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## The Pursuit of Happiness

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## The Pursuit of Happiness

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Thinking highly of yourself can improve well-being, even in cultures that value collectivism over individualism, according to new research from the University of Dayton.

The study is the first to establish a cause-and-effect link between self-enhancement (thinking positively about oneself) and psychological well-being. The study also supports previously published research that suggests self-enhancement is a universal motivation.

"There is a debate among scholars about whether self-enhancement is a fundamental human motivation or a by-product of Western culture," said Erin O'Mara, assistant professor of psychology and lead author of the article, published in the April issue of *Journal of Research in Personality* and available online.

"Some scholars argue self-enhancement motivation is relative: Western culture values individualism and encourages self-enhancement, while Eastern culture values collectivism and encourages self-effacement, emphasizing one's negative values to promote social connections rather than distinguish one person from another," O'Mara said. "Our research suggests this is not the case."

O'Mara and her colleagues enlisted 101 undergraduates from the United States and 131 undergraduates from China for the study. Each student first completed five tests to measure psychological well-being. A week later, they were asked to consider an attribute they deemed personally important. They were randomly assigned to write about instances that demonstrate how they display that attribute more than their peers (self-enhancement) or less than their peers (self-effacement).

Following the writing assignment, the participants then took the same five tests to measure changes in their psychological well-being.

Across the board, students who self-enhanced showed improvement in their psychological well-being from the previous week, regardless of gender or nationality. Those students who self-effaced showed no change in psychological well-being.

"Not only is self-enhancement prevalent across cultures, but so is its effect of improving psychological well-being," O'Mara said. "The debate should not be whether all cultures self-enhance, but on how self-enhancement manifests and functions in varying cultural contexts."

O'Mara said it's important to note self-enhancement does not always yield positive effects. In the eyes of others, people who self-enhance may be perceived as arrogant or narcissistic.

In previously published research, O'Mara found people who have high levels of stress but distort their perceptions of their stress using "rose-colored glasses" experience more negative feelings in the long term.

"However, this research establishes that self-enhancement is linked to the promotion of psychological well-being in Eastern and Western cultures, decreasing experiences such as depression and increasing experiences such as satisfaction with life," she said.

The title of the article is "A longitudinal-experimental test of the panculturality of self-enhancement: Self-enhancement promotes psychological well-being both in the west and the east."

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