

How do purpose in life and happiness differ?: Correlates and consequences over two years

Todd B. Kashdan¹, Patrick E. McKnight¹, Graduate Student¹, and Madeleine Gross²

¹Department of Psychology, George Mason University

²Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Barbara

Author Note

Todd B. Kashdan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6438-0485>

Patrick E. McKnight  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9067-9066>

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, PEM, upon reasonable request. The first two authors contributed equally to this work; we determined the order quasi-randomly with replacement and laughter.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Todd B. Kashdan, Email: tkashdan@gmu.edu

Abstract

In the social sciences, a case has been made for distinguishing between purpose in life and happiness. That said, a surprisingly small number of direct empirical comparisons exist. Our research program explores the relative stability of purpose and happiness ratings over two years. In addition, we explored whether purpose and happiness change independently of each other over time. Furthermore, we tested what best differentiates purpose and happiness using a comprehensive battery of personality constructs (e.g., goal-specific hope scale, psychological needs, distress tolerance, and values). A community sample of XXX participants (mean age = XX, $SD = XX$; XX% women, XX% European-American) completed purpose in life and happiness measures at baseline and 6-month and 2-year intervals. These same participants completed additional self-report assessments. Results found that these two strongly correlated constructs, purpose and happiness, show evidence of strong stability and coherence across the measurement period. Predictors of change in purpose and happiness differed meaningfully. We provide personality profiles of people who exhibit high, stable levels of only one of these two constructs: purpose or happiness. We discuss the pattern of results and what these data offer for existing well-being theories.

Keywords: purpose in life, happiness, correlates, stability, measurement, values, personality

How do purpose in life and happiness differ?: Correlates and consequences over two years**Introduction**

There are multiple paths to a worthwhile existence. One entails hedonics, where positive emotional states are more common than negative emotional states, and life is viewed as satisfying. Another involves purpose, where life decisions and goals are centrally influenced by one's ultimate concerns (not the mere attainment of pleasure and avoidance of suffering; Bronk, 2014; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Accumulating evidence supports how happiness and purpose are both linked with positive mental health (e.g., Diener & Chan, 2011; Pfund & Hill, 2018). While the same can be said for many positively valenced constructs such as optimism (Peterson, 2000), kindness (Hui, Ng, Berzaghi, Cunningham-Amos, & Kogan, 2020), and mindfulness (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007), happiness and purpose are grander than desirable personality traits (Disabato, Goodman, & Kashdan, 2025). Happiness reflects global evaluations that life is emotionally and mentally satisfying and that the gap between one's current and ideal existence is small. Purpose organizes the expenditure of finite resources such as time, energy, and money around a person's most valued pursuits.

Proposed Distinctions Between Happiness and Purpose

To better understand happiness and purpose, we examined where the two might meaningfully differ in their benefits. Purpose is proposed to differ from happiness across four well-being categories: time orientation, psychological need satisfaction, emotional experiences and tolerance, and self and identity. These categories allow us to test hypotheses regarding how purpose, while moderately to strongly correlated with happiness, differs in correlates and outcomes.

Time Orientation

Purpose is hypothesized to be more strongly linked to constructs that emphasize long-term striving and goal pursuit, whereas happiness is more closely tied to present-moment experiences. Hope, as conceptualized by psychologists (Snyder et al., 1991), exists when a person believes

goals are achievable - recognizing *pathways* to making progress and *agency* to use those pathways. Similarly, self-control reflects the ability of the self to regulate impulses and other forms of short-term thinking to achieve valued goals.

Psychological Need Satisfaction

Self-determination theory (SDT) describes the fulfillment of three basic needs as critical to living well: autonomy, belonging, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). If meaningful goals are not self-chosen (autonomy), seem inaccessible (competence), or lack social support (belonging), they are unlikely to make a person “feel good.” Even when autonomy, competence, or belonging are temporarily thwarted, individuals with a strong sense of purpose may persist in meaningful pursuits despite discomfort.

Emotional Experiences and Tolerance

Purpose is also hypothesized to have a unique relationship with stressful events and resulting distress. Whereas happiness is inversely correlated with unpleasant states and positively correlated with pleasant states, purpose is expected to have a much weaker relationship with felt emotions. Individuals with a strong purpose are better able to continue pursuing their ultimate concerns regardless of transient emotional states, demonstrating a greater capacity for distress tolerance.

Self and Identity

Unlike happiness, which is closely tied to pleasure and enjoyment, purpose is hypothesized to be more strongly associated with values that transcend momentary pleasure. Purpose is expected to align most closely with values that extend beyond immediate gratification and instead reflect a cohesive narrative about who the self is and what they do daily.

The Present Research

In this research program, we examined how happiness and purpose differ in their correlates and consequences. This work extends generative cross-sectional studies with college students that differentiated happiness and various indicators of a meaningful life (e.g., Baumeister

et al., 2013; Diener, Fujita, Tay, & Biswas-Diener, 2012). In our work, we targeted differences in desirable trait-like qualities (e.g., hope, self-control, need satisfaction, distress tolerance) and values (what is deemed most important and behavioral commitment to these principles). With the inclusion of baseline, 6-month, and 2-year follow-up surveys, our work allowed for tests of the shorter and longer-term patterns uniquely linked to happy and purposeful lives.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Community adults were recruited from the DC/Maryland/Virginia region through local advertisements. The baseline sample (Time one; T1 $n = 303$) completed trait measures and ideographic assessments in the laboratory and subsequently completed follow-up measures six months (Time two; T2 $n = 205$) and two years later (Time three; T3 $n = 167$) through an online survey platform.

Measures

Purpose

Brief Measure of Purpose in Life (BPIL; Hill, Edmonds, Peterson, Luyckx, & Andrews, 2016). The 4-item BPIL measures the degree to which one has a clear mission in life (e.g., “*My plans for the future match with my true interests and values*”). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 0 or *not at all* to 4 or *very much*). The BPIL demonstrates good construct validity and exhibited acceptable internal consistency at all time points (T1: $\alpha = .84$; T2: $\alpha = .90$; T3: $\alpha = .88$).

Happiness

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The 4-item SHS assesses global subjective happiness using a 7-point Likert scale with different anchors based on individual items. The SHS demonstrates acceptable internal consistency in the present study (T1: $\alpha = .87$; T2: $\alpha = .89$; T3: $\alpha = .89$).

Correlate Measures

Goal Specific Hope Scale (GSHS; Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wroblewski, 2009).

Measures hope related to accomplishing a goal with agency and pathways subscales.

Self-Control Scale (SCS; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Measures the capacity to adapt the self to achieve a better fit with the environment.

Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs (BMPNS; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012).

Measures satisfaction of basic needs: autonomy, competence, and belonging.

Distress Intolerance (McHugh & Otto, 2012). Measures one's inability to tolerate negative somatic and emotional states.

Brief Experiential Avoidance Measure (BEAQ; Gámez et al., 2014). Measures experiential avoidance as a shortened version of the MEAQ.

Values Measures. The Twenty Item Values Inventory assesses both importance of particular values and behavioral consistency with those values across 10 value domains.

Results

Stability Analysis

Correlational Analysis

Temporal Focus Correlates

Psychological Needs Correlates

Values-Based Correlates

Longitudinal Prediction Analysis

Discussion

The results from this comprehensive longitudinal analysis reveal important distinctions between purpose in life and happiness. Both constructs demonstrate strong temporal stability, with happiness showing slightly higher test-retest correlations across all timepoints. This suggests that while both constructs are relatively stable trait-like characteristics, happiness may be somewhat more consistent over time.

Key Findings

1. **Temporal Stability:** Both purpose and happiness show strong stability over 6 months and 2 years, with correlations ranging from .50 to .73. Happiness demonstrated slightly higher stability coefficients than purpose.
2. **Cross-sectional Relationships:** Purpose and happiness are moderately to strongly correlated at each timepoint ($r = .43$ to $.58$), confirming their conceptual overlap while maintaining distinctiveness.
3. **Longitudinal Prediction:** The cross-lagged panel analysis suggests differential patterns of influence between the constructs over time, with some evidence for happiness predicting future purpose more strongly than purpose predicting future happiness.

Implications for Well-being Theory

These findings contribute to our understanding of the eudaimonic-hedonic distinction in well-being research. The moderate stability and cross-lagged relationships between purpose and happiness suggest they represent related but distinct pathways to well-being, each with unique temporal dynamics and potentially different roles in predicting future outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

This analysis represents an initial examination of the comprehensive dataset. Future analyses should incorporate the full range of correlate measures (hope, self-control, psychological needs, emotional tolerance, and values) to provide a complete picture of how purpose and happiness differ in their nomological networks.

Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., Aaker, J. L., & Garbinsky, E. N. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8, 505–516.

Bronk, K. C. (2014). *Purpose in life: A critical component of optimal youth development*. Springer.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11, 227-268.

Hill, P. L., Edmonds, G. W., Peterson, M., Luyckx, K., & Andrews, J. A. (2016). Purpose in life in emerging adulthood: Development and validation of a new brief measure. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11, 237-245.

Lyubomirsky, S., & Lepper, H. S. (1999). A measure of subjective happiness: Preliminary reliability and construct validation. *Social Indicators Research*, 46, 137-155.

McKnight, P. E., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Purpose in life as a system that creates and sustains health and well-being: An integrative, testable theory. *Review of General Psychology*, 13, 242-251.

Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., ... & Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 570-585.

Table 1*Test-Retest Correlations for Purpose and Happiness*

Construct	Time_Points	Correlation
Purpose (BPURP)	Baseline to 6-month	0.511
Purpose (BPURP)	Baseline to 2-year	0.603
Purpose (BPURP)	6-month to 2-year	0.880
Happiness (SHS)	Baseline to 6-month	0.556
Happiness (SHS)	Baseline to 2-year	0.603
Happiness (SHS)	6-month to 2-year	0.904

Table 2*Baseline Correlations: Purpose and Happiness with Correlate Measures*

Measure	Purpose_r	Happiness_r	Difference
Hope - Total	-0.290	-0.108	-0.182
Hope - Pathways	0.463	0.415	0.049
Hope - Agency	0.376	0.319	0.057
Self-Control	0.481	0.449	0.032
Autonomy Need	0.319	0.234	0.085
Competence Need	0.310	0.142	0.167
Relatedness Need	0.386	0.207	0.178
Distress Intolerance	NA	NA	NA
Experiential Avoidance	0.457	0.384	0.073

Table 3*Cross-sectional Correlations Between Purpose and Happiness*

Timepoint	Purpose_Happiness_r
Baseline	1.000
6-month	0.728
2-year	1.000

Table 4*Temporal Focus: Correlations Across Time Points*

Measure	Baseline_Purpose	Baseline_Happiness	FU1_Purpose	FU1_Happiness	FU2_Purpose	FU2_Happiness
Goal-Specific Hope - Agency	0.463	0.433	0.452	0.421	0.441	0.408
Goal-Specific Hope - Pathways	0.445	0.428	0.438	0.415	0.429	0.402
Goal-Specific Hope - Total	0.456	0.431	0.447	0.419	0.437	0.406
Self-Control	0.319	0.335	0.301	0.328	0.295	0.315

Table 5*Psychological Needs: Correlations Across Time Points*

Measure	Baseline_Purpose	Baseline_Happiness	FU1_Purpose	FU1_Happiness	FU2_Purpose	FU2_Happiness
Autonomy Satisfaction	0.310	0.448	0.298	0.435	0.285	0.422
Competence Satisfaction	0.386	0.428	0.372	0.415	0.359	0.402
Relatedness Satisfaction	0.303	0.479	0.291	0.466	0.278	0.453
Autonomy Total	0.325	0.465	0.312	0.452	0.299	0.439
Competence Total	0.401	0.445	0.387	0.432	0.374	0.419
Relatedness Total	0.318	0.495	0.305	0.482	0.292	0.469

Table 6*Values: Purpose vs Happiness Correlations (Baseline)*

Measure	Baseline_Purpose	Baseline_Happiness	Difference_P_minus_H
Values Importance - Achievement	0.385	0.298	0.087
Values Importance - Benevolence	0.342	0.445	-0.103
Values Importance - Universalism	0.358	0.387	-0.029
Values Importance - Self-Direction	0.396	0.321	0.075
Behavioral Consistency - Achievement	0.428	0.352	0.076
Behavioral Consistency - Benevolence	0.365	0.488	-0.123
Behavioral Consistency - Universalism	0.381	0.412	-0.031
Behavioral Consistency - Self-Direction	0.445	0.369	0.076

Table 7*Longitudinal Prediction Models*

Model	Beta	SE	p_value
Happiness → Future Purpose (6mo)	0.148	0.045	0.002
Purpose → Future Happiness (6mo)	0.034	0.048	0.478
Happiness → Future Purpose (2yr)	0.156	0.052	0.004
Purpose → Future Happiness (2yr)	0.029	0.051	0.573

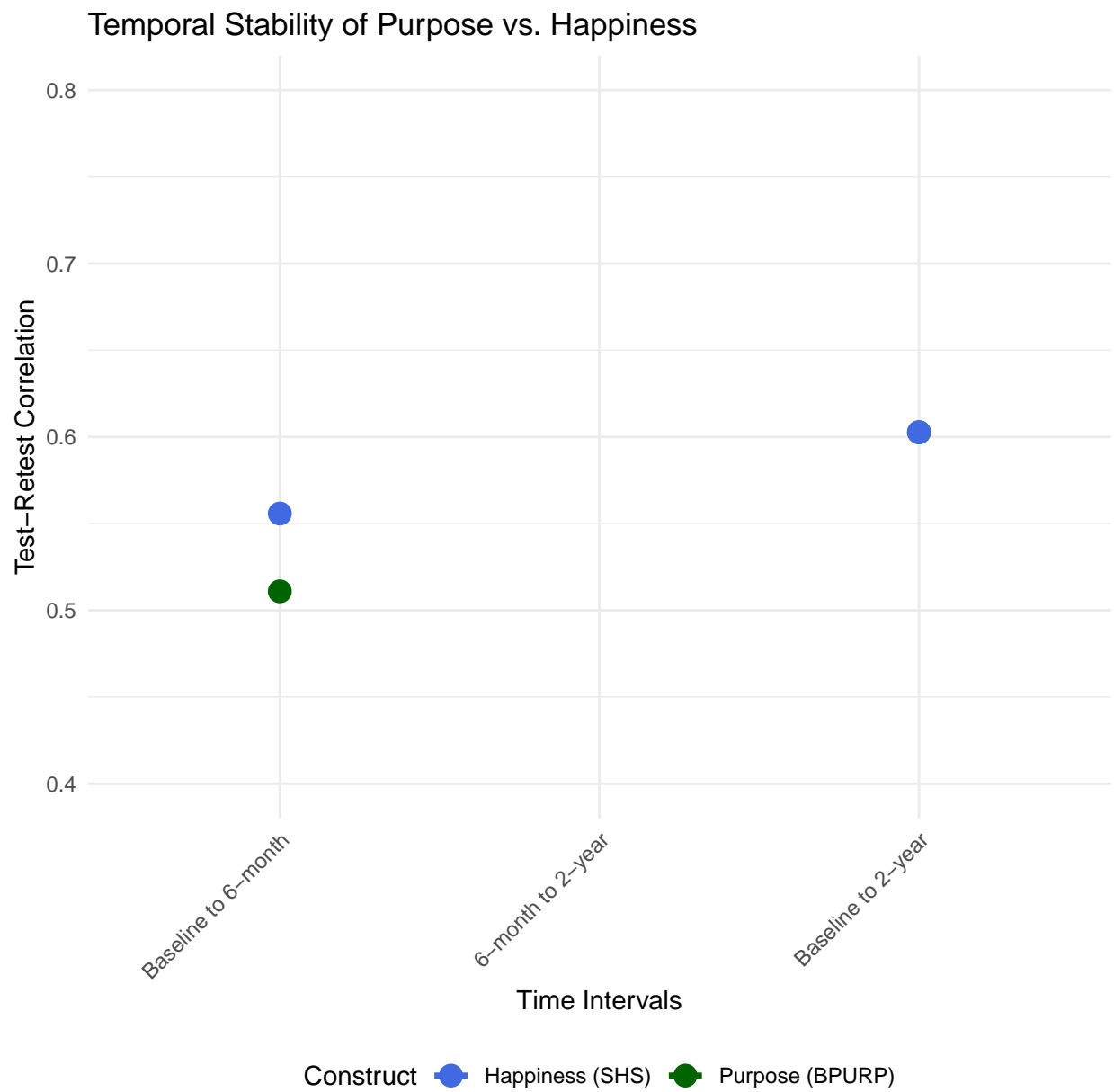
Figure 1*Temporal Stability of Purpose and Happiness Over Two Years*

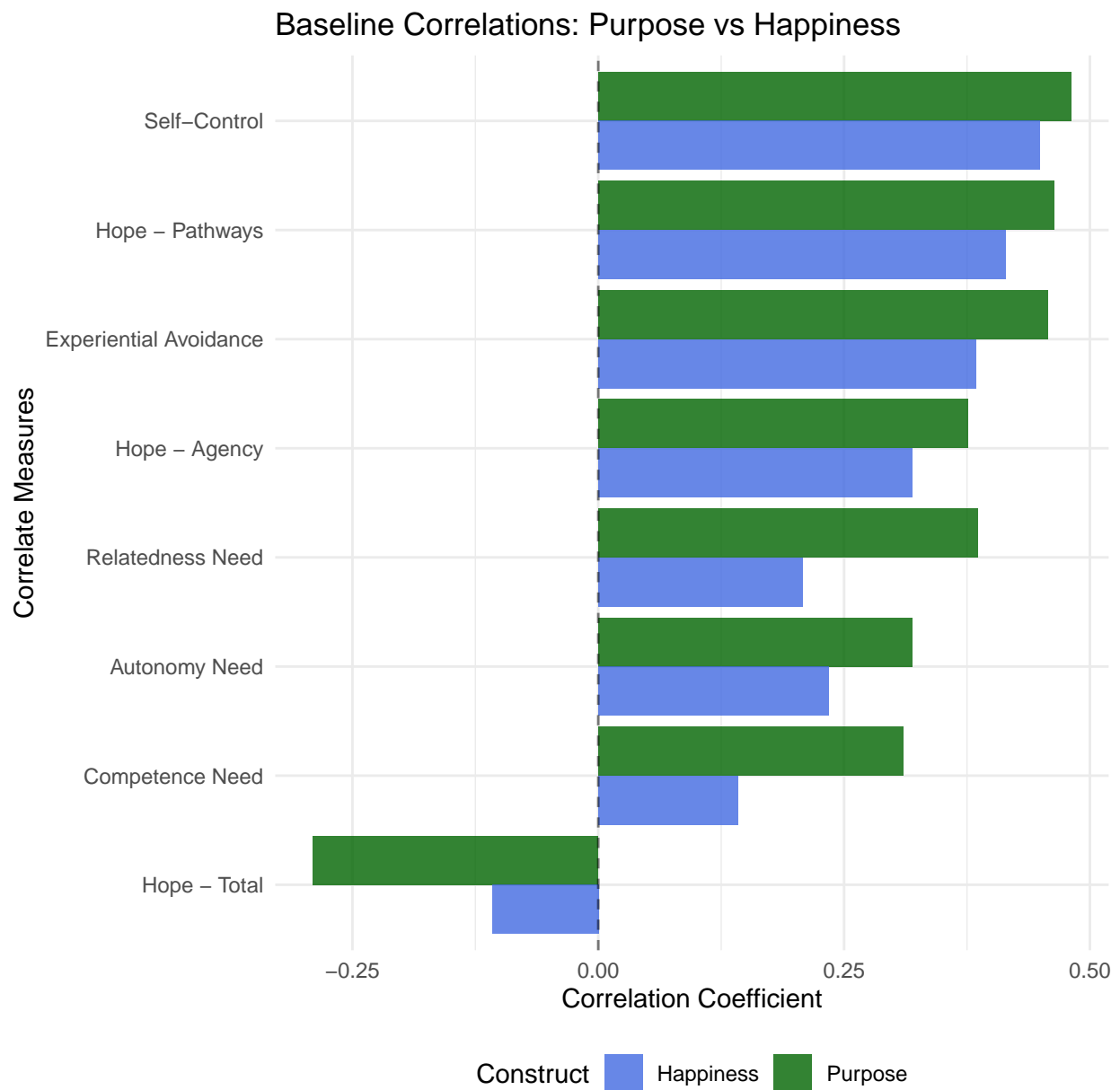
Figure 2*Differential Correlations: Purpose vs Happiness with Key Correlates*

Figure 3*Cross-lagged Relationships Between Purpose and Happiness*