By Wendy Glauser
Photographs by Jonathan Small

THE DEPRESSION PARADOX

People who struggle with depression may be trying too hard — not too little — to regulate their emotions, often in ways that leave them more distressed

At this moment, someone is waking up, again, with depression. *Today, I'll try harder to pull myself out of this funk*, they think. They look in the mirror and force a smile, having learned that activating facial muscles can improve mood. They repeat affirmations aloud — *I am loved. I am safe* — but stop when they realize their brain is fixating on the reality that they haven't heard back about a job opportunity. They feel anxiety building over having to put themselves through the interview process yet again. But then they recall a therapist's advice: distract yourself. They turn on a lighthearted podcast, but struggle to concentrate. They want to feel better, but they also want to curl up and cry.

This may be a fictionalized scenario but, to many suffering from depression, it still rings true. It's the inner dialogue — the competing motivations and continual effort to regulate emotions while in the pit of depression — that is a key focus for social psychologist Danfei Hu, a former Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and currently an assistant professor at the University of York in the U.K. Hu's research challenges the conventional belief that people with depression simply need to try harder to feel better. In time, the research could change the way psychologists treat depression.

Born and raised in Wuhan, China, Hu immigrated to the U.S. for her graduate studies before moving to Israel. She became interested in the science of emotion regulation while pursuing her PhD in social psychology at Pennsylvania State University. Her scientific journey began when she worked as a research student on a project that sought to motivate high school students to study science, technology, engineering and math. The project examined how students' beliefs about struggle shaped their motivation: students who viewed difficulties as a sign of lacking innate talent tended to avoid challenges, while those who attributed difficulties to insufficient effort were more likely to persist.

As Hu talked to high school students, she realized that how people feel could critically shape motivation. "Students would often say they hate math because the subject was difficult and made them anxious," she says. "This experience sparked my interest in the intersection of motivation and emotion."

In other areas where self-regulation plays a role, such as weight loss and academic achievement, research has emphasized the importance of motivation. Improving academic performance, for example, often depends on students being motivated to learn the subject or care about their achievement in the first place. But for emotion regulation, Hu says, most research has focused on strategies, not motivation. The science recommended, for instance, that if you feel sad, distract yourself or try to use another perspective to analyze the situation. Hu's training in the science of motivation raised questions about this approach. "If people aren't motivated to do something in the first place, just telling them what to do is not enough," she says.

Hu wanted to back up the truck. Before determining how to help those who struggle to deal with their sadness or anxiety, she wanted to know: Do people who feel down want to feel better? Are they trying to make themselves feel better? And, if so, why isn't



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Many of Hu's studies involve experience sampling, a method that pings participants on their phones during the day to capture feelings and behaviours in real time.

that working? She chose the Hebrew University of Jerusalem so she could work with Maya Tamir, a world-renowned scientist in emotion regulation and motivation, and was supported with an Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellowship. "I was really excited to work with someone whose research I had admired and followed for years," Hu says, "and the Azrieli Fellowship made that dream come true." She says the Fellowship also gave her the sense of community with other visiting scholars funded by the program — "a support network to navigate this experience together."

The questions Hu was asking, however, required a new kind of study, one that could catch people in the middle of their emotional lives rather than relying on their retrospective memories. Working with Tamir, she turned to experience sampling, a method that pings participants on their phones throughout the day to capture feelings and behaviours in real time. The approach would prove essential to what they found next.

In a seminal two-part study, published in 2024, Hu assessed the experienced and desired emotional states of 293 people in Israel and Australia (where her co-researchers were based), most of whom were in their 20s. Participants received several smartphone surveys for up to 10 days, reporting on how they felt, how they wanted to feel, and how much effort they were putting into changing their emotions. Participants were also assessed for depressive symptoms or major depressive disorders.

Based on the survey results, Hu and her colleagues calculated the discrepancy between experienced and desired emotions and then examined how that discrepancy affected people's effort investment in emotion regulation. Among participants with lower depressive symptoms or those who were psychologically healthy, they found that the larger the mismatch between experienced and desired emotions, the harder people tried to change how they felt. In other words, people tend to invest effort in regulating their emotions only when they need to — when they aren't feeling what they want to feel.

Curiously, among participants with elevated depressive symptoms or clinical depression, the pattern broke down. Their motivation to regulate emotions remained chronically high, regardless of whether the discrepancy between how they felt and how they wanted to feel was large or small.

"Before we did this research," says Hu, "we thought the reason that depressed individuals are less successful in their emotion regulation could be because they're not motivated to improve."

The study of Australian and Israeli participants, most of whom were young adults, proved this assumption wrong. The research showed that people with depression invest a lot of effort in trying to make themselves feel better, though they tend to exert effort even when it is not necessary. For those who are "pressing on the gas pedal all the time," as Hu describes it, "a lot of their emotion regulatory resources might be wasted, because they're using them even when they don't need to."

Indeed, in another study (not yet published), Hu and colleagues found that greater effort at regulating emotions predicted feeling better in healthy individuals. But in people with depression, greater effort did not necessarily help depressed individuals feel better; in some cases, it made them feel worse. Together, the findings are "heartbreaking," Maya Tamir says. "How difficult an experience is it to constantly try to change how you feel? And, ironically, investing a lot of effort in emotion regulation in daily life may not be as effective for depressed people as it is for healthy people."

To further understand why people with depression aren't as successful at regulating their emotions as psychologically healthy people — on top of the potential burnout and inefficiency associated with their constant effort — Hu and Tamir enrolled 200 young Israeli adults, about half of whom were clinically diagnosed with major depressive disorder, in another experience sampling study. Six times a day over 10 days, participants were pinged on their phones and asked to report both how they were feeling — anxious and sad? happy and calm? — as well as how they were trying to manage those feelings. Were they distracting themselves? Reframing the situation? Ruminating? Seeking support?

Again, the research, published in 2025, upended assumptions. A widely held belief is that depressed people are too rigid in their emotion regulation — that they rely overly on emotion regulation strategies that are commonly deemed ineffective (such as rumination) rather than employing a variety of strategies. The study found that people with depression cycled through different emotion regulation strategies almost twice as often as people without depression, but with much less payoff. Among people with depression, high use of different strategies variably predicted worse emotion regulation outcomes and greater depressive symptoms on a day-to-day basis.

The reason may be that people with depression use helpful tools but at the wrong time, says Hu. "My research and other research have consistently found that depressed individuals pick the less context-appropriate strategy," Hu says. "An analogy I often use is, if you use a knife that's designed to cut vegetables to cut meat, you might hurt yourself."

Complicating matters further, Hu has found that people with depression have more conflicting goals in emotion regulation than healthy individuals. They are often motivated to both want to decrease and increase unpleasant emotions at the same time. Unsurprisingly, these conflicting goals undermine emotion regulation and predict greater clinical symptoms over time. "This could be one of the explanations as to why people with depression are not succeeding in their emotion regulation," she says.

Why would people with depression want to feel worse? One theory is that depression is tied up with identity. Another is that the idea of happiness can be unfamiliar and therefore something to be avoided. "We all want self-verification," Tamir says. "The problem is that when you view the world as a negative place and you view yourself as a sad person, self-verification means actually confirming the belief that the world is not great and that you're a sad person."

It's easy to see how Hu's research could affect how friends, family and therapists support people with depression. For instance, the well-intentioned act of telling people struggling with depression to do more — change their perspective, find hobbies, ignore the worry — might be harmful. And if further research confirms that self-verification is what's causing people with depression to both want to feel more happiness and sadness at the same time, then therapy could focus on helping people reframe how they see themselves; not as a depressed person, for instance, but as someone on the path to self-acceptance.

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Still, neither Hu nor Tamir believes the research is mature enough to reshape cognitive behavioural therapy or drive public awareness campaigns. "Ultimately, I would love to see this line of work contribute to improved mental health outcomes," says Hu, "and we're working toward that goal."

For now, she's enjoying the process of asking novel questions and solving problems. She wants to better understand how depressed and non-depressed people allocate their coping resources, including in which situations they invest more, or less, effort.

She also wants to explore more about which regulation strategies work in what contexts and whether training could help people with depression use more context-appropriate strategies and implement them more effectively. Returning to the knife analogy, she says, "If I'm not a good cook, you can tell me to try to use knife A when I need to slice meat, but that doesn't mean that when I use the knife, I will use it correctly or I won't hurt myself. That's one research question that needs to be studied."

Although Hu's research found that investing effort in most emotion regulation strategies is less effective for people with depression than for psychologically healthy individuals, there was an exception. The one strategy benefiting both people with and without depression was asking others for emotional support. It's a conventional theory that has stood up to Hu's inquisitions: When you're struggling emotionally, seeking professional help is always a good idea. ▲●■