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What Goals Do People Have for Who They Want to Be Emotionally? Exploring Long-Term Emotional Goals

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The goals that people have for their emotions are crucial for whether emotion regulation is pursued, as well as the regulation strategies people select. However, emotional goals may extend beyond the emotions people want to feel to include long-term goals for how people want to *be* emotionally in the future. In two studies, we qualitatively explored people's long-term emotional goals (i.e., desired emotional self; Study 1, $n = 157$, October 2023) and then quantitatively confirmed the association between well-being and current emotional attributes, desired emotional self, intention to work toward long-term goals, and belief in goal malleability (Study 2, $n = 244$, November 2023). Study 1 used qualitative coding to identify 13 long-term emotional goals, including hedonic goals (e.g., experience more pleasure, experience less negative affect) as well as goals to allow emotions, better understand emotions, have more emotional confidence, reduce emotion-driven behavior, increase regulation, increase cognitive control, and several goals related to interpersonal functioning (e.g., increase emotional connections, empathy, expressiveness, emotional boundaries). In Study 2, we confirmed the desirability of the long-term emotional goals, and we found that for many of the goals, greater discrepancies between desired and current emotional selves were associated with decreased well-being. In Study 2, we also explored self-reported attention to short-term versus long-term emotional goals. We found that greater emphasis on long-term emotional goals in emotional situations was associated with enhanced well-being. Exploratory analyses examined gender differences and the role of belief in goal malleability in intention to pursue long-term emotional change.

Keywords: emotional goals, emotion motives, personality change, well-being

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Emotion regulation is a fast-growing field of study in the realm of psychological science and in the subfield of emotion science. Better emotion regulation is associated with greater well-being (John & Gross, 2004), and problems with emotion regulation (i.e., emotion dysregulation) show clear links with symptoms of psychopathology (Aldao et al., 2010; Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017; Watson & Naragon-Gainey, 2010). One of the key aspects of emotion regulation is that regulation is *motivated*—people try to modulate or maintain their emotions because they seek particular emotional states and assume (rightfully so)—that emotions can either help or hinder their goals (Tamir, 2016; Tamir et al., 2020). The question under investigation in this article is as follows: What *kind* of goals? We focus here on trying to understand the *long-term* emotional goals people have for themselves, which extends beyond what kinds of emotions people want to feel (Tamir et al., 2020) to who a person wants to *be* emotionally. We explore the breadth and scope of long-term emotional goals and examine how pursuit of long-term emotional goals maps on to efforts to change personality.

Emotional Goals and Motives

The extant work on emotional goals has focused primarily on the goals people have for what they want to feel *now* (i.e., momentary or short-term emotional goals; Swerdlow et al., 2022; Wilms et al., 2020). Most of the time, people seek pro-hedonic emotional goals, which involve feeling more pleasant and fewer unpleasant emotions (Tamir, 2016; Tsai, 2017). However, people can also pursue contrahedonic goals with the intention of feeling *less pleasant* and/or *more unpleasant.* Emotional goals can be general (e.g., "I want to feel less bad") or specific (e.g., "I want to feel 40% more angry").

Emotion goals are distinct from both emotion *motives* and the means for reaching emotional goals (i.e., emotion regulation strategies). Emotion motives are considered the "why" behind emotion goals (Tamir et al., 2020), representing the broader reasons people pursue emotional experiences. Emotions can be pursued to enhance (or disrupt) social relationships (Wilms et al., 2020), to

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improve performance (Tamir et al., 2013), or to verify beliefs about the self (Wood et al., 2009). Both hedonic and contrahedonic emotional goals can serve a variety of motives. For example, one person may want to feel pleasant and upbeat to accomplish creative tasks (Henderson et al., 2023), whereas a depressed person may pursue sadness (Millgram et al., 2015, 2019), because happiness feels out of reach or unfamiliar, consistent with an epistemic self-verification motive to experience sadness (Tamir, 2016).

Once a person sets an emotional goal, they then must employ a strategy (or multiple strategies; Ford et al., 2019) to achieve their desired state by upregulating the desired feelings and/or down-regulating undesired feelings (Tamir et al., 2020). From an emotional goal perspective, the choice of strategy should be consistent with the emotional goal, where an "effective" strategy helps a person attain their desired type and level of emotion (Gross, 2015; Southward et al., 2021). For example, when a depressed person *wants* to feel sad, whether consciously (Millgram et al., 2015) or unconsciously (Winer & Salem, 2016), they may choose to stay home from a party they were invited to.

Effective Versus Adaptive

The depressed person example highlights an important distinction between *effective* and *adaptive* emotion regulation (Southward et al., 2021). Effective emotion regulation involves successfully modulating (or maintaining) the emotion toward the desired emotional state (Christensen & Aldao, 2015; Southward et al., 2021). Staying home from a party is *effective* at facilitating sadness, likely by increasing isolation and removing opportunities for happiness and social connection. Yet, this is not an *adaptive* choice because withdrawal, isolation, and avoidance exacerbate depression (Jacobson et al., 1996; Yildirum & Belen, 2018), and depression symptoms tend to abate when people engage in more social and pleasurable activities (e.g., behavioral activation; Alexopoulos et al., 2016). *Adaptive* strategies are those that facilitate long-term desired outcomes (Christensen & Aldao, 2015; Southward et al., 2021). Most often, these long-term outcomes are operationalized as greater well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, balance of positive to negative affect; E. Diener et al., 2010) or as improved mental health.

Although pursuit of well-being and pursuit of improved mental health *may* be goals that people have for themselves, assuming that these *are* the goals indicative of adaptive functioning is potentially problematic. The field of emotion regulation has moved toward considering emotion regulation flexibility where strategy selection "fits" the goals at hand (Aldao et al., 2015; Bonanno & Burton, 2013). The idea missing from current conceptualizations of *adaptive* emotion regulation is what individuals are seeking for themselves emotionally in the long-term. If effective emotion regulation involves strategies that help people obtain their momentary emotional goals, perhaps adaptive emotion regulation strategies are those that help people obtain their long-term emotional goals.

However, little is known about the *types* of emotional goals people have for themselves long-term other than (a) desired or "ideal" emotions people wish to experience and (b) existing research on goals to change personality, where long-term emotional goals may overlap with intended goals to change emotional aspects of personality (e.g., reducing neuroticism).

Desired or Ideal Emotions

The goals for emotions people hope to feel more of and those they hope to feel less of are referred to as desired emotions (Tamir et al., 2016) or ideal affect (Tsai, 2017). The emotions that people prefer to feel are culturally situated (Tsai, 2007). For example, many people from East Asian cultures prefer low-arousal positive affect (e.g., calmness, relaxation), whereas those from the United States typically prefer high-arousal positive affect (e.g., excitement, joy; Tsai, 2007, 2017).

People also desire to feel emotions that are consistent with their core values (Tamir et al., 2016). For example, people who value safety and comfort want to feel greater levels of calmness and lower levels of anxiety, whereas those who value power want to feel more anger (Tamir et al., 2016). In general, people have greater well-being when they feel the emotions they *want* to feel, whether those feelings are pleasant (e.g., awe, love, excitement) or unpleasant (e.g., sadness, anger, disgust; Tamir et al., 2017). Importantly, the emotions people desire for themselves and find ideal are emotions that people are more likely to pursue in moments of daily life—the long-term desired emotions contribute to momentary emotional goals.

Although useful, ideal, and desired affect are not sufficient for characterizing long-term emotional goals. Beyond the feelings a person desires to feel more of, that person may *also* have goals for themselves related to how they process and respond to their emotions. For example, perhaps a person has been told they are "too impulsive" and thus develops a goal to "feel but not act" on their emotions. This is an emotional goal, but it is not a goal about desired or ideal feelings. Rather, goals related to processing and/or reacting to emotions may be consistent with goals to change the emotional aspects of personality—who does a person want to *be* as a person (in terms of their emotions)?

Pursuit of Personality Change

Historically, people used to think of personality as "set like plaster" (McCrae & John, 1992) and relatively unchangeable, but more recently, studies have determined that personality *does* change (Srivastava et al., 2003) and that people *seek* personality change (Baranski et al., 2021; Hudson et al., 2019). The trait people typically want to change the most is neuroticism, which is the trait most closely associated with emotional functioning—people typically want to become less neurotic and more emotionally stable (Baranski et al., 2021; Hudson et al., 2019). Relatedly, people also want to become less self-conscious and more conscientious (i.e., better self-control; Allan et al., 2014), both of which may overlap with goals to change long-term emotional functioning. Moreover, personality traits that are more desirable may be seen as more changeable (Steimer & Mata, 2016), which is important because a person is unlikely to pursue changing a personality trait that they think is utterly unchangeable.

Thus, the extant research confirms that people have personal characteristics they want to change and can change with effort (Hudson et al., 2019). Personality change shows a bidirectional association with well-being; people who are generally happier exhibit more personality change (Soto, 2015), in part because happier people feel more capable of attaining their goals (Haase et al., 2012). Because we conceptualize long-term emotional goals as consistent with aims to change the emotional aspects of personality, it should be that intention to pursue long-term emotional goals

would also be predicted by well-being and would be associated with beliefs in goal changeability.

Short Versus Long-Term Emotional Goals

If people do hold long-term emotional goals, then there may be times at which short-term emotional goals (i.e., what a person wants to feel *now*) are consistent with long-term emotional goals, but other instances where short- and long-term goals diverge. Stated differently, sometimes *effective* regulation strategies also facilitate *adaptive* functioning, but sometimes *effective* and *adaptive* differ. For example, if someone wants to feel grateful (*goal identification*), they write in a gratitude journal (*strategy selection* and *implementation*), and their feelings of gratefulness increase to the desired level (assessed via *monitoring*)—this would constitute effective emotion regulation (Gross et al., 2019). If this person has long-term emotional goals related to loving and supportive interpersonal relationships, use of a gratitude journal and subsequent feelings of gratitude are also likely to help with their long-term goal.

In contrast, if another person with a history of sexual assault becomes anxious and uncomfortable on a date and they want to decrease their anxiety, they may abruptly end the date and go home early—this behavior decreases anxiety and thus could also be considered "effective." Yet, if this person has long-term goals of reducing emotion-driven behavior and maintaining loving and supportive relationships, the choice to emphasize momentary emotional relief is likely not *adaptive*. Indeed, experts have suggested that people with symptoms of psychopathology tend to prioritize short-term emotional goals over long-term gains (Aldao et al., 2015). Relatedly, studies have shown that greater attention to long-term consequences in general (not specific to emotion) is associated with greater well-being (Ortner et al., 2018), and when people think more about how they want to feel in the long-term, they use more engagement-based regulation strategies (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, problem solving; Ortner et al., 2022). Thus, greater attention onto who someone wants to *be* emotionally in the long run should also be associated with greater well-being.

Present Studies

The initial aim of the current work was to understand the types of long-term emotional goals people have for themselves and then evaluate the implications of long-term emotional goals for emotional functioning. We also wanted to explore how people balance their long-term and short-term emotional goals. Because this is the first study—to our knowledge—to evaluate long-term emotional goals, we did not want to assume that the goals most often associated with adaptation (e.g., well-being, mental health) were in fact goals for all people, but we did want to examine how long-term emotional goals may relate to these traditionally "adaptive" outcomes.

In our first study, we used an open-ended qualitative approach to develop a taxonomy of long-term emotional goals (i.e., desired emotional self). In our second (preregistered) study, we then sought quantitative replication of the qualitatively derived taxonomy. We also tested the prediction that people with greater discrepancies between their current emotional selves and desired emotional selves would have generally lower well-being (e.g., lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction) and that those who experience greater positive affect would report greater intention to work toward their long-term emotional goals. In addition, we tested the prediction that attention to short-term over long-term emotional goals was associated with lower well-being.

Study 1

Method

Transparency and Openness

Because this study was qualitative, we did not conduct a power analysis but ran the number of participants we had funding to run. The study was approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board. Below, we report all measures given in the study. All data are available at https://osf.io/5n8b4/?view_only=b75f92cfc4c9430586f705de853098da. Data coding was conducted in Microsoft Excel. This study's design and analysis were not preregistered. Data were collected in October of 2023.

Participants

Participants were recruited from Prolific, an online recruitment company for social science research. The only restriction was that participants were adults (18 and over) and lived in the United States. We also asked for a balanced sample in terms of gender representation (i.e., approximately equal men and women, where those who identified as nonbinary were also welcome). The study was open to 160 people, but three gave nonsensical answers to the emotional goals question and were excluded. The average age was 38.19 ($SD = 13.85$, range = 20 to 75), with 47.8% women and 2.5% nonbinary, and 17.3% who identified as a racial or ethnic minority (5.7% Black, 7.6% Hispanic/Latine/LatinX, 7.6% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 5.7% mixed race, and .6% other). The sample was highly educated, with 55.0% who reported having a bachelor's degree or higher (master's, doctoral degree, etc.), and was geographically diverse, with 36 out of the 50 U.S. states represented.

In addition to typical demographics, participants were asked about their mental health diagnoses. In a series of yes/no questions, they indicated if they had ever received a diagnosis of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, obsessive–compulsive disorder, eating disorder, substance use disorder, bipolar disorder, a personality disorder, schizophrenia, or other. In total, 44.6% ($n = 70$) indicated no history of mental health concerns. For the remaining 87 who reported a mental health diagnosis, 67.8% ($n = 59$) indicated depression, 80.5% ($n = 70$) indicated anxiety (panic disorder, generalized anxiety, social anxiety), 24.1% ($n = 21$) indicated posttraumatic stress disorder, 11.5% ($n = 10$) indicated obsessive–compulsive disorder, 12.6% ($n = 11$) indicated substance use disorder, and the remainder of the diagnoses (eating disorder, bipolar disorder, personality disorder, schizophrenia) were indicated by fewer than seven people in each category.

Procedure

After completing informed consent and providing demographic information, participants were asked three qualitative questions about their emotional lives. We first asked people, "Describe yourself emotionally. This is intended to be a truly open-ended question; you can interpret this however you like as long as your answer is about your feelings, moods, and emotions." The prompt was included to get

people thinking about their emotional selves and to identify emotional aspects of themselves they may have wanted to change; we did not intend to code this item.

Then, we asked people about their long-term emotional goals. Specifically, we asked "What are your long-term emotional goals for yourself? If you think about yourself in the future, if you become the person you've always wanted to be, what will *that* future version of yourself be like emotionally?" Finally, to address emotional goals from a slightly different angle, we asked about emotional goals that others may have pushed onto the person. We asked, "What are the long-term emotional goals other people have suggested for you? What kinds of feedback have you gotten from other people about who you should be emotionally?" This prompt was included because we assumed that a person may recognize that others have goals for them different from the goals they set for themselves, and thus asking this would allow for a broader and more complete set of emotional goals.

For all three qualitative questions, participants were asked to write at least two sentences and were prompted to write more if they wrote under 60 characters.

Data Analytic Plan

Using iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we reviewed all narrative responses to the personal emotional goals. We developed content themes in the initial passes and then condensed and refined the codes. We then reviewed the responses to the emotional goals people thought they "should" have (i.e., goals suggested by others) to ensure we did not miss any salient goals. A goal was noted only when at least five people mentioned the topic.

Results

Emotional Goal Categories and Subcategories

There was a variety of themes in the data in terms of the emotional goals people had toward themselves. Notably, the same types of goals appeared in the set of goals people indicated they "should" have (i.e., goals that other people think the participant should pursue). In total, we generated 13 emotional goals that generally group into four overarching categories (see Table 1): (a) hedonic, (b) self-assuredness, (c) reduce emotionality, and (d) interpersonal. Notably, these 13 goals were considered independent of one another and the categories are not intended to be prescriptive.

The most common goals people described were hedonic in nature. People described goals for increasing happiness, peace, calmness, or contentment (i.e., positive feelings). Relatedly, people also talked about reducing specific emotions or emotional syndromes, including depression, anxiety, social anxiety, or just negative emotions they wanted to feel less of (e.g., anger).

In addition, some people talked about goals we roughly grouped together as "self-assuredness," reflecting curiosity and openness related to the self. These goals include increasing the experience of emotion (i.e., allowing emotions to rise and fall, allowing a broader range of emotions, tolerating emotion), increasing self-understanding related to emotion, and increasing self-confidence (i.e., listening to emotional reactions and not ignoring them for the sake of others).

The second most common overarching category of goals was related to reducing emotionality. We conceptualized these goals as distinct from desired or ideal affect (i.e., experience more positive and/or less negative emotion) as these are not about what a person wants to feel but how a person experiences and responds to emotions. For example, participants talked about wanting to reduce emotional sensitivity (sometimes explicitly) or aspects of sensitivity, such as not feeling as intensely or having as many feelings over "small" events. People also talked about wanting to increase their emotion regulation skills. Some people talked about wanting to reduce their emotion-driven behaviors; this was specifically about not *acting* on emotion. Finally, people also described wanting more cognitive control over their emotions, not "wallowing" as much in negative thoughts (i.e., less rumination and worry). The latter two goals correspond to goals to reduce emotion-related impulsivity (Carver & Johnson, 2018), where reducing emotion-driven behavior reflects goals to decrease behavioral impulsivity in response to emotion and increasing cognitive control reflects goals to decrease cognitive impulsivity in response to emotion.

Finally, people reported emotional goals that were interpersonal in nature. People indicated goals for emotional connection, characterized by wanting to have stronger emotional relationships, sometimes desiring a romantic partner or strong friendships. People also indicated goals for emotional expression, recognizing the importance of sharing emotions with others. A specific intrapersonal goal for emotion surrounded compassion, which was around showing other people how much they matter, with the goal of giving themselves to others. Some people also described an opposite intrapersonal goal of setting more emotional boundaries, emphasizing the self *over* others.

"Should" Goals

The goals that people generated as stemming from others (i.e., goals others suggested they "ought to" or "should" have) were similar in scope to the long-term goals people indicated for themselves. There were some distinctions in rates of endorsement, though. For example, more of the participants indicated that others had never conveyed any long-term emotional goals for them *or* that they do not think it reasonable to listen to others' goals (i.e., the "no goal" category was larger, $n = 29$, 18.47%). There were also more people who noted that other people have suggested they *increase* their emotional expressivity.

Notably, although the "should" goals did not generate any additional goal categories, there were a few goals mentioned (categorized as "other") that did not appear at all in the original goals coding. For example, contrahedonic goals were mentioned, but only by two participants (e.g., "Other people have told me I should worry more, or that I should be more angered but I simply can't."). In addition, two additional people also reported that others suggest they should *refrain* from expressing emotions. For example, "I have gotten feedback saying that I should be less emotional. I think this means that I should hide my emotions and keep them to myself."

Discussion

This first exploratory study corroborated existing research on ideal (Tsai, 2017) and desired affect (Tamir et al., 2016), whereby over a quarter of participants spontaneously reported hedonic goals to increase positive emotions and/or decrease negative emotions. These were the most noted long-term emotional goals generated in this study.

Table 1
Coded Categories of Emotional Goals in Study 1

Goal category	Specific goal	Example	Own goal *N* (%)	"Should" goal *N* (%)
No goal	No goal	"I don't have a goal to be any different than I am now. I am happy with my emotional self."	10 (6.37%)	29 (18.47%)
Hedonic	Increase positive	"I will hopefully maintain a positive outlook on life. I want to continue to be cheerful and help uplift others. My goal is to try to be happy wherever and whenever possible."	43 (27.39%)	18 (11.46%)
Hedonic	Reduce negative (and reduce symptoms of psychopathology)	"I would like to be not depressed and to have my anxiety controlled."	45 (28.66%)	24 (15.29%)
Self-assured	Allow and experience (all) emotions	"I want to feel them fully and trust that I won't be overwhelmed, and remember that they're only temporary and that feeling them fully will allow them to not get stuck within me."	13 (8.28%)	9 (5.73%)
Self-assured	Increased self-understanding	"I would like to be more in tune with my emotions and understand why I feel a certain way."	5 (3.18%)	4 (2.55%)
Self-assured	Self-confidence	"To have more confidence in the things I do whether it's going out in public and talking or just being myself without self consciously thinking about what other people are." "To always value the opinions I have about myself over the thoughts and impressions/ judgements of others." "To be able to be by myself without being upset."	17 (10.83%)	12 (7.64%)
Reduce emotionality	Reduce sensitivity, increase stability	"I want to have better control of my emotions and not be so moody or easily upset."	20 (12.74%)	15 (9.55%)
Reduce emotionality	Reduce emotion-driven behavior	"Try to remain rational and not make rash decisions based on my feelings."	15 (9.55%)	8 (5.09%)
Reduce emotionality	Learn to regulate (includes specific regulation skills)	"I want to be able to regulate them in a healthy way."	16 (10.19%)	5 (3.18%)
Reduce emotionality	Cognitive control, reducing self-criticism, wallowing or being "stuck" in negative thoughts	"I would like to refrain from wallowing in negative thoughts."	14 (8.92%)	15 (9.55%)
Interpersonal	Compassion; showing caring and concern for others	"If anything, I'd like to make sure that I show the people I care about how much I value them."	7 (4.46%)	5 (3.18%)
Interpersonal	Connecting to others, feeling loved and supported	"I want to develop and maintain stronger emotional connections with others."	16 (10.19%)	7 (4.46%)
Interpersonal	Expressing emotions to others	"I would like to be able to communicate my emotions better and recognize when I am not doing so."	16 (10.19%)	28 (17.83%)
Interpersonal	Creating emotional boundaries by removing toxic people and reducing dependency	"I need to be able to set boundaries at work, with my loved ones and in order to give myself some stronger boundaries to safeguard my own heart, voice."	10 (6.37%)	10 (6.37%)
Other	Other reasons	"I want to rely more on God and let my worries go to him." "I hope to become less depressed and more outgoing. I think extroversion is a trait that is widely praised by society at large." "Ideally I would move up in my field and have some kind of high-level role, giving me more financial freedom. I think without the stress of worrying about finances I would be in a better mental space."	9 (5.73%)	20 (12.74%)

Beyond the hedonic goals of what people wanted to feel, people also reported goals more consistent with personality change. For example, decreased emotional sensitivity and exhibiting lower reactivity/impulsivity in response to emotions are theoretically related to goals for lower neuroticism (Sauer-Zavala et al., 2017). Other goals were related to emotional intelligence concepts, such as understanding emotions better, developing greater regulation skills, and allowing emotions (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). Many of the goals described here were interpersonal in nature, such as desiring greater interpersonal connections with others, wanting to have compassion

for others, and sharing emotions more with others, all of which may correspond with the personality trait of agreeableness (DeYoung et al., 2007). Interestingly, we also found evidence of goals related to decreasing dependence on others, which included goals for self-confidence (i.e., prioritizing the self over other people's opinions) and setting interpersonal boundaries. The results here confirm our general predictions that long-term emotional goals extend beyond hedonic feelings.

At first blush, it may seem confusing why we found no evidence of contrahedonic goals. We suspect that when people were thinking long-term and broadly, few (if any) people would indicate that they *want* to feel anxious or depressed in the long run. Prior work suggests that depressed and anxious people tend to avoid positivity (Winer & Salem, 2016) and are more motivated to feel sad and anxious feelings that are familiar (Millgram et al., 2019). Yet, we suspect that these motives are more short-term and do not translate into long-term emotional goals, though this suspicion will need to be confirmed in later work.

Finally, in looking at the responses for this study, we recognized that it may be important to assess not only the goals people have for themselves but also their willingness to work *toward* those goals, as well as their belief in whether the goal is achievable. Past work has found that when people believe that emotions are malleable or changeable, they engage in more emotion regulation (Kneeland et al., 2016)—purportedly because they have greater faith that their regulation efforts could be effective. In addition, some people likely have greater self-efficacy to enact change toward their emotional goals. Particularly, as people with greater positive affect tend to report more self-efficacy (Schutte, 2014) and greater pursuit of goals (Haase et al., 2012) including goals for personality change (Soto, 2015), we expected that people with greater positive affect would show greater intention to work toward their long-term emotional goals.

Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to obtain quantitative data on the qualitative categories derived from coding in Study 1. In this study, we had four major preregistered hypotheses (see the Transparency and Openness section for the link). First, we predicted that the categories of goals that were most frequently mentioned in Study 1 would also be the goals rated as most desirable when assessed quantitatively (e.g., increase positive affect, decrease negative affect, and affective symptomatology). Second, we predicted that greater discrepancies between desired long-term emotional goals and the current emotional self would be associated with lower well-being (e.g., lower positive affect, greater negative affect, lower life satisfaction). Third, we predicted that people with greater positive affect would report greater average intention to work toward goals. Finally, we predicted that greater attention to long-term goals over short-term goals would be associated with greater positive affect and life satisfaction, whereas greater attention to short-term (relative to long-term goals) would be associated with higher negative affect, consistent with prior work suggesting that a long-term focus is related to higher well-being (Ortner et al., 2018).

In our preregistered plan, we also indicated that we would calculate descriptive statistics and correlations among the goals and between current emotional self, desired emotional self, intention to work toward the emotional goals, malleability of the goals, attention to short- and long-term goals, and indicators of well-being. We also indicated an intention to look at goal malleability and the goals selected as "top" emotional goals (i.e., goals that were ideographically prioritized for each participant).

Method

Transparency and Openness

Similar to Study 1, we did not conduct a power analysis, as the purpose was to obtain initial quantitative data. The study was approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board. We report all questions and measures in the Procedure section below. All data, code, and research materials are available at https://osf.io/5n8b4/?view_only=b75f92cfc4c9430586f705de853098da. Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26. This study's design and analysis were preregistered at https://osf.io/t9r6a. Data were collected in November 2023.

Participants

Participants were recruited from Prolific. To maintain consistency with Study 1, they were required to be from the United States and could not have participated in Study 1. We also intentionally requested a gender-balanced sample, without excluding nonbinary participants. In total, 251 adults completed the study. Seven were excluded for failing the embedded attention check, leaving a final sample of 244 people. The average age was 38.57 ($SD = 14.22$), and the sample was 48% women (3.4% nonbinary) and 65.2% White (12.3% LatinX/Hispanic, 9.4% Black, 6.6% Asian/Asian American, 4.9% biracial, and 1.6% other).

Measures

Goal Attributes.

Current Emotional Self. Participants rated their current emotional selves on 13 items, one item for each of the emotional goal categories coded in Study 1. Prototypical items were selected that seemed to best represent the overall category and were phrased to reflect current emotional patterns and habits. For example, the "reduce emotion driven behavior" item was "I avoid making rash decisions based on my feelings." All items were rated from 0 (*not at all like me*) to 6 (*EXTREMELY like me*) on Likert-type scales.

Desired Emotional Self. Each of 13 long-term emotional goals (referred to here as the desired emotional self for clarity of comparison) was rated from 0 (*no desire*) to 6 (*extremely strong desire*). These were the same 13 items as the current emotional self ratings but phrased in terms of someone "to be" rather than from an "I am" perspective. For example, the emotion-driven behavior item was "To be someone who avoids making rash decisions based on my emotions."

Intention to Work on Goals. Each of the 13 emotional goals was rated in terms of how much effort the participant intended to put toward that goal. There was intentionally no time frame described, as participants were told explicitly they could think about working toward these as goals at "some point" in the future. Each item was rated from 0 (*I have no interest in working on this goal*), 1 (*In all honesty, I will PROBABLY NOT put forth effort toward this goal*), 2 (*I MIGHT put forth effort toward this goal*), 3 (*I will LIKELY put*

forth effort toward this goal at some point), to 4 (*I will DEFINITELY put forth effort toward this goal at some point*).

Goal Malleability. To assess goal malleability, participants rated each of the 13 emotional goals on how changeable they believed each attribute to be, from 0 (*not changeable*) to 5 (*definitely changeable with effort*). These items were included as intentionally exploratory, as we expected that people may be more willing to put forth effort to achieve a desired long-term emotional goal *if* they see that attribute as changeable. These items are a type of malleability belief (Kneeland et al., 2016) that link beliefs about the malleability of emotions (Ford & Gross, 2019) with malleability of personality (Steimer & Mata, 2016).

Attention to Short- and Long-Term Goals. We developed eight novel items to assess the degree to which people report paying attention to their short-term hedonic goals (i.e., how they want to feel *right then*) versus their long-term emotional goals (i.e., who they want to be emotionally in the long run) while experiencing negative emotions. We first asked people to consider their focus when in a negative emotional state via this prompt: "When you experience negative emotions (e.g., anger, disgust, sadness, fear), how often are you thinking about these different kinds of emotional goals (even if not consciously)?" They then rated four items asking about short-term goals (e.g., "I have a hard time thinking about anything besides what I want to feel at that second.") and four focused on long-term goals (e.g., "I need to pursue the emotions that will benefit me most in the long run."). Items were rated from 0 (*almost never, 0%–10%*) to 1 (*almost always, 90%–100%*), with anchors borrowed from the Difficulties with Emotion Regulation Scale (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

Well-Being.

Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences. The Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE; E. Diener et al., 2010) is a 12-item measure assessing the degree to which people experience positive and negative affect in their lives. Six of the items assess positive states (good, positive, pleasant, joy, happy, contented), and six assess negative states (negative, bad, unpleasant, sad, angry, afraid). Items are rated as to how frequently the person experiences each state from 1 (*very rarely or never*) to 5 (*very often or always*). The SPANE produces separate positive affect (PA; $\alpha = .93$) and negative affect (NA; $\alpha = .91$) scales.

Life Satisfaction. A five-item life satisfaction scale (E. D. Diener et al., 1985) was used. Items (e.g., "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.") are rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores reflect greater life satisfaction ($\alpha = .93$).

Procedure

The study was conducted via Qualtrics. After providing informed consent, participants rated their current emotional selves, desired emotional selves, and then intention to work toward each goal (in that order, each section on a different page). We then asked participants to select their top emotional goals. They were given a list of all 13 goals and asked to check up to four of the goals that were crucially important to them. For this question, the order of goals was randomly presented. Participants also had the option to select "I am not interested in prioritizing any of these goals" as their one selection, which always appeared last on the list. These items were included to understand which goals were most prioritized by participants (e.g., to follow-up Study 1), with the assumption that goals selected as "top" goals would be more desired and that people would intend to work toward them with more effort.

We then assessed attention to short- and long-term goals when feeling negative emotions, followed by the two well-being measures assessing positive and negative affect (SPANE; E. Diener et al., 2010) and life satisfaction (E. D. Diener et al., 1985). Finally, participants rated each goal for how changeable or malleable it was and then provided their demographics before returning to Prolific for compensation.

Data Analytic Plan

The data analytic plan was preregistered, with four predictions and several exploratory analyses. Our first prediction was that the hedonic long-term goals (i.e., for increased positive affect and decreased negative affect) would be the highest endorsed, consistent with Study 1. To assess this, we calculated descriptive statistics on the desired emotional self items (means, standard deviations) and we calculated the percentage of people who selected each goal as a "top" long-term emotional goal. Note that to fully explore the data, consistent with our preregistration plan, we also conducted paired samples *t* tests between the current emotional self ratings and desired emotional self ratings with the assumption that most people would consider their current emotional self less ideal/desirable than their desired emotional self. We also calculated intergoal correlations among the current emotional self items and the desired emotional self items; these were exploratory and are available in Supplemental Table S1.[1]

Our second hypothesis was that greater discrepancies between current emotional functioning (i.e., current emotional self) and the desired emotional self would be associated with lower well-being. To test this, we calculated difference scores by subtracting current emotional self scores from desired emotional self scores, where higher discrepancy scores reflect wanting the attribute more than having it (Tamir et al., 2016). We calculated correlations between the discrepancy scores and indicators of well-being—NA, PA, and life satisfaction. Zero-order exploratory correlations between well-being indicators and the separate current emotional self attributes as well as the long-term desired emotional self attributes are provided in the Supplemental Materials to be fully transparent (Supplemental Table S3).

Our third hypothesis was that people with greater positive affect would report generally greater intention to work on emotional goals, which we tested by correlating well-being indicators with the average (across all 13 goals) intention to work toward long-term emotional goals. Correlations between individual goal intentions and indicators of well-being along with descriptive statistics for the intention items are provided in Supplemental Table S4.

Finally, we wanted to confirm that people with lower well-being tend to prioritize short-term over long-term emotional goals (Christensen & Aldao, 2015). To assess this, we first conducted

[1] A reviewer asked whether the 13 goal items were reduced into subscales, such as the overarching categories found in Study 1. Although our preregistration plan involved looking at the goals separately, we did conduct a principal component analysis on the desired emotional self items (and the current emotional self items, just to be thorough). Parallel analysis suggested two components but accounted for less than 50% of the variance. Moreover, many of the items loaded onto multiple factors. As there was not a clear solution, we chose to examine the items separately but list the component loadings of the confirmatory factor analysis in Supplemental Table S2.

psychometric analyses on the eight items assessing attentiveness to short- and long-term goals via a principal component analysis to confirm that short- and long-term goal items loaded onto separate factors (see Supplemental Table S5). We used an oblimin rotation, as we did not want to assume these items were uncorrelated. We calculated reliability ratings for the separate short- and long-term goal scales and a difference score to reflect the relative degree of attention to short- versus long-term goals. We then conducted correlations between attentiveness to short-term, long-term, and discrepancy between attentiveness to short- and long-term goals with indicators of well-being and average current emotional self, desired emotional self, and intention to work toward emotional goals.

In our preregistration plan, we also indicated an exploratory plan to examine demographic differences, to assess the role of goal malleability in long-term emotional goals, and to compare goals selected as "top" with those not selected as "top" goals. To assess gender differences, we calculated independent samples *t* tests comparing men and women on the current emotional self (Supplemental Table S6) and the desired emotional self (Supplemental Table S7). To assess goal malleability, we first calculated descriptive statistics and correlations between goal malleability and the other goal indicators (current emotional self, desired emotional self, intention to work toward goals; Supplemental Table S8). We originally preregistered an exploratory plan to assess goal malleability as a potential mediator between desired emotional goals and intention to work toward goals. However, as these data are cross-sectional, we ultimately opted against mediation (Winer et al., 2016), but we did conduct hierarchical regressions with the intention to work toward each goal as the outcome variable. Step 1 had the current emotional rating for that goal, Step 2 included the desire for that goal long-term, and Step 3 had malleability for that goal. This analytic method allowed for assessment of whether any relationship between goal desire (Step 2) and intention to work decreased with the addition of Step 3, thus providing a look at mediation with traditional methods, but also allowed for a simpler examination of how each factor (current self, desired self, malleability) contributes to goal intention. Notably, because the individual analyses were similar across emotional goals, we ultimately averaged across emotional attributes and present one aggregated model (individual models are presented in Supplemental Table S9).

To assess differences in the current emotional self, desired emotional self, intention to work, and goal malleability on goals selected as "top" versus those not selected as "top," we first calculated the number of "top" goals per person (between 0 and 4). We then averaged ratings for the top goals ideographically per person and averaged ratings for unselected goals in the same way. We calculated paired samples *t* tests between the ratings for "top" and unselected goals and present these in Supplemental Table S10.

The threshold for significance was preregistered as $p < .01$ due to the number of exploratory analyses conducted.

Results

Current Versus Desired Emotional Selves

Descriptive statistics for current emotional self and desired emotional self are presented in Table 2. Every desired emotional self item (i.e., those reflecting long-term emotional goals) had means above the midpoint (e.g., 3), suggesting they were at least moderately desirable. Our first hypothesis, in line with Study 1, that people would prioritize feeling good (i.e., high levels of positive affect) and feeling low levels of negative affect was supported; these two were the only goals that over 50% of the participants picked as one of their "top" goals. The only other goal that was selected as a "top" goal by almost half of the sample was to avoid wallowing in negative thoughts.

Although not part of our preregistered hypotheses, we also assessed discrepancies between the current and desired emotional selves (also in Table 2). The current self was rated lower on every goal attribute except for "being emotionally open and readable"; this was the lowest rated attribute that was also selected as "top" by the smallest percentage of participants. These data suggest that people value emotional expressiveness less than other goals and that, on average, people consider their current emotional self as adequate in this domain.

Associations With Well-Being

Desired/Current Discrepancies and Well-Being. Our second hypothesis was that greater discrepancies between current and desired emotional selves would be associated with lower well-being (see correlations in Table 3). This prediction was mostly supported; greater discrepancies between current and desired emotional selves were associated with greater NA, lower PA, and lower life satisfaction for *most*, but not *all* of the goals. Wanting more than currently having attributes of setting boundaries with others, acting compassionately toward others, emotional openness (i.e., expressiveness), and avoiding making rash decisions based on feelings were not associated with well-being. Notably, as the overall average discrepancy was stronger than many of the individual correlations, it may be that generally seeing oneself as less emotionally adept than desired is associated with lower well-being.

To be thorough, we also calculated correlations between the discrepancy items and intention to put forth effort on the associated goal. This was not a preregistered hypothesis, but we thought it might make sense that those who identified a greater discrepancy between who they currently are emotionally and who they desire to be emotionally in the long-term might also report greater intention to put forth effort toward that goal (see Table 3). This was the case for most, but not every goal. Greater discrepancies for confidence, compassion, connection, and increasing positive affect were *not* associated with the intention to put forth effort toward those goals.

Intention to Work on Goals and Well-Being. Our third hypothesis was that greater intention to work toward emotional goals would be associated with greater positive affect. We found, as predicted, that the average intention to work on emotional goals was associated with greater positive affect ($r = .24$, $p < .001$). However, intention to work on emotional goals was not associated with either life satisfaction ($r = .04$, $p = .49$) or negative affect ($r = -.04$, $p = .54$).

Attention to Short- and Long-Term Goals

A principal component analysis on the attentiveness to short- and long-term goal items resulted in a two-factor solution accounting for 67.98% of the variance, with one long-term factor ($\alpha = .89$) and one short-term factor ($\alpha = .71$; see Supplemental Table S5 for factor loadings). Perceived attention to short-term and long-term goals in emotional situations were not significantly correlated ($r = .10$, $p = .11$). Overall, participants reported attending to short-term goals

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Current and Desired Long-Term Emotional Selves in Study 2

No.	Item	Current emotional self	Desired emotional self (long-term goal)	Paired *t* test	% selected as top goal	*r* (current and desired)
		M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)			
4	I frequently feel cheerful, happy, content, and grateful. (Positive Affect)	3.13 (1.60)	5.14 (1.08)	−17.67, $p < .001$, $d = 1.13$	53.3% ($n = 130$)	.16*
13	I feel low levels of anxiety, stress, sadness, anger, guilt, and shame. (Low Negative Affect)	2.49 (1.84)	4.50 (1.90)	−11.28, $p < .001$, $d = .72$	52.5% ($n = 128$)	−.11
1	I allow my feelings to rise and fall naturally without trying to push them away. (Allow)	3.16 (1.54)	3.86 (1.55)	−5.87, $p < .001$, $d = .38$	10.7% ($n = 26$)	.27**
8	I understand what I feel and why I feel the way I do. (Understand)	3.82 (1.47)	4.68 (1.23)	−7.98, $p < .001$, $d = .51$	14.8% ($n = 36$)	.22**
6	I am confident that what I think and feel matters, no matter what anyone else says. (Confidence)	3.79 (1.58)	4.75 (1.21)	−9.07, $p < .001$, $d = .58$	25.4% ($n = 62$)	.31**
2	I refrain from wallowing in negative thoughts. (Cognitive Control)	2.72 (1.72)	4.88 (1.20)	−15.54, $p < .001$, $d = 1.00$	45.5% ($n = 111$)	−.07
5	I avoid making rash decisions based on my feelings. (Reduce Emotion-Driven Behavior)	3.71 (1.56)	4.39 (1.48)	−5.94, $p < .001$, $d = .38$	22.5% ($n = 55$)	.31**
9	I am not particularly sensitive and reactive to emotional triggers. (Low Sensitivity)	2.34 (1.78)	4.20 (1.59)	−12.88, $p < .001$, $d = .93$	21.3% ($n = 52$)	.10
11	I have the skills to regulate extreme highs and lows. (Regulation)	3.22 (1.55)	4.83 (1.21)	−13.73, $p < .001$, $d = .88$	28.7% ($n = 70$)	.13
10	I develop and maintain strong emotional connections with others. (Connection)	3.28 (1.65)	4.49 (1.27)	−12.30, $p < .001$, $d = .79$	29.5% ($n = 72$)	.47**
7	I identify and act on opportunities to express kindness to people in need of help. (Compassion)	4.07 (1.33)	4.74 (1.38)	−9.33, $p < .001$, $d = .60$	24.2% ($n = 59$)	.66**
3	I set boundaries with others to safeguard my own heart, my own voice. (Interpersonal Boundaries)	3.40 (1.48)	4.28 (1.47)	−7.65, $p < .001$, $d = .49$	22.1% ($n = 54$)	.26**
12	I am emotionally open, where my feelings are readable to others. (Expression)	2.99 (1.66)	3.25 (1.75)	−2.20, $p = .03$, $d = .14$	5.7% ($n = 14$)	.42**

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Discrepancies Between Desired and Current Emotional Selves With Well-Being

Discrepancy desired–current	Well-being			
	SPANE NA	SPANE PA	Life satisfaction	Intention to work on goal
… Frequently feel cheerful, happy, content, and grateful. (Positive Affect)	.45**	−.55**	−.52**	.07
… Low levels of anxiety, stress, sadness, anger, guilt, and shame. (Low Negative Affect)	.23**	−.08	−.10	.49**
… Allow my feelings to rise and fall naturally without trying to push them away. (Allow)	.30**	−.23**	−.30**	.35**
… Understand what I feel and why I feel the way I do. (Understand)	.28**	−.28**	−.20**	.19*
… Confident that what I think and feel matters, no matter what anyone else says. (Confidence)	.26**	−.24**	−.21**	.03
… Refrain from wallowing in negative thoughts. (Cognitive Control)	.45**	−.42**	−.37**	.21**
… Avoid making rash decisions based on my feelings. (Reduce Emotion-Driven Behavior)	.12	−.13	−.16	.31**
… Not particularly sensitive and reactive to emotional triggers. (Low Sensitivity)	.30**	−.18*	−.29**	.34**
…. The skills to regulate extreme highs and lows. (Regulation)	.47**	−.35**	−.31**	.28**
… Develop and maintain strong emotional connections with others. (Connection)	.23**	−.22**	−.15	.05
… Identify and act on opportunities to express kindness to people in need of help. (Compassion)	−.02	.001	−.08	−.02
… Set boundaries with others to safeguard my own heart, my own voice. (Interpersonal Boundaries)	.12	−.11	−.14	.34**
… Emotionally open, where my feelings are readable to others. (Expression)	.08	−.12	−.14	.26**
Total (average of all discrepancy items)	.47**	−.43**	−.45**	.19*

Note. SPANE = Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences; NA = negative affect; PA = positive affect.
* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.81$) more than long-term goals ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(243) = 6.74$, $p < .001$, $d = .43$.

Our fourth hypothesis was that attention to short-term goals would be associated with lower well-being. We found (see Table 4) that greater perceived attention to short-term goals was associated with greater negative affect. We also found that greater perceived attention toward long-term goals was associated with greater well-being (e.g., lower NA, higher PA, and higher life satisfaction). In addition, people with greater current emotional skills (i.e., a higher average score on the current emotional self items) reported greater attention to long-term goals and more attention to long-term relative to short-term goals. People with greater intention to work on their emotional selves tended to attend to both short-term and long-term emotional goals in emotional situations, according to their self-report.

Exploratory Analyses

Demographic Differences in Current and Desired Emotional Selves. Because these are the first studies (to our knowledge) to focus on long-term emotional goals, we wanted to understand any potential demographic differences among the goals. We examined the current emotional goals, desired emotional goals, and intention to work on each goal by gender, race (White vs. minority), and sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. not). There were no differences in current emotional attributes or desired attributes based on race or sexual orientation, but there were gender differences (see Supplemental Tables S6 and S7). In terms of current emotional selves, men reported greater abilities to refrain from wallowing in negative thoughts, lower emotional sensitivity, and better emotion regulation than women. In terms of long-term emotional goals, women reported greater desire for cognitive control, greater desire for interpersonal boundaries, and greater self-confidence compared to men.

Goal Malleability. We examined the goal malleability ratings as associated with current emotional self, long-term emotional goals, and intention to work on each goal. Correlations between goal malleability and the other indicators are presented in Supplemental Table S8. We also wanted to understand whether goal malleability accounted for significant variance in intention to work toward emotional goals, after accounting for both current and desired emotional selves. Individual models are reported in Supplemental Table S9, and an aggregated model is presented in Table 5. We found that greater intention to work toward emotional goals was associated with greater perceived emotional skills (i.e., higher current emotional self ratings) and stronger desired emotional self ratings (e.g., stronger long-term emotional goals). In addition, higher goal malleability was associated with greater intention to work toward goals even after accounting for current and desired emotional selves. Because both current self and desired self ratings remained significant with goal malleability in the model, mediation in the hierarchical model(s) is unlikely. Rather, it seems that degree of goal desirability *and* malleability both seem to be important contributors to effort to work toward long-term emotional goals.

"Top" Goals. Participants were allowed to select up to four "top" goals they wanted to prioritize, and most (75.8%) selected four. We calculated current emotional self ratings, desired emotional self ratings, intention to work toward goals, and goal malleability

Table 4
Attention to Short-Term and Long-Term Goals in Study 2

Index	Perceived attention on short-term goal	Perceived attention on long-term goal	Emphasis on short-term relative to long-term (short–long)
SPANE NA	.23**	−.19**	.31**
SPANE PA	−.05	.38**	−.34**
Life satisfaction	−.06	.24**	−.24**
Average current emotional self	−.02	.37**	−.32**
Average desired emotional self	.20*	.20*	−.04
Average discrepancy (desired–current)	.17*	−.28*	.26**
Average intention to work on goals	.21**	.37**	−.17*
Average goal malleability	.13	.03	.06

Note. SPANE = Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences; NA = negative affect; PA = positive affect.
* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

ratings for goals selected as "top" and those not selected as top ideographically for each person. Comparisons (see Supplemental Table S10) revealed that people rated themselves currently lower on their "top" goals compared to the unselected goals and had stronger ratings of desire, greater intention to work on, and higher perception of goal malleability for "top" goals compared to those goals unselected as "top" goals.

Discussion

The aim of the current preregistered study was to quantitatively confirm the relevance of the long-term emotional goals derived in Study 1. We had four specific predictions for this study, most of which were supported by the data. First, we expected to find that people find the goals most often generated in Study 1 the most desirable (e.g., hedonic goals to increase positive affect, decrease negative affect). Indeed, the hedonic goals *were* the goals most often selected as "top" goals, and goals for positive affect had the highest desirability rating (above 5, suggesting high desirability). Each goal presented here was rated, on average, as fairly desirable—each had means above 4.0 *except* goals for increased emotional expression.

Second, we predicted that people with greater discrepancies between their current emotional self and long-term emotional goals would report lower well-being, specifically lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction. Notably, there *were* empirical discrepancies between all of the goals except goals for emotional expression, suggesting that people see these emotional attributes as desirable and want more of them than they currently believe they have. Consistent with our predictions, we did find that discrepancies between desired and current emotional attributes were associated with at least one lower well-being index for most of the goals, but not for (a) interpersonal boundaries, (b) reduce emotion-driven behavior, or (c) compassion. There is no discernable pattern to these findings, and it remains unclear why *these* particular goal discrepancies were not associated with well-being; it may be that these discrepancies are related to some other kind of variable (e.g., social support).

Third, we predicted that people with greater positive affect would report greater intention to put forth effort toward goals, and this was supported. This prediction was based on the notion that greater self-efficacy is linked to greater positive affect (Schutte, 2014), and when people feel better—including better about themselves—they will be more likely to pursue their goals. In general, people are more willing to pursue challenges and tasks perceived as hard if they feel capable of doing them (Ajzen, 2020), and people feel more capable of exerting willpower (i.e., using self-control to pursue goals) when they feel more positive affect (Veilleux et al., 2021).

Finally, we predicted that greater attention to long-term goals over short-term goals would be associated with greater life satisfaction, whereas greater attention to short-term goals (relative to long-term goals) would be associated with higher negative affect. These predictions were supported; people who reported greater attention to short-term goals reported greater negative affect, and those who paid more attention to long-term goals had greater life satisfaction, greater positive affect, and lower negative affect. These results coincide with expert statements that people with psychopathology (i.e., more negative affect, lower well-being) tend to prioritize short-term over long-term goals (Christensen & Aldao, 2015), and call for the need to further examine how people emphasize and balance short-term and long-term emotional goals.

Table 5
Predicting Average Intention to Work Toward Emotional Goals in Study 2

Step	$R^2\Delta$	Predictor	*B* (*SE*)	β	*p*
Step 1	.11**	Average current self	.23 (.04)	.34	<.001
Step 2	.33**	Average current self	.10 (.04)	.15	.004
		Average desired goals	.50 (.04)	.61	<.001
Step 3	.04**	Average current self	.09 (.03)	.13	.008
		Average desired goals	.43 (.04)	.52	<.001
		Average goal malleability	.23 (.05)	.23	<.001
Overall	$R^2 = 49$**				

Note. *SE* = standard error.
** $p < .001$.

General Discussion

Together, these two studies provide preliminary evidence that long-term emotional goals include the kinds of emotions people want to feel (i.e., desired and ideal affect; Tamir, 2016; Tsai, 2017), but are broader than that. Long-term emotional goals include how people want to *be* emotionally in the long run. These results connect existing research on emotion goals and motives with related research on personality change (Allan et al., 2014), confirming that people *do* want to grow and change in how they navigate their emotions in the future.

Connection to Emotion Motives

Although the aims of the present study were not to confirm the extant research on emotion motives (i.e., the reasons *behind* the types of emotional goals people have for themselves, or what a person hopes to gain from achieving their emotional goals), there were some parallels. Namely, some of the long-term emotional goals here were interpersonal in nature, which is consistent with theory (Tamir, 2016) and empirical work suggesting that people pursue emotions for social reasons, whether to feel anger to confront others (Tamir et al., 2008) or to feel sadness to recruit support from others (Hackenbracht & Tamir, 2010). Here, we found that people want to feel emotionally connected to others and want to think of themselves as emotionally compassionate toward others. These are also socially associated motives.

We have articulated these attributes as long-term emotional goals in this study, but we recognize that many of these goals could be interpreted as motives underlying desired and/or ideal affect. For example, perhaps the desired affect people want to feel is love or empathy, and to feel these feelings, people are motivated toward emotional connection. What we have articulated as a goal (e.g., emotional connection) could be considered a motive (i.e., the reason behind an emotional goal). Similarly, perhaps the goal for decreased emotional sensitivity is really a motive to feel less negative affect. Future research can examine if and how extant emotional motives (e.g., social, performance, epistemic, eudemonic; Tamir, 2016) connect to the long-term emotional goals considered here. Future research can also aim to explore whether these long-term emotional goals are end goals or whether they are better characterized as motives that serve ideal and/or desired affect.

Connection to Personality Change

As predicted, some of the long-term emotional goals identified in this study are theoretically consistent with goals to change emotional aspects of personality. Prior work has found that people report wanting to change aspects of their personalities, most notably to decrease neuroticism (Baranski et al., 2021; Hudson et al., 2019). Considering that neuroticism is characterized by intense affect (Miller & Pilkonis, 2006) and is associated with heightened sensitivity and reactivity to emotional triggers (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010), desires to reduce neuroticism overlap with many of the long-term emotional goals identified in this study. Namely, goals to experience less negative affect, goals to have lower sensitivity, goals for less emotion-driven behavior, goals for lower rumination (e.g., wallowing in negative thoughts), and goals for better regulation are all consistent with desires to change neuroticism. Indeed, there are clinical treatment approaches that are effective in reducing neuroticism (Sauer-Zavala et al., 2017, 2023) that target all of these goals.

Some of the other goals are likewise consistent with other personality traits. For example, setting stronger interpersonal boundaries could be characterized as a goal to reduce agreeableness, whereas allowing and experiencing emotion could be considered within a goal to increase openness. Future work can explore overlaps between long-term emotional goals and personality changes.

Although personality changes naturally over time (Caspi et al., 2005) and can shift with concerted effort (Roberts et al., 2017), viewing these long-term emotional goals as changing personality may be problematic if people view personality as unchangeable (Chiu et al., 1997). Indeed, in this study, we found that goals that were rated as more changeable (i.e., malleable) were also rated as more desirable. In addition, perceived malleability of the emotional goals was associated with the intention to work toward goals above and beyond desirability. These exploratory analyses confirm the importance of dispositionism beliefs (Chiu et al., 1997) for the goals people set for themselves. Future work could evaluate whether interventions to alter perceptions of long-term emotional goal changeability influence how, whether, and which goals people actually pursue.

Limitations

The current studies were not without limitations. For example, goals are certainly amenable to self-report, but the goals people are able and willing to report may be imbued with social desirability, which we did not assess in either study. In addition, we recognize that we claimed to test the prediction that people with more symptoms of psychopathology emphasize short- over long-term goals, but we did not technically assess symptoms of psychopathology. However, people with symptoms of psychopathology tend to report greater negative affect and lower well-being (Troy et al., 2023), and thus we would expect to see similar patterns conveyed here. However, it may also be that people with different disorders have different patterns of long-term emotional goals (e.g., those with depression de-emphasizing interpersonal goals); future work should certainly assess symptoms of psychopathology in relation to the goals people endorse and how people balance short-term versus long-term emotional goals.

Our findings here suggest that attention to long-term emotional goals is useful for well-being. Prior work has indicated that types of emotions people want to feel (e.g., more happy, less anxious) serve higher order goals (e.g., find meaning in life; Tamir et al., 2020). It is thus far unclear how long-term emotional goals relate to other types of long-term goals and motives (e.g., interpersonal motives; Horowitz et al., 2006) that may not be inherently emotional. For example, a person who wants to feel angrier (i.e., a contrahedonic goal) to ask for a raise (i.e., performance motive) may do so because of long-term goals to save for retirement or due to values of fairness and equity. Teasing apart attentiveness to any long-term goal versus attentiveness to long-term emotional goals may be useful in the future. It may be that distinctions between goal types do not matter—if people are working toward growth to whoever they want to be, they may approach emotions differently.

Finally, and importantly, the data collected here do not address contextual features. Effective and adaptive emotion regulation is dependent on situational features (Aldao et al., 2015; Bonanno &

Burton, 2013), yet the data here address individual differences. Granted, long-term emotional goals *should* be stable for a given person over time, but specific long-term goals are likely to be activated in some situations more than others. Prior work has shown that people who consider long-term goals in moments of time tend to use more putatively adaptive strategies (e.g., cognitive reappraisal, problem solving, social sharing; Ortner et al., 2022), but it is yet unclear how any particular activated long-term emotional goal might relate to the selection and implementation of emotion regulation strategies used in that moment (Gross, 1998, 2015), nor how those momentary choices influence effective and adaptive emotional functioning.

Constraints on Generality

The data collected here were self-reported and assessed online. Although we intentionally aimed for gender balance in both studies (with allowance for nonbinary gender identities), the samples were still primarily White (especially Study 1), were fairly educated, and were restricted to people living in the United States. Considering that desired affect can vary across countries (Tamir et al., 2016), future work should explore long-term emotional goals in minority samples, those with less education, and cross-culturally.

Strengths and Future Directions

There are many strengths in our approach to examining the novel area of long-term emotional goals. First, we started with a qualitative approach to understand what people truly want for themselves emotionally without imposing any kind of structure on their responses (Study 1). This approach resulted in several goals we likely would not have generated based on the emotion motive literature (e.g., setting better emotional boundaries). We also independently confirmed that goals to experience and goals to express emotion are different, as people discuss them quite distinctly (Greenaway & Kalokerinos, 2019).

The current work aimed to identify how people might themselves determine what "adaptive" emotion regulation is by articulating long-term emotional goals. Theoretically, strategies that help people move toward their long-term goals would be considered adaptive. A taxonomy of long-term emotional goals, such as the one articulated here, can help future studies better examine trade-offs between long-term and short-term goals. For example, in emotional moments of time, whether assessed in the lab or via experience sampling, do people who actively consider their long-term goals make "better" (i.e., more adaptive) regulation decisions? Future work may explore a multidimensional goal measure, perhaps with multiple items per goal domain, which could potentially explore whether the set of goals here is reducible to a fewer number of unique goals.

Alternatively, are some goals inherently "better" than others? For example, many people who meet criteria for one or more disorders exhibit difficulties tolerating distress (Leyro et al., 2010) and therapy—regardless of which type—tends to increase distress tolerance (Heiland & Veilleux, 2023). Thus, people who want to decrease negative affect in the long run, including diminishing symptoms of depression and anxiety, would be well served to adopt the goal to allow and experience emotions. Yet, this was one of the lower rated goals. Similarly, habitual use of expressive suppression (i.e., masking the expression of feelings from others) is associated with a wide variety of symptoms of psychopathology, at least in Western cultures (Chervonsky & Hunt, 2017). Yet, very few people had goals of emotional expression and openness. Future work can aim to understand whether it may be important to motivate clients *toward* adopting some of these long-term emotional goals.

We also recognize that people's long-term goals may not be generated entirely based on their own desires, but by what people believe they "ought" to pursue, consistent with the notion of the "ought" self in self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). In Study 1, our assessment of "ought" goals revealed no difference in *types* of goals people generated. However, some people may feel more compelled toward their "ought" goals than others or experience more conflict between their own desired emotional goals and their "ought" emotional goals. It may be, for example, that greater discrepancies between current and "ought" goals are associated with different outcomes (e.g., anxiety, impression management) and that "ought" goals may involve different intentions or perceptions of malleability compared to ideal goals.

Finally, further examination of demographic differences is warranted, including gender differences. In this study, we found that men considered themselves less sensitive, less reactive, and more skilled at emotion regulation compared to women. The latter is particularly interesting as women actually tend to use more regulation strategies than men (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). Women also hold stronger goals for setting interpersonal boundaries and exhibiting self-confidence, both of which make sense considering gender norms of women as "givers." These differences are likely the result of gender norms around the experience and expression of emotion (Fischer & Lafrance, 2015). Understanding the role of cultural and gender factors in the selection and pursuit of long-term emotional goals may be useful, which also may relate to the culturally sanctioned values people hold (Tamir et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In sum, the current studies confirmed the importance of desired affect in the goals that people have for themselves emotionally in the long run. Additionally, these studies clarified that people have goals for who they want to *be* emotionally, as well as for what they want to feel. People who report thinking about their long-term emotional goals in emotional situations, relative to short-term goals, seem to have greater well-being. A deeper understanding of the long-term emotional goals people set, as well as the factors related to how, if, and when people pursue those goals, and the beliefs they hold about the changeability of goals are all elements ripe for future study.

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