

# PERCEPTION OF HAPPINESS IN UMECIT PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS IN THE PRESENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

Happiness can be defined from different perspectives. In general, being happy improves people's lives as it is an essential part of the mental health and well-being of all human beings. However, external situations, such as the pandemic that produced COVID-19, have caused many people to change their perspective on happiness. For this reason, this work had the purpose of exposing the perception of university students about the concept of happiness and psychological well-being in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design was chosen to analyze the lived experiences of the phenomenon called happiness. The population consisted of psychology students of the Metropolitan University of Education, Science and Technology (UMECIT), La Chorrera campus, the description of the research scenario was six volunteer participants with an age range of 17 to 25 years of both sexes. The instrument applied was elaborated and submitted to expert judgment in order to obtain adequate validation properties to obtain reliable information for the research. Among the findings is that three of the six students feel happier when they enjoy the present and can create new experiences with friends and family, while the other half prefer to work on their dreams because they feel happier fulfilling their goals. In their conclusion, it is pointed out that there is a connection between happiness and some dimensions of psychological well-being such as: interpersonal relationships, autonomy, sense of life and self-acceptance, because these dimensions can be important factors to be happy, since each one of them fulfills a function that allows the human being to feel satisfied and fulfilled with his or her life.

**Keywords:** Psychological well-being, COVID-19, Eudemonism, Hedonism, College students, Happiness

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## INTRODUCTION

Today's society is undergoing a series of dizzying changes and growing transformations at the economic, political, social, cultural and environmental levels. Today, the pandemic caused by the emergence of a viral strain called SARS-CoV-2 is a new event for humanity in the 21st century. According to a study conducted by Nereida Valero on June 25, 2020, there were 9,522,025 infected cases and 484,876 deaths, however, the numbers have not stopped, so much so that more than 388 million cases and 5.71 million deaths have been counted, as is the case on Friday, February 4, 2022. Despite the spread of the different strains of this virus, there is a reduction in the probability of becoming infected, thanks to the implementation of vaccines and restriction measures, however, people's mental health and happiness have been affected, despite the favorable management of the situation.

Therefore, the present work exposes the concept of happiness that the students of the psychology career of the UMECIT of the La Chorrera branch have, based on a bibliographic review on the phenomenon called happiness and taking into account the experiences lived during the pandemic, knowing this will help us to identify if it has affected, modified or strengthened the beliefs of the participants regarding the concept of happiness and the psychological well-being that they had before the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the economy of all countries, generating critical situations in companies around the world such as unemployment, which led to economic difficulties in most families. People with high trait anxiety, i.e., those who tend to respond with high sensitivity to uncertain situations, could be affected by the situation they cannot control. Likewise, events such as job loss not only affect the adults responsible for a household, but also the children and the elderly, who depend economically on that family member, so these circumstances create an uncertainty that harms the psychological well-being of all.

Panama maintained an isolation quarantine as of March 25, 2020 and subsequently, it was gradually reopened as of May 13, 2021 in order to somehow control the increase in cases and reduce contagion so as not to saturate the health system, therefore, people faced situations such as having to remain in their homes, however, this action resulted in problems such as loneliness and physical distancing, situations that are complex to accept in a population that is culturally accustomed to socialize with other people. This becomes a problem when it affects psychological well-being,

since one of the pillars for human beings is to maintain positive relationships, therefore, physical distancing can have repercussions in a worsening of these relationships.

As for mental health in Panama, this was affected by the COVID-19 situation and confinement at the national level as shown in the study by Romero-Ramos et al. (2022), where it was demonstrated that there is also uncertainty in the economic part due to the loss of employment and lack of hiring, in addition, aspects related to health and the fear of catching COVID-19 proved to be significant in the emotions of individuals, consequently, they showed high levels of stress, anxiety and frustration.

Thus, during the pandemic, the problem of mental health could be reflected by the increase of variables that affect well-being such as stress and anxiety, although it is also interesting to note what was observed in other scenarios, where some people felt happy, because they were at home with their family sharing more time. For this reason, it is interesting to conduct further research on the subject, since it is interesting to know what is the perception of people about a phenomenon that anyone can manifest or feel, but that can change from person to person, such as happiness.

Due to the fact that the population of the 21st century has gone through one of the events that will mark history, that is, the pandemic due to COVID-19, the fact of analyzing the perspective of some university students who are preparing themselves academically to exercise a profession that promotes mental health and the psychological well-being of others, it is interesting to know the perception that future health professionals have regarding this phenomenon, since the human being is always in the constant search for personal satisfaction.

From the above mentioned, the following research question was posed: What is the perception of UMECIT university students about the concept of Happiness in relation to the experiences lived during the pandemic due to COVID-19?

The aforementioned question supports the desire to expose the concept of happiness that students have in order to know the existence of a possible change in thinking about the concept of happiness as a result of the situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic in the General Psychology students of UMECIT La Chorrera Campus, in addition, to take into account the perspective of future mental health professionals.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This work has a qualitative approach, that is, *“It uses the collection and analysis of data to refine the research questions or reveal new questions in the process of interpretation”* (Hernández, Fernández and Baptista 2014). Qualitative studies are also guided by important research areas or themes. However, rather than clarifying research questions and hypotheses that lead to the collection and analysis of results (as most quantitative studies do), qualitative studies may develop questions before, during, or after data collection and analysis. These activities are usually aimed first at discovering what the most relevant research questions are and then modifying and commenting on them (p.7).

## **UNITS OF STUDY AND RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

The setting of this work is located in West Panama, specifically in the UMECIT, La Chorrera A branch. The population of this study is made up of university students of the General Psychology career who belong to different levels of the career. The university has more than 500 students in total and this campus has 185 students in this career. The participants were 6 volunteers of both sexes, aged 17 to 25 years, in order to obtain data through a virtual interview.

### **Criteria for the Selection of Key Informants:**

According to Hernández, Fernández and Baptista (2014) *“This kind of sample can also be called self-selected, since people propose themselves as participants in the study or respond to an invitation (Battaglia, 2008b)”*.

Next, the criteria used for the selection of participants were:

- Completely voluntary.
- Right to withdraw from the study at any time.
- No penalty for refusing to participate or withdrawing.
- It is important to assure potential participants that participation in the study is completely voluntary and that they have the right to discontinue participation at any time. The information should indicate that refusing to participate or deciding to withdraw from the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits for the participant, in compliance with the ethical aspects of all research that suggest informed consent, confidentiality of the data collected, and possible risks for the participants.

The exclusion criteria were the following:

- Not belonging to the general psychology career.
- Not belonging to the educational institution where the study was conducted.

The technique used to understand the information obtained from the collection instrument was discourse analysis, as Sayago (2014) says, discourse analysis is a technique used to analyze data, either qualitatively or quantitatively since it stands out for its multidisciplinary, that is, it can be used in different sciences (linguistics, sociology, anthropology, social psychology, cognitive psychology, political science, communication sciences, pedagogy, etc.). It is a matter of recognizing the most important categories of an investigation based on the participants' answers. The information obtained must be subjected to an analysis to detect the most important points (codes) in order to create the categories mentioned in the study.

## **RESULTS**

Happiness, being a polysemic concept, could not be defined with a single definition, since the concept may vary depending on the perspective and particular experiences of each person, however, happiness could be considered as the continuous construction of personal satisfaction as well as collective satisfaction, that is, there are important variables when talking about happiness, since it is not only in the pleasures and in the present, but it is the result of constant work throughout life, such as goals, health, psychological well-being, virtues, among others.

For the presentation, a code is shown that represents the interview instrument (E), the participant (P) and the participant's number that was assigned to him/her in order to identify his/her answers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 10).

### **THE FIRST CATEGORY CALLED HAPPINESS**

In the happiness category, it was found that some participants agreed that in order to talk about happiness it is relevant to take into account factors such as physical and psychological well-being, as mentioned in the interview of participant 1 (EP1) with respect to happiness: *"It is one's own well-being, both physical and mental, that is, being well with oneself". Based on the above, when there is optimal physical health, this can influence the mood of the person, as well as if adequate psychological well-being is maintained. One of the ways to improve physical well-being*

*is by exercising, since different neurotransmitters are released. For example, the study “exercise and mental health: Many reasons to move” reviews various articles that affirm the efficacy of exercise as a treatment and prevention of depression in the elderly. In other words, the greater the physical well-being, the better the mood.*

Another point that was highlighted about the concept of Happiness is that it is related to other variables in order to consider whether a person is happy or not. In this regard, one of the interview participants (EP6) stated that *“My concept of happiness would encompass, from my perspective, three aspects: Love of self, love of family, and love of the people around me. Because they are the people who have been in my growth”*, in terms of what the participant expresses, reference is made to happiness as a construction based on different variables that, jointly, can contribute to the manifestation of this feeling in the individual.

Quoting participant (EP2) *“if I had to define the word Happiness, it would be “specific moments” that you keep in your memory and also when you decide to be happy. I also feel that they are moments with people and situations that sometimes you create yourself; then they would be moments and a decision that one makes.”* In other words, the person expresses the value of positive external situations that bring as a causality a good mood. Likewise, he also mentions that being happy is a decision as well as situations that one creates oneself. In other words, if you are having a bad day, an opportunity to feel better is to enjoy a hobby or strategy to manage our emotions.

### **REGARDING THE DURATION OF HAPPINESS, THE FOLLOWING RESULTS WERE FOUND**

Based on the already known answers about the duration of happiness, it can be deduced that the duration depends on an external situation since it can influence the individual’s reaction. Participant 2 (EP2) *“As I said it was a decision, it can last as long as I decide or as long as a good time lasts. Unless it is intervened by some external circumstance that affects our happiness. Happiness lasts until when something external affects it.”* In this response it is mentioned that an external event can make a person better or worse, although it is also recognized that happiness can be a decision.

According to another participant EP1 *“for me it can last more than an hour”* mentions an estimated time that for another person may be different, in the case of the other participants they did not give an estimated temporality, according to:

EP3: *“I think happiness can last as long as one allows it...”*

EP5: *“I do not think that one can estimate the time that happiness can last, but the moment that a situation that can generate happiness for you can last”*.

EP10: *“Before I thought that happiness lasted a long time, but with respect to a workshop we did on emotions my mentality changed a little to the point that I could not tell you a concrete answer”*.

Four of the six participants did not offer an exact duration so it can be deduced that it is difficult to measure the exact length of time an individual can be happy, as it will depend on the person’s external situations and the actions they take to choose to be happy. However, one claims that it could last more than an hour if there is no external intervention.

Some subcategories of happiness were also analyzed, such as achieving goals, enjoying the present and purpose, in the results it was found that three of the six participants prefer to enjoy the present, since one of the reasons is that they feel that it is the only time they can live and can rejoice; according to EP3 *“I would prefer to enjoy the present because honestly the only time we can live is the present and by enjoying the present I allow myself many things such as: having a better state of mind..”* in other words, they prefer this option because they can enjoy the moments, whether it is being with friends or loved ones and even being able to enjoy personal experiences. Because the present is the only moment one can feel.

The other participants prefer to work on fulfilling their dreams as is the case of EP1: *“the truth is that with my experience I feel I have had these last few weeks, I would say enjoy the present, but sometimes I think the second option is stronger because of the fear of the future or the fear of failure. So I would choose the second one.”*

The uncertainty that life offers may place some people to choose to have something stable in the long term because that way they will feel more secure and happy fulfilling their achievements and getting more peace of mind. The other two participants mentioned that it is preferable to have a balance between both choices. The psychological well-being category was summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Psychological well-being**

<b>The dimensions of psychological well-being</b>	
Sense of life	Four of the six participants do not find it difficult to make choices that lead to a path they can be satisfied with in the medium and long term.
Self acceptance	Half of the participants accept themselves as they are, and the other half would like to change something to feel better about themselves.
Autonomy	Two participants do not care what other people think of their lives, and the others only take into consideration the opinions of their parents or their most intimate circle of interpersonal relationships.
Relationships	Most participants mention that their interpersonal relationships tend to bring significant value to their mood.

**Note:** Dimensions of psychological well-being considered for the study.

According to the question Is there any possible change in thinking about the concept of happiness due to the COVID-19 situation in the general psychology students of UMECIT La Chorrera?

It was found that most participants expressed a change in perception as EP2 *“Yes, quite a lot. Before my source of happiness was to be in meetings giving class as an instructor, but now it changed type, going out to places where there is nature. And practicing activities that allow me to live experiences”*.

On the other hand, I quote EP4: *“I feel that, yes, I have changed a little, since before the pandemic it was different. Because before I did not see my environment as a priority, I only cared about myself and did not see important things like accepting myself and loving others”*.

Participant EP1 says *“... at the beginning I thought that happiness was when I had money, when I had a job, and now my concept changed to “enjoy” even if it is just to congratulate you for getting up in the morning”*.

It can be deduced that there was a change in thinking within the perspective of how the participants perceive happiness, since they had to adapt to the situations brought about by the pandemic.



## DISCUSSION

This research aimed to present the concept of happiness that university students have before the COVID-19 situation. Happiness according to Castilla (2016) is a highly subjective experience and idiosyncratic in nature to the individual, that is, happiness alludes to an experience of subjective satisfaction of a person and only lived by him/her. Therefore, each person in this research may perceive happiness in a different way since they have ideas, behaviors, and attitudes specific to the individual; although the concepts of the participants are not the same, they share some similarities that will be seen in the results.

The results show that most of the students adapted their concept of happiness because of the pandemic and other students only reflected on the importance of their pillars that sustain their happiness. Which there is an adaptation independent of the circumstances that the individual may have. In the study of Girao Uribe (2018) states that there is a correlation between happiness and behavioral adaptation since within the study two instruments were used which are: Behavioral Adaptation Inventory (BAI) and Lima Happiness Scale. It was found that the higher the level of adaptation, the higher the level of happiness. In other words, the pandemic has made most people adapt to the new circumstances brought by COVID-19, such as the way of working (teleworking), studying (virtual classes), socializing (video calls), among others. In other words, they also managed to adapt in the way they perceive happiness.

With respect to duration, there is no estimated time frame to affirm how long happiness can last, since the majority did not respond with an exact number, nor with ranges. That is, it depends entirely on the individual's experience and the circumstances that he/she may have day by day. The study by Mercado Ibáñez (2014) explains in the results that achieving proposed objectives and favorable circumstances can make you happy and when happiness is achieved in this way it is more lasting, although this may depend on external circumstances as explained in this research.

When describing the concept of happiness of the students, it is found that they value the balance of physical health as psychological well-being, therefore, the hypothesis proposed in this research which was "*Psychological well-being is a good predictor of happiness in individuals*" is verified According to Ryff (2018) creator of the theory of psychological well-being states that there are six components which are: self-determination, self-acceptance, positive personal relationships, personal growth, sense of life and mastery of the environment.

These variables are related to happiness, since they generate that state of personal satisfaction to the individual, Muratori et al (2015) affirm that, within psychological well-being, the relevance of the spheres may vary from person to person and even from one country to another, since it was concluded that Spaniards take into account personal growth and positive relationships to be happy, which indicates that having healthy relationships allows them to improve their skills and the fact of growing as people. On the other hand, Argentines perceive greater psychological well-being with personal growth and sense of life. Also, the study clarifies that “*subjective happiness correlates directly with each of the dimensions of psychological well-being*” (Muratori, 2015).

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the research question is answered: what is the perception of UMECIT university students about the concept of happiness in relation to COVID-19?

According to the students answers, the idea that happiness is a highly subjective experience is strengthened by the fact that it will depend a lot on the individual's own experience, as explained in the results and in the discussion of the results. In addition, the students who explained their concept of happiness presented some similarities from their perspective, as well as some differences which may be influenced by the philosophical currents that are most talked about when discussing happiness. Eudemonism and Hedonism, happiness is the main objective of each, although approached in different ways. Since the results showed that three of the six students feel happier when they enjoy the present and can create new experiences with friends and family, the other half prefer to work on their dreams because they feel happier accomplishing their goals.

This does not mean that the happiness of participants who enjoy the present is better than those who work to achieve their goals and vice versa, since everyone builds their happiness based on thoughts generated through experience, therefore, it is difficult to draw a conclusion about which current is right since, in practice, these variables can be significant when talking about happiness. And it will be up to the individual to choose what makes him or her happier. However, the fact that they are different thoughts does not mean that they cannot complement each other in order to have a broader criterion.

Other conclusions obtained were:

- The results show that most of the students adapted their concept of happiness because of the pandemic and other students only reflected on the importance of their pillars that sustain their happiness. There is an adaptation independent of the circumstances that the individual may have.
- On the other hand, the connection of happiness and psychological well-being with its dimensions such as search for Meaning in life, Self-acceptance, Autonomy and Interpersonal relationships was analyzed.
- It was concluded that these dimensions can be important factors for being happy because each of them fulfills a function that allows the human being to feel satisfied and fulfilled with his life.

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