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Desired emotional states: their nature, causes, and implications for emotion regulation

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Emotion regulation is a process directed toward achieving desired emotions. People want to experience different emotions at different times and for different reasons, leading them to change emotions accordingly. Research on desired emotions has made several discoveries. First, what people want to feel varies across individuals and across situations. Second, what people want to feel depends on how much they value emotions and on the extent to which they expect emotions to yield behavioral, social, or epistemic benefits. Third, what people want to feel sets the direction of emotion regulation and can shape emotional experiences and subsequent behavior. Identifying and understanding desired emotional states can promote healthier emotion regulation and emotional experiences, and more adaptive personal and social functioning.

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Emotion regulation involves attempts to change an existing emotional state into a desired emotional state by using emotion-regulating strategies [1^{*}]. The outcome of emotion regulation, therefore, depends on which emotional state people desire, and on the efficacy of the strategy they use to attain it [2^{**}]. Whereas most research on emotion regulation focuses on strategies [3], there is little research on the emotional states people desire (i.e. emotion goals), which motivate emotion regulation. A growing body of research now indicates that to promote adaptive emotion regulation, emotional experiences and behavior, it is necessary to identify and understand what people want to feel, and why they want to feel that way. This review summarizes this body of research, focusing on recent advances.

Do people differ in the emotions they desire?

Imagine people sitting together at the office, trying to manage their emotions as they work on an important presentation. Would they all want to feel the same way? When people engage in emotion regulation, they typically try to decrease unpleasant emotions. However, people do not necessarily want to feel good all the time. In approximately 15% of the times people try to change their emotions in their daily life, they try to decrease pleasant or increase unpleasant emotions [4,5]. People differ not only in whether they desire pleasant or unpleasant emotions, but also in which pleasant or unpleasant emotions they desire.

Desired emotions differ across people. Whereas some people at the office, for example, may try to get excited as they work on the presentation, others might try to calm down. First, desired emotions differ by demographic variables. Specifically, they differ by age. Whereas older adults desire more pleasant emotions [6], adolescents desire relatively more unpleasant emotions [4,7]. Desired emotions also differ by gender [8]. Women desire less anger and more empathy than men do [9^{*}].

Second, desired emotions differ by personality. For instance, people higher in extraversion are more motivated to experience arousing pleasant states, such as happiness [10,11], people higher in neuroticism are more motivated to experience fear, whereas people higher in trait anger are more motivated to experience anger [12], compared to people lower on these traits. People with higher (versus lower) self-esteem are also more motivated to feel happiness [13].

Third, desired emotions differ by culture. People desire emotions that are culturally valued [14]. For instance, European Americans desire excitement more than East Asians do, whereas East Asians desire calmness more than European Americans do [15]. European Americans are also more motivated than Asians to savor positive emotions [16] and repair negative emotions [17]. Desired emotions also differ by religion. For instance, compared to Christians, Jews desire more pride, whereas Muslims desire more sadness [18].

Desired emotions differ not only across people, but also across situations. The same person, for example, may desire different emotions when working on a presentation on budget cuts (where she might want to feel calm or even sad) versus a presentation on a proposed new product

(where she might want to feel excited and happy). In fact, what people want to feel varies across situations even more than it varies across people. By changing the nature of the situation, researchers have been able to change the emotions people desire, even leading them to desire emotions that are unpleasant to experience. In the next section, we explain why this might be so.

Why do people desire certain emotions?

People want to experience emotions that would benefit them. Because emotions feel pleasant (or unpleasant), people often desire emotions to optimize immediate pleasure. In such cases, people desire emotions for hedonic benefits. Emotions also offer benefits other than immediate pleasure or pain, such as eliciting desired behaviors, promoting social relations, or providing desired knowledge [2**]. In such cases, people desire emotions for instrumental benefits [19].

First, because emotions can influence behavior, people sometimes desire emotions to optimize behavior. When negotiating, for instance, people who seek confrontation desire more anger than those who seek collaboration [20]. People want to feel angrier when anticipating tasks that require aggression [21], and more fear when anticipating tasks that require caution [22]. Second, because emotions can influence social relationships, people desire emotions for social benefits. For instance, people who want to affiliate with others want to match their feelings to those of the other [23]. We may wish to connect to others. Group-based emotions are felt on behalf of a group [24]. People who want to connect to their group, may desire group-based emotions. For example, people wanted to feel sadder on a national day of mourning, because doing so connected them to their group [25]. People may also wish to disconnect from others. When people expected to meet strangers that are likely to demand costly help, they desired less compassion [26*]. Similarly, people who wanted to dominate members of adversarial groups wanted to feel more anger toward them [27]. Third, because emotions inform us about the world and about ourselves, people might desire emotions that reaffirm their beliefs about the world or about themselves. In such cases, people desire emotions for epistemic benefits. For instance, members of eastern cultures are more willing to dampen pleasant emotions, partly because balanced emotional experiences confirm their dialectic view of the world [16]. Similarly, people seek familiar emotional experiences, partly because they are consistent with their sense of self [10,12,13].

Therefore, one factor that determines what people want to feel is the type of benefit they seek. If a person working on a presentation at the office wants to feel good, she might desire happiness, because it is pleasant; if the person wants to optimize her performance, she might desire worry, because it motivates her to work harder; if

the person wants to bond with her fellow employees, she might want to empathize with them, because empathy can promote social connections. People desire emotions that promote the benefits they personally value. For example, people who value benevolence desire more empathy than others, whereas people who value power desire more pride, but also more anger, than others [9*].

A person who cares about performance, may desire the emotion that enhances performance in the given context. But which emotion is most likely to do that? For instance, which emotion is most likely to optimize performance when giving a presentation at work — worry, happiness, or calmness? When seeking emotions for instrumental benefits, people operate based on their general evaluations of emotions (i.e. how good or bad is the emotion?), and based on the outcomes they expect emotions to have in specific contexts (i.e. what is the emotion likely to do?).

First, people differ in their evaluations of different emotions [28*]. People form conscious and unconscious evaluations of emotions and such evaluations lead them to approach or avoid these emotions. The more people like an emotion, whether pleasant or unpleasant, the more they desire it. For instance, the more people like disgust, the more they want to experience it, and they regulate their emotions accordingly [29]. Similarly, people differ in their evaluations of happiness both across cultures [30,31] and within cultures [32]. People also form implicit evaluations of happiness that become increasingly positive with age [33]. The more positive such evaluations, the more people desire happiness.

Second, people differ in the beliefs they endorse about the likely consequences or utility of emotions [34]. The more people believe an emotion could yield desired outcomes, the more they desire that emotion. Thus, back at the office, a person who believes that worry would improve his presentation would try to worry about it, whereas a person who believes that excitement would improve her presentation would try to get excited about it. Indeed, athletes who believed that excitement would promote their performance desired excitement before a game, whereas those who believed that anger would promote performance desired anger [35]. People who believed sadness increases analytic thinking wanted to feel sad before completing analytic tasks [36]. Similarly, people who expected anger to promote confrontational behavior, wanted to feel angrier before a confrontation [20]. In fact, leading people to expect anger to be useful increased the desirability of anger [37*]. This was the case even when beliefs about the usefulness of anger were manipulated outside of conscious awareness. People who expect unpleasant emotions to promote desired outcomes, are willing to experience such emotions when the outcomes are worth the hedonic cost [38].

In summary, people desire certain emotions because they lead to outcomes that matter to them. People desire emotions they like or those they believe would lead to desired outcomes. People desire emotions to attain hedonic, behavioral, social, epistemic, and other benefits. General evaluations of emotions, whether consciously accessible or not, may determine what people typically want to feel, whereas beliefs about the specific consequences of emotions may determine what people want to feel in specific situations.

Desired emotions shape emotion regulation, emotion experience, and behavior

When people regulate their emotions effectively, they change what they feel into the emotional state they desire. The emotions people desire, therefore, shape the outcomes of emotion regulation. By changing emotional experiences, desired emotions can ultimately affect both intrapersonal and interpersonal behavior. For instance, participants who were led to desire anger tried to actively increase their anger and consequently felt angrier than other participants. The experience of anger, in turn, led them to lose more money in a gamble, and to share fewer resources with others [37*].

Desired emotions can contribute to emotion regulation at the individual and the social levels. First, affective disorders serve as extreme examples of emotion regulation at the individual level. Depression, for instance, is characterized by frequent and intense negative emotions. Depression involves deficits in emotion regulation [39], which have typically been attributed to maladaptive emotion regulation strategies [40]. Emotion regulation deficits in depression, however, may also involve maladaptive desired emotions. Indeed, there is some evidence that depressed people desire relatively more sadness and less happiness than non-depressed people. Depressed people were more likely than non-depressed people to select stimuli that maintained or increased their sadness, although they realized other choices would make them happier [41]. If depressed people are more motivated to experience sadness, this could ultimately maintain the disorder. Second, desired emotions play a role in emotion regulation at the social level. Changing the desirability of emotions has been shown to affect their regulation. For instance, making anger toward the outgroup less desirable, led people to inhibit their anger toward outgroup members and increased their support of conciliatory policies [27]. Such findings demonstrate that desired emotions can influence emotion regulation, emotional experiences and behavior in intergroup conflicts.

Moving desired emotions forward

Emotion regulation is shaped by the emotions people want to feel. These desired emotions are not always pleasant and vary across individuals and across contexts. People desire emotions they evaluate positively and those

they expect to yield desired benefits. People may desire emotions to attain hedonic or instrumental (e.g. behavioral, social, epistemic) benefits. Therefore, to understand, anticipate, and change the outcomes of emotion regulation, it is necessary to identify the emotions people desire, and understand why they desire them.

These discoveries highlight new challenges. First, future research should examine both what people want to feel (i.e. desired emotions) and how they try to achieve it (i.e. emotion regulation strategies). If certain strategies are used to decrease emotions and others are used to increase emotions, whether people use the former or the latter strategies may depend on the emotions they desire. Second, future research should examine the development of desired emotions. For instance, parents may teach their children about the value and likely consequences of emotions [42]. People may also come to evaluate emotions based on lessons from direct experience [43]. Third, future research should examine the emotions we desire for ourselves, but also those we desire for others. Interpersonal emotion regulation is important in close relationships, where people influence the emotions of another for instrumental benefits, and are similarly influenced by the other [44]. Interpersonal emotion regulation is also important in group contexts. For instance, leaders might try to shape emotions of group members to elicit support for certain policies, that can either benefit or hurt societies [45]. Understanding the role of desired emotions in shaping individual and group-level emotions (for better or for worse), could ultimately help facilitate more adaptive personal and social functioning.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- of special interest
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