

Can Happiness Change?

Examining the Associations between Major Life Events
and Changes in Subjective Well-Being

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The Hedonic Treadmill

- Events influence subjective well-being
- But . . . people adapt
- Adaptation is:
 - Quick
 - Complete
 - Ubiquitous
 - Inevitable

Implications of the Hedonic Treadmill

Measurement Issues

- Self-reports of subjective well-being are wrong
- Temporarily salient factors make well-being judgments unreliable

Schwarz and Strack (1999):

“There is little to be learned from global self-reports of well-being . . . [W]hat is being assessed, and how, seems too context dependent to provide reliable information about a population’s well-being.”

Implications of the Hedonic Treadmill

The Effects of Life Circumstances

- Life circumstances account for a very small percentage of the variance in happiness
- For example:
 - The association with income is (supposedly) tiny
 - Even becoming a quadriplegic does not matter
- The only thing that might affect us is the quality of our social relationships

Implications of the Hedonic Treadmill

People are Terrible Affective Forecasters

- They believe that life events will have a strong impact
- Yet they ignore the fact that adaptation usually occurs
- People make wrong life decisions based on faulty predictions about future affective states

Implications of the Hedonic Treadmill

The Effects of Personality Traits

- Some of the strongest predictors are personality traits
- Subjective well-being is moderately heritable
- Subjective well-being is stable over time
- Thus, we may inevitably adapt back to genetically determined set-points

Lykken and Tellegen (1996):

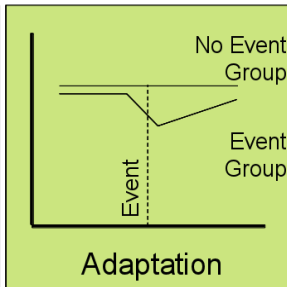
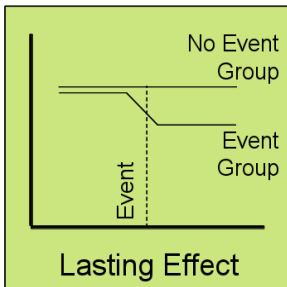
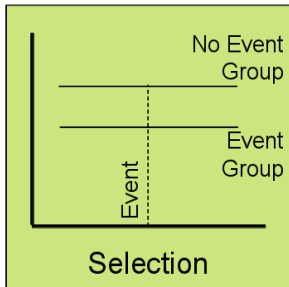
“It may be that trying to be happier is as futile as trying to be taller and therefore is counterproductive.”

Studies of Life Events

- Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1976)
 - Lottery winners
 - Control group
 - Spinal-cord injured
- Differences were not as large as one might expect
- Problems
 - Not longitudinal
 - Pre-existing differences?
 - Do they ever return to baseline levels?

Life Events

Three possible explanations of cross-sectional effects:



Remaining Questions

- Can subjective well-being change?
 - Is change related to changes in life circumstances?
-

Remaining Questions

- Can subjective well-being change?
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- Is adaptation quick?
- Is adaptation complete?
- Is adaptation ubiquitous (does it occur for all life events)?
- Is adaptation inevitable (does everyone adapt)?

Strategy

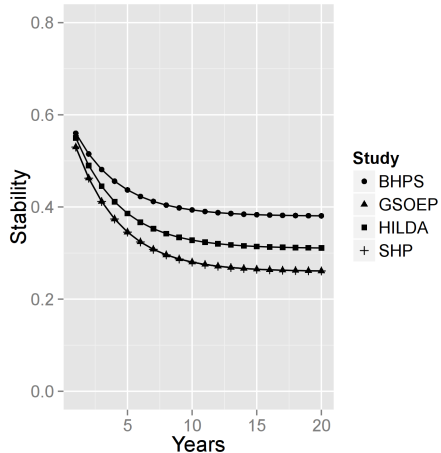
- **Data:** Large-scale, nationally representative panel studies
- **Outcome Measures:**
 - Single-item self-report life satisfaction measure
 - Multiple-item positive and negative affect measures
- **Analyses:**
 - Identify people who experience an event
 - Use multilevel modeling to estimate changes in life satisfaction before and after event
 - Examine potential moderators of these effects

Reliability and Stability

- Results from four panel studies
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Reliability and Stability

- Results from four panel studies
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- Reliability $\approx 70\%$
 - Stable Trait $\approx 33\%$
 - Autoregressive $\approx 33\%$

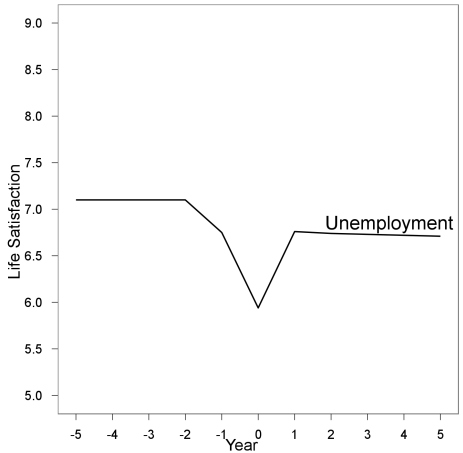
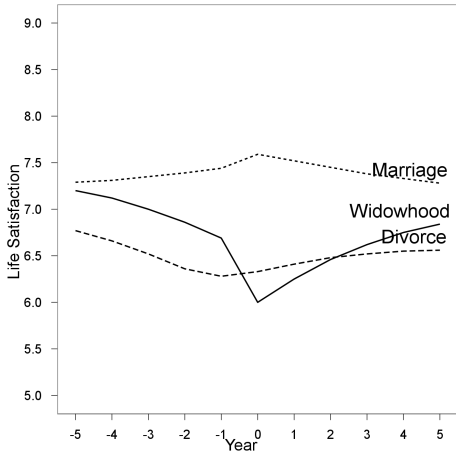


Life Events

Marriage, Widowhood, Divorce, and Unemployment

Life Events

Marriage, Widowhood, Divorce, and Unemployment

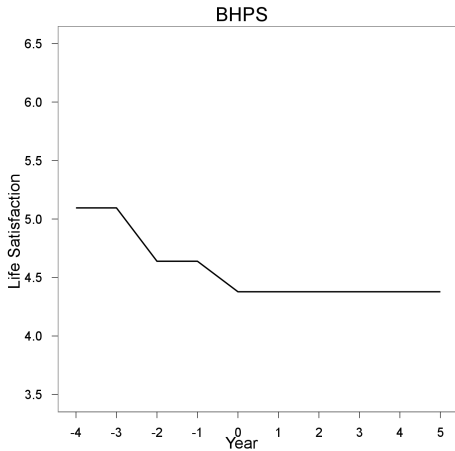
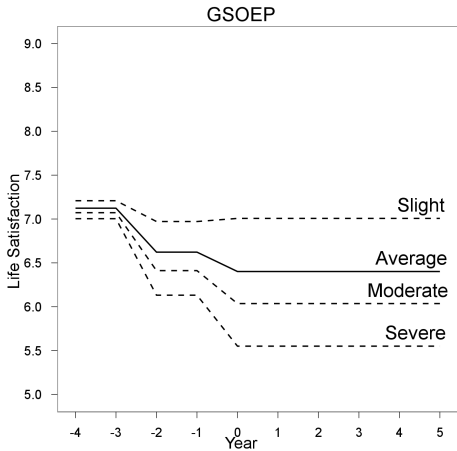


Disability

Sensitivity to Severity

Disability

Sensitivity to Severity

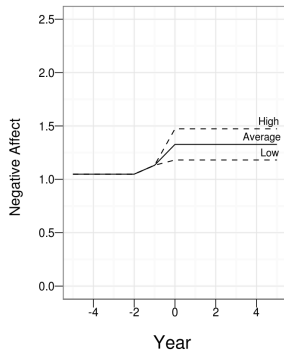
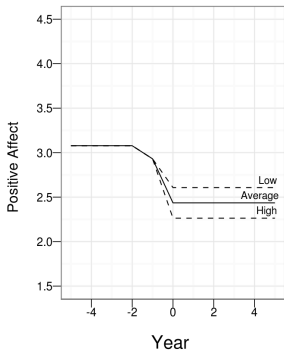
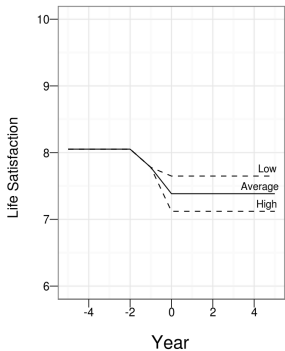


Different Measures of Well-Being

Disability

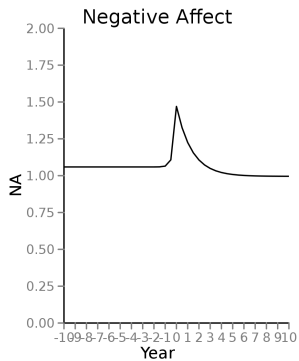
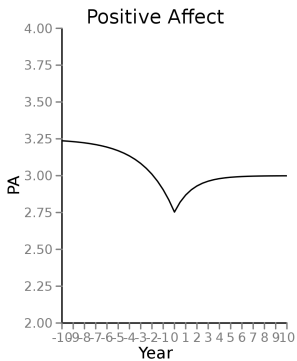
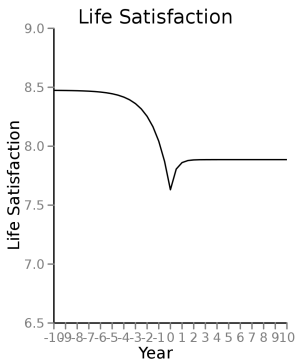
Different Measures of Well-Being

Disability



Different Measures of Well-Being

Death of Spouse or Child

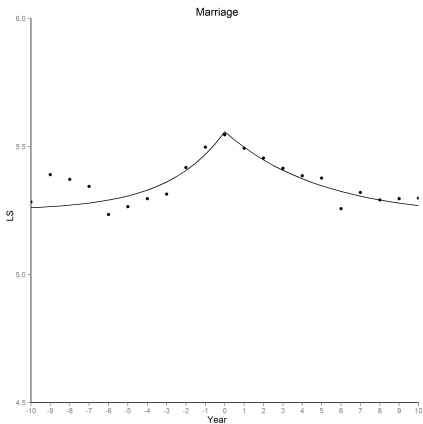


What Would Have Happened?

Results from BHPS

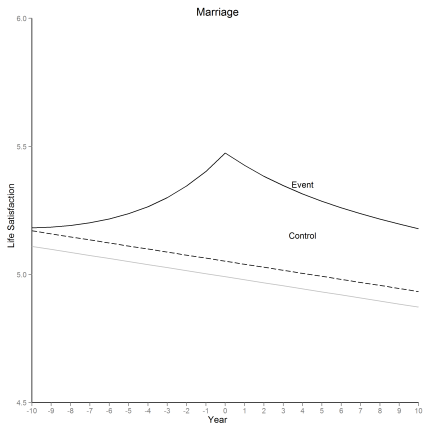
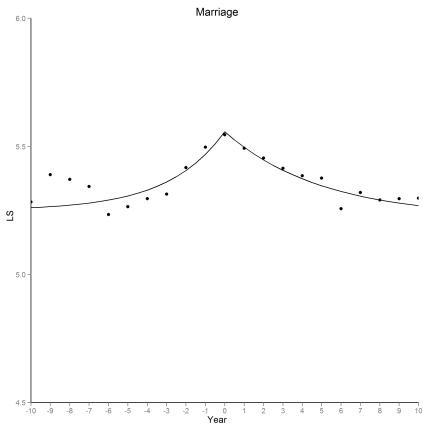
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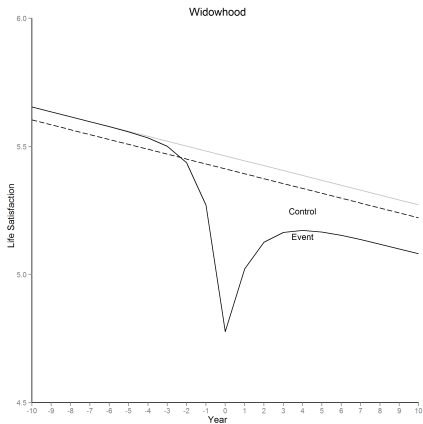
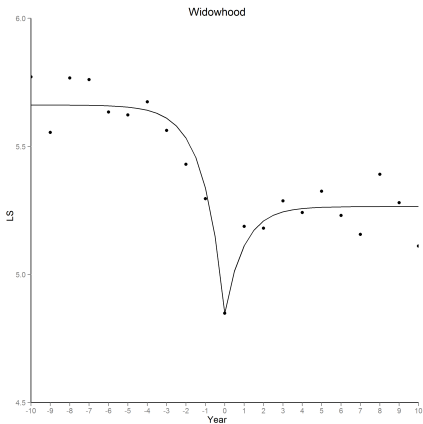
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Results from BHPS



What Would Have Happened?

Results from BHPS



Moderators of Reaction and Adaptation

- Previous studies show that there is as much variance in the long-term changes that occur after events as in the original baseline levels
- Are there individual difference factors that moderate reaction and adaptation?
- Prospective designs help determine whether these factors serve to:
 - Buffer the effects of negative life events
 - Enhance the effects of positive life events

Moderators of Reaction and Adaptation

- Social Relationships/Social Support/Social Contact:
 - Often described as the best predictor of subjective well-being
 - Potential buffering effects in times of stress
 - Can existing social support protect against future losses?

Social Relationships in the GSOEP, BHPS, and HILDA

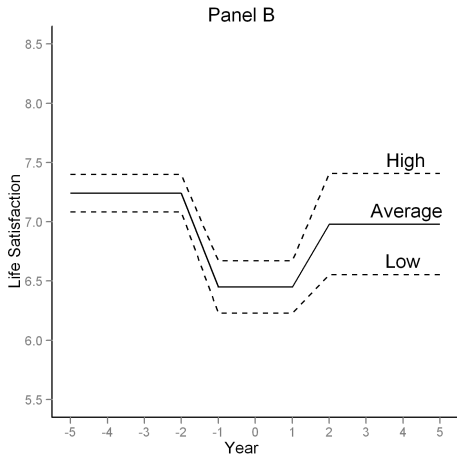
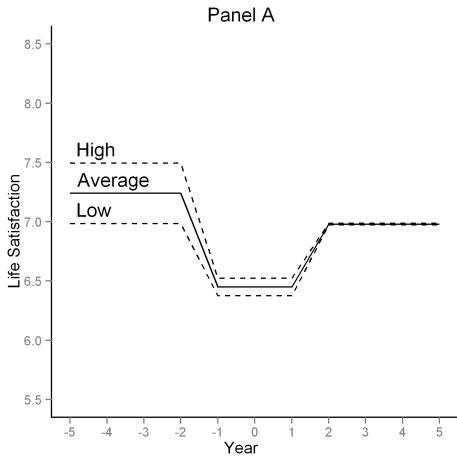
- **GSOEP:** How much have participants engaged in social activities with friends, relatives, or neighbors.
- **BHPS:** How many people were available to serve specific support roles (e.g., listen when they needed to talk; help out in a crisis)
- **HILDA:** Ten statements about social contact, availability of social support, and loneliness

GSOEP

Pre- and Post-Widowhood Social Support as a Moderator

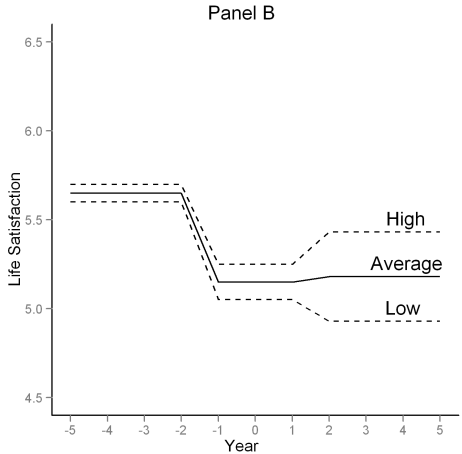
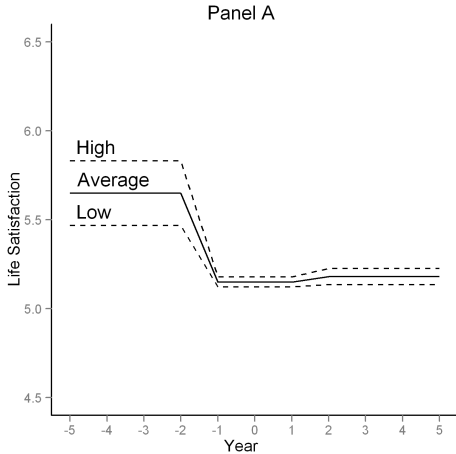
GSOEP

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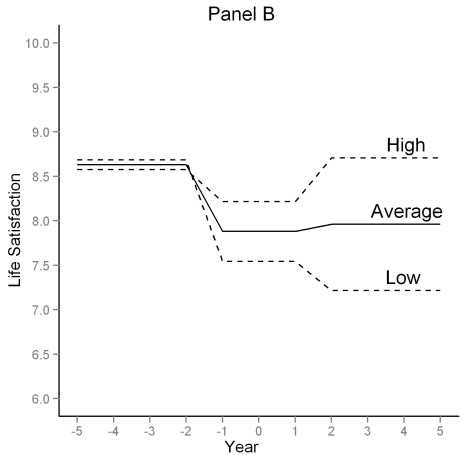
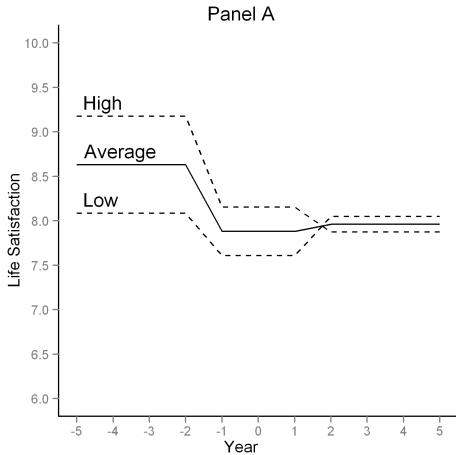
BHPS

Pre- and Post-Widowhood Social Support as a Moderator



HILDA

Pre- and Post-Widowhood Social Support as a Moderator

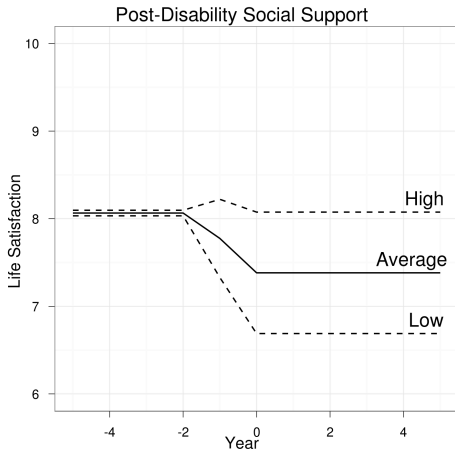
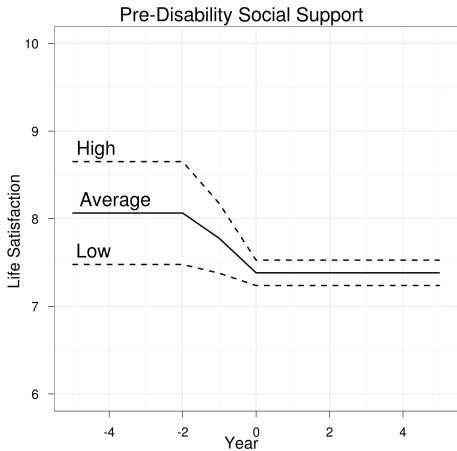


HILDA—Disability

Pre- and Post-Disability Social Support as a Moderator

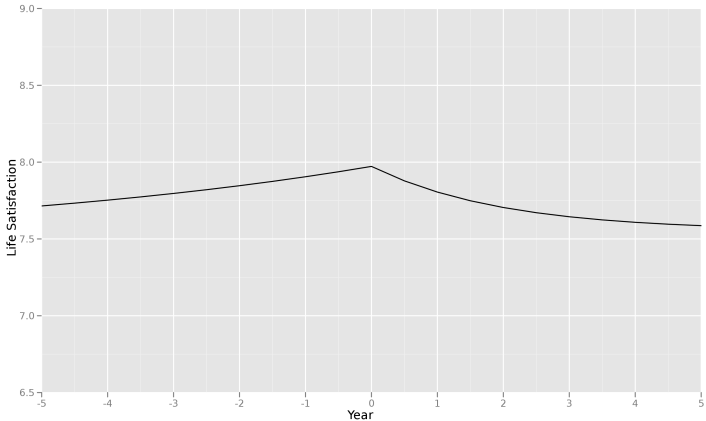
HILDA—Disability

Pre- and Post-Disability Social Support as a Moderator



Alternate Approach

Effects of Childbirth in Couples



Summary—Adaptation Effects

- Satisfaction measures are sensitive to changes in life circumstances
 - Different life events result in different trajectories following the event
- Adaptation . . .
 - Is relatively ubiquitous (though little evidence for adaptation to disability)
 - Is not always quick
 - Is not always complete
 - Is not inevitable
- The Hedonic Treadmill?
 - We do not have unchangeable happiness set-points
 - There is possibility for change

Summary—Moderation Effects

- Panel studies like the GSOEP, BHPS, and HILDA allow for important tests of moderation hypotheses
- Although social relationship variables are consistently linked with life satisfaction, the precise pattern of results does not support a true buffering effect
 - Pre-event levels of social support are unrelated to the change that occurs after the occurrence of a life event
- Personality variables are also related to baseline levels, but they do not moderate the effects of life events

Remaining Issues

- What other factors moderate the effects of life events?
 - Individual difference factors
 - Factors associated with the event
- Any effects of positive events?
- Why does adaptation occur?
 - Can it be prevented for positive events?
 - Can it be hastened in negative events?