differential attrition between the groups of .50.

Measures of happiness, envy, equanimity, state (emotional) joy, dispositional (characterological) joy, loneliness, and daily spiritual experiences and a demographic questionnaire were administered pre-and post- intervention.

A four-week intervention was designed that incorporated the elements expected to enhance joy as identified by Watkins et al. (2017) and various religious constructs as applicable. The Joy Intervention included twice-weekly 15-minute exercises, or 8 total interventions over 120 minutes. Week 1 focused on the overall appraisal of an event component, with a particular focus on mindfulness from Buddhist practices. It was hoped that by increasing mindfulness skills participants may have more capacity to attend and give an accurate appraisal. Intervention 2 focused on perspective-taking. It was hoped that lowered engagement with the immediate moment would impact joy. Intervention 3 included an evocative video related to gratitude and prompted participants to reflect upon a time they received something for which they longed. This is related to the component of joy regarding longing for an outcome. Intervention 4 included engaging with nature to prompt gratitude. Gratitude has been identified as distinct from but related to joy. In Intervention 5 participants received psychoeducation and a personal reflection from the lead investigator related to random acts of kindness. The purpose of this was to increase interpersonal connection and encourage participants to receive the "gift" of no journaling assignment as a kindness. Participants also were encouraged to continue to the cycle of random kindness. This was related to the social component of joy found in Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions. Intervention 6 was a journal related to the experience of Intervention 5. A redemptive twist, or what appears to be an unexpected turnaround, has also been found to be related to joy. In Intervention 7, participants were shown a portion of a short film that focused on success against the odds and prompted to reflect on a time they had a similar experience. Finally, joy was found to usually have a result, which may include celebration. Intervention 8 was related to the experiential exercise of rewarding oneself for successful completion of the course. This also corresponded to Christian and Islamic perspectives which include the act of rejoicing as resultant of joy.

After the pre-test was administered to all participants, those in the immediate intervention condition were provided direction regarding how to register for an online course containing the Joy Intervention. It was delivered in a Moodle-type website to which participants had access for 30 days. The content was delivered in worksheet and video formatting. Each intervention included a 150-word minimum journaling component. After the 30 days, all participants were administered the post-test.

Results

Results did not support the hypothesis.

MANOVA analysis revealed no difference between the Control and Experimental groups over time across the measures (Pilla's Trace = .41). However, observed power was very low (e.g., power ranged from .30 to .49) and indicated the failure to find differences might be due to small sample sizes. Moderate to large reliable effects are noted for state joy, loneliness, and daily spiritual experiences measures. Notably, the loneliness and daily spiritual experiences measures had higher scores for the control group than the experimental group over time.

Measure of	Effect Size		
	d'	95% CI	
Happiness	.54	-0.14	1.23
Envy	-.20	-0.76	0.36
Equanimity and Compassion	-.28	-1.07	0.51
State Joy	.95	0.02	1.88
Disposition Joy	-.04	-0.71	0.63
Loneliness	-.72	-1.31	-0.14
Daily Spiritual Experiences	-.68	-1.22	-0.14

Discussion

The small sample size may have limited the ability to detect significance. However, analysis of effect sizes did indicate the intervention created a large increase in state joy in participants in the experimental condition. Further, the intervention did not result in a significant effect size for colloquial happiness, which may indicate the intervention specifically influenced joy and not happiness. However, stay at home orders related to the novel coronavirus-19 pandemic were issued during the intervention period, which may be a confounding variable. Further research is needed with a larger, less homogeneous sample.

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