

Review Article

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Joy Research: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

This narrative review includes current research on the effects and predictors of joy. Only 3 studies on the effects of joy could be found in this current literature including studies on smiling, gratitude and well-being resulting from joy. Several predictors of joy were noted in this literature. They included experiential learning, a sense of worth, being respected, being a male in surgery, connections for pharmacists, connections in neurology, connections with patients and connections for old people. Aside from this literature being relatively sparse, several methodological limitations can be noted. They include sampling problems like single gender samples and several samples of clinicians and patients. Only a few studies appeared on the effects of joy and the studies on predictors of joy were primarily focused on being respected and connected. Surprisingly, no studies were focused on the joys of relationships with family and friends except for participants in several studies expressing the desire for more time with family and friends. No studies could be found on potential underlying biological mechanisms for joy. Despite these limitations, this literature suggests ideas for future research on joy.

1. Joy Research: A Narrative Review

Joy is an emotion of great happiness, pleasure or delight. The term was derived from the middle English *joye*, old French *joie* and Latin *gaudium* (meaning to rejoice or be glad). Surprisingly, very little research on joy has appeared in the current literature on emotions even though joy is considered one of the basic eight emotions by several researchers. This may relate to the psychology/psychiatry literature being more focused on negative than positive emotions.

This narrative review includes current research on the effects and predictors of joy. This research was found on PubMed and PsycINFO by entering the term joy and the years 2020-2026. Exclusion criteria were protocols, case studies, and non-English language papers. The 11 papers in this current literature review can be categorized as effects of joy (3 papers) and predictors of joy (8 papers). These sections are followed by a discussion on

methodological limitations of this current literature.

2. Effects of Joy

Only 3 studies on the effects of joy could be found in this current literature. These included studies on smiling, gratitude and well-being resulting from joy (see table 1). In a paper entitled "The smiles of older people through recreational activities: relationship between smiles and joy", **smiles and joy** were highly correlated (.97) [1] In this sample (N = 13 females in Japan, N = 2767 smiles), surges of smiles occurred to one's own mistakes, successes, and big mistakes. Although this is a large sample of smiles, the smiles were only observed in 13 females in Japan, suggesting that the data may not be generalizable to other genders and other nationalities. It would have been interesting to know the proportion of smiles that turned into laughter, as one's own mistakes are often laughable.

Effects	First Authors
Smiles	Ohta
Gratitude and love	Roberts
Subjective well-being	Wang

Table 1. Effects of Joy (and first authors)

In a study entitled “The complexities of joy, a qualitative study of joy cultivation, loss of joy, and happiness in British adults”, joy was noted to be a “distinct profound emotion” but frequently intertwined with gratitude and love (N = 14 adults, 28–59 years old) [2]. The barriers to joy were negative relationships, societal pressures and emotional burdens. Sustaining joy occurred by **positive relationships, engaging with nature and cultivating self – awareness**. Although the authors noted that joy was distinct from happiness, joy and happiness were not measured in the same way. Surprisingly, the joy of engaging with nature only appeared in this study in this literature even though joy along with awe are frequently mentioned in the literature on forest walking (green spaces) and surfing (blue spaces) [3].

Appreciative joy, which is one of the four Buddhist “immeasurables” (too large or too deep to measure), has also contributed to subjective well-being [4]. Appreciative joy has been defined as an attitude of celebrating another person’s happiness as if it were your own happiness. In this study, appreciative joy meditation training was, not surprisingly, noted to increase appreciative joy and gratitude. It might have also increased the other 3 Buddhist roots including loving kindness, compassion and equanimity (mental calmness), although the other roots were not measured in this study.

3. Predictors of Joy

Several predictors of joy were noted in this literature (see table 2). They included experiential learning, a sense of worth, being valued and respected, being a male in surgery, connections for pharmacists, connections in neurology, connections with patients and connections for old people.

Predictors	First Authors
Experiential learning	Rickhaus
Feelings of worth	Jalilianhasanpour
Feeling respected	Hughes
Teaching	Hanson
Social Connection	Biggs, Seshadri, Fatima, Goodwin

Table 2: Predictors of joy (and First Authors)

In a paper entitled "Finding joy in science", **experiential learning** was said to be the UN's 2030 agenda for sustainable development [6]. These authors defined experiential learning as exploring and experiencing joy in learning. They emphasized the need to foster a lifelong love for learning by instilling curiosity, emotional bonds, and joy in students. A classroom study in which teachers’ remarks/ behaviors could be coded along with students’ smiles/laughter could reveal the qualities that instill joy such as the teachers’ humor.

Similarly, in a study entitled "Creating joy in the workplace", **feelings of worth, appreciation and well-being** were said to lead to joy [6]. These feelings would also be expected to lead to pride, although this study, like most of the studies in this literature, focused on joy as a single variable. Replicating this study would be difficult at this time given that the home has become the most prevalent workplace. It would be interesting to know whether joy also occurs on zoom work sessions.

The joy of being a clinician was the focus of a few studies. For example, in a study entitled "The joy of surgery: how surgeons experience joy, time and support", joy was mentioned for several aspects of surgery [7]. In this sample of surgeons (N = 223), joy was noted for operating and its technical skills, curing disease, patient relationships, and working with a good team. Most of the surgeons reported **feeling valued and respected**. Unfortunately, these several predictors were not compared for their relative contributions to joy, as in regression analysis or structural equation

modeling. **Gender differences** occurred in the same sample of surgeons (N = 223) but reported by different authors (Hanson et al, 2024). In this paper, male surgeons were noted to be greater facilitators of joy by being leaders in the field, heading clinical teams, and teaching. Fewer females felt respected (55%) than males (68%). Female surgeons were younger and had spent fewer years in the field. Being younger and having fewer years in the field might have naturally led to the females feeling less respected. Less respect might have been reported by the less experienced male surgeons as well. As might be expected, almost 100% of both women and men in this sample wanted to spend more time with friends and families. Surprisingly, however, none of the studies in this literature measured time with friends and family as a predictor of joy.

In a study entitled “Joy in work among hospital pharmacists” (N = 152), **purpose, connection and belonging as well as autonomy and agency** were contributors to joy [8]. Barriers to joy included feeling undervalued, conflict, and feeling unsupported. Again, regressions and structural equation modeling were not conducted to assess the relative contributions of the contributors to joy or the relative contributions of the barriers to joy. Also, it’s not clear whether the contributors outweighed the barriers in this sample.

In a paper entitled "Sustaining joy in serious neurologic illnesses", **meaning, social connection, happiness/contentment, spiritual transcendence and pleasure** were noted to enhance joy [9]. These predictors could seemingly be categorized as other-oriented

(meaning and social connection) and self-oriented (happiness, spiritual transcendence and pleasure). This is a serious illness clinical sample that was not compared to a healthy control group, although the same variables might be expected to contribute to joy in a healthy control group.

Connection between clinicians and patients has also been a notably important contributor to joy. In a study on clinicians and patients, the authors concluded that finding the balance between connecting with patients and experiencing vulnerability to the pain and loss of patients was important [10]. Again, the importance of connections was highlighted in this study.

In a review on **joy in old people** (N = 11 studies, including 5 qualitative and 6 quantitative studies), seven of the studies occurred in nursing homes and four in the community (mean age = 82) [11]. The authors reported that the experience of joy was reported in five studies, assessments of joy were made in three studies and the association between joy and other factors was explored in three studies. Once again, sources of joy included **social connections** and participation in activities where these older people likely experienced their social connections.

4. Methodological Limitations of this Literature

Aside from this literature on joy being relatively sparse, several methodological limitations can be noted for these studies. They include the design problem of the studies being cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, leading to tenuous conclusions. Sampling problems included single gender samples and several samples of clinicians and patients. The data were almost exclusively self-report data that has the problems of questionable reliability as well as “faking good” for the researchers.

Only a few studies appeared on the effects of joy and the studies on predictors of joy were primarily focused on being respected and connected. Surprisingly, no studies were focused on the joys of relationships with family and friends except that the participants in several studies expressed the desire for more time with family and friends. And, no studies explored the frequency or the duration of joy or personality type differences on the experience of joy. Also, no studies were found on potential underlying biological mechanisms for joy. Despite these methodological limitations, this literature highlights the need for more research on joy.

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