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## Doing Well & Feeling Well: Do Self-Control and Flourishing Go Hand-in-Hand?

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### Abstract

In the competitive times of today, self-control is considered to be an essential characteristic of an individual in order to achieve success. Self-control is essentially the ability to give up on smaller immediate rewards in order to obtain larger delayed rewards (Henden,2008), capacity to change and adapt the self so as to produce a better, more optimal fit between self and the world (Rothbaum et al.,1982) and the ability to attain deliberative control over impulses (Ainslie, 1975; Eisenberg et al.,2003; Fujita & Han, 2009).The aim of this research was to study the relationship between the ability to exert control on self in young girls with the current levels of their happiness and psychological well-being, and how their self-control is associated with flourishing. Towards this end, a quantitative approach was taken and 3 questionnaires were administered. Data was collected from 200 girls of age 16-22 living in Delhi using the Self Control Scale (Tangney et al, 2004), Psychological Flourishing Scale (Diener&Diener, 2008) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle,2002). The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the help of SPSS 23. The results obtained showed that self-control is a significant predictor of both happiness and flourishing. This adds to the knowledge base of the field considering the scant research done previously on self-control, and its relationship with happiness and flourishing in the Indian context.

**Key Words:** Flourishing, Happiness, Psychology, Self-control.

“Being happy is not enough to be happy”

-LidijaMarkovicRosati<sup>1</sup>

Since the development of positive psychology, happiness has been the core focus of all researches, so much so that positive psychology research has come to be synonymous with research on understanding and increasing happiness. This is with good reason, as the field of positive psychology started as inquiry into happiness in response to psychology’s long-standing pre-occupation with inquiry into pathology. But according to the founder of positive psychology Martin Seligman (2011),

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though happiness is one of the most important aspects of a larger construct relevant for a good life, happiness 'alone' is not enough. According to him the word 'happiness' has been overused to the extent that it has now lost its meaning (Seligman, 2011). Aristotle, long back, had found the answer to "what is the good that we choose for its own sake rather than because it makes a contribution to something else that we value?" as happiness (Seligman, 2011). But for Seligman, the answer is human 'flourishing' instead. It is therefore necessary for researchers in positive psychology to turn to flourishing and pay more attention to the individual characteristics enabling it, which is what the present study aims to do.

Flourishing moves beyond the measures of simple happiness and gives a more holistic perspective on what exactly it is to feel good, happy and well. The concept of flourishing resonates with the idea that 'people want to thrive, not just survive'. Flourishing is a state of optimal mental health that extends beyond merely the absence of mental illnesses (Keyes, 2007).

According to Seligman (2011), the PERMA model of well-being attempts to answer what flourishing is and what facilitates it. The five pillars or building blocks of the theory are:

1. P (Positive emotion)- hedonic increase in the experience of positive emotions about the past as in gratitude and forgiveness, the present as in mindfulness and the future as in hope and optimism.

2. E (Engagement)- expressing challenging tasks by fully deploying the skills, strengths and attention to it. This engagement produces an experience of 'flow', described as the sense of effortlessness felt in the moment which stand out in one's life and can be referred to as "being in the zone", "ecstasy" and "aesthetic rapture" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

3. R (Relationships)- connections to others give life purpose, meaning, joy, laughter, belongingness and pride.

4. M (Meaning)-sense of purpose derived from belongingness and serving something beyond self.

5. A (Accomplishment)- pursuing achievement, competence, success and mastery for its own sake.

Flourishing influences several dimensions of life, including work life. In a study by Rothmann (2013) it was found that flourishing employees feel good (i.e. are satisfied with their jobs and experience positive emotions at work), function psychologically well (i.e. are energetic, dedicated, self-determined, find meaning and purpose at work, and experience harmony), and function socially well (i.e. social acceptance, growth, contribution, coherence and integration). Though it is clear that flourishing is desirable, very few people actually claim to be in that state. Epidemiological researches suggest that not even 20% of adults in a developed nation like US flourish (Keyes, 2007). This is associated with "emotional distress, psychosocial impairment, limitations in daily activities, and lost work days" (Keyes, 2002). Thus, more research and interventions are called for to



understand what can help individuals flourish. There are several personal characteristics that are associated with flourishing and the present study aims to explore the role of one such quality: self-control.

Self-control is one of the most widely studied constructs in social sciences. More than 3% of peer-reviewed psychology articles in the year 2010 were referred by 'self-control' or related terms (Duckworth, 2011).

<sup>1</sup>Rosati, L. M. (n.d.).

Self-control is defined as the ability to give up on smaller immediate rewards for larger delayed ones (Henden, 2008), capacity to change and adapt the self so as to produce a better, more optimal fit between self and the world (Rothbaum et al, 1982) and the ability to attain deliberative control over impulses (Ainslie, 1975; Eisenberg et al., 2003; Fujita & Han, 2009).

Different names for self-control vary widely and include delay of gratification, effortful control, willpower, self-discipline, self-regulation and ego-strength (Duckworth, 2011). Moffitt et al. (2011) use the term 'self-control' synonymously with conscientiousness, a large class of personality traits that include responsibility, industriousness and orderliness.

A number of studies, as mentioned, have found a positive relationship between self-control and positive health (Crescioni et al., 2011) and positive outcomes (Tangney et al., 2018). A study done by Ramezani & Gholtash (2015) on college students showed that self-control is positively and significantly related to happiness, and that self-control is a dominant predictor of happiness. It has also been found that trait self-control positively predicts happiness across age-groups (Cheung et al., 2014). Khondabi (2004) showed the relationship between self-control and higher quality of life. Lu and Shih (1997) found 9 major sources of happiness, out of 180 reported sources, amongst which one was self-control.

Much has been written about the consequences of lacking in self-control. The first crime committed by human in fact was due to the inability to control oneself, according to the Bible. The fruit was so "pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom" (Genesis 3:6, New International Version) that Eve fell for the temptation. The Bible underscores the importance of self-control as: "Like a city whose walls are broken through, is a person who lacks self-control" (Proverbs 25:28, New International Version). As far as our own Indian texts are concerned, there's heavy emphasis on self-control. The ideas of 'Atm-sanyam-yog' and Brahmacharya are highly popular, suggesting that only when one learns to restrain and control oneself, one can find eternal bliss (Paranjpe, 2012). Patanjali (1975) defines Yoga as the control or restraint of the processes of consciousness and the ideal human condition is attained through control. He also claims that by exercising restraints, a yogi can acquire several types of powers. Restraints or 'Yama' stand as the first limb of the eight yoga practices by Patanjali. One aspect of Yama is 'Brahmacharya' which refers to chastity, marital fidelity, sexual restraint and control of lust. Paranjpe in his book states "Restraint is obviously the most crucial aspect of yoga" (Paranjpe, 2012; p.180) thus suggesting that self-control has been of utmost importance in the Indian tradition too (Paranjpe, 2012).



Lack of or low level of self-control has been shown to be associated with several negative life outcomes. Gottfredson&Hirschi (1990; p.90) state that “people who lack self-control will tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical risk-taking.”They claim that people low in self-control, are more likely to engage not only in criminal activities, but also in imprudent behavior like drinking, gambling, smoking and academic dishonesty. On the flip side, presence of high levels of self-control has been shown to be associated with positive life outcomes. A large number of studies have shown the relationship of self-control with academic achievement and success. Tangney et al. (2004) showed the correlation of high self-control with higher grades, better adjustment (lesser pathology and higher self-esteem), less binge eating and alcohol abuse, better relationships and interpersonal skills, secure attachment and more optimal emotional response in university students. Wolfe & Johnson (1995) found that self-control was the only among 32 personality variables that contributed significantly to prediction of grade points among university students. A pair of studies by Mischel, Shoda, and Peake (1988) and Shoda, Mischel, and Peake (1990), commonly known as the ‘Marshmallow experiment’, assessed 4 year old children’s capacity to delay gratification and had a follow-up. They found that children with higher delay of gratification grew up to have better SAT scores, indicating better academic performance, and better interpersonal relationships in early adulthood.

Despite all this, self-control is not universally recognized as only positive and always positive. There actually exists considerable debate on whether self-control is ‘good’ or not. On one side of the debate, is the idea that “there maybe no such thing as ‘too much’ self-control” (Duckworth, 2011; p.1). James Allen in his book, ‘The Life Triumphant’ suggests that “self-control should not be associated with a destructive repression, but with a constructive expression” (Allen, 1907; p.14). The process of self-control, according to him is not of death, but one of life. He writes that just like the mechanic turns coal into gas, and water into steam, and then concentrates to use the refined resources for benefits for others, the person practicing self-control transmutes his lower inclinations into better qualities to increase his own and others’ happiness. James Allen writes, “every self-indulgence, every forbidden pleasure, every hateful thought renounced is transformed into something more purely and permanently beautiful” through self-control (Allen, 1907; p.14).

On the other side, pioneers like Sigmund Freud suggest that “happiness diminishes as humans inhibit direct satisfaction of basic wishes and desires” (Freud, 1958). Too much of self-control can often end up in pathology. Disorders like anorexia nervosa, treatment-resistant depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder could all be looked at as instances of over self-control. This view has led to the development of a therapy, RODB T that actually seeks to help people in reducing self-control (Lynch, 2018). RODB T or the Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy is a new evidence based treatment targeting a spectrum of disorders characterized by excessive self-control, often called as over-control (OC). It is supported by 20 years of clinical experience and research (UK Medical Council, 2008; Rounsville& Carroll, 2001).

According to Lynch (2018), ‘too much self-control’ can be linked with “social isolation, maladaptive perfectionism, aloof interpersonal functioning, disingenuous emotional expression and severe and



difficult to treat mental health problems” (Lynch, 2018). The results of a study done by Wrosch and Heckhausen (2002) suggest that internal-control attributions were related to higher regret and more intrusive thoughts in older adults. Uziel (2018) studied the downsides of self-control and the harmful implications of wanting more self-control, and concluded that though it might be beneficial for a stronger work ethic, too much self-control can prove to be detrimental to health. Furthermore, recent studies have found that the same resource needed for acts of self-control is also needed for decision making (Vohs et al., 2008). After exerting high levels of self-control, people become reluctant to make decisions, preferring to avoid or postpone them (Pocheptsova, Amir, Dhar, & Baumeister, 2009)

In the light of all these studies and debates, the present study was undertaken with the aim to explore whether or not self-control is related with and can predict flourishing and happiness among young adults. Following were the research objectives of the study:

1. To explore the relationship between self-control and flourishing.
2. To explore the relationship between self-control and happiness.
3. To explore the relationship between happiness and flourishing.
4. To explore the relationship between self-control and certain personal attributes and choices like socio-economic status, dieting, family type, schooling, family environment, perceived control, and smoking & drinking.
5. To explore the relationship between flourishing and certain personal attributes and choices like, socio-economic status, dieting, family type, schooling, family environment, perceived control, and smoking & drinking.
6. To explore the relationship between happiness and certain personal attributes and choices like, socio-economic status, dieting, family type, schooling, family environment, perceived control, and smoking & drinking.

## Method

The present study was an exploratory study done with a quantitative approach. Pre-existing questionnaires were used to get self-reported data from the participants after taking informed consent. The main variables assessed during the study were flourishing, self-control and happiness. 200 high school and undergraduate female participants belonging to the age group of 16-22 years and living in Delhi- NCR formed the sample of the study. The participants were recruited via convenience sampling. The participants belonged to diverse disciplines and came from various socio-economic backgrounds. All the participants were administered three questionnaires: The Self Control Scale (Tangney et al, 2004), The Psychological Flourishing Scale (Diener&Diener, 2008), and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002) in the same order. Demographic details of the participants were also taken to have a holistic understanding of the participants. These included



the religion, number of siblings and birth order, family type (nuclear or joint), schooling type (all girls or co-ed), average annual family income, family environment, diet information, perceived control, and smoking & drinking habits, which could give considerable information that could be tested for relationship with flourishing, self-control and happiness levels of an individual.

### Results and discussion

The present study was undertaken to explore the relationship between self-control, happiness and flourishing. 200 college or high school females of age 17-22 formed the sample and underwent administration of several questionnaires. The means of the constructs measured are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of the constructs**

	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
<b>SELF-CONTROL</b>	113.31	16.70
<b>HAPPINESS</b>	118.79	17.30
<b>FLOURISHING</b>	64.97	9.85

The first research objective was to explore the relationship between self-control and flourishing. The results are depicted in table 2 and 3. The results show a statistically significant positive correlation between self-control and flourishing of an individual,  $r(200)=.321$ ,  $p=.01$ . Simple linear regression was carried out to investigate whether self-control could predict flourishing. A statistically significant relationship was found ( $p<.001$ ). The R square value suggests that 10.3% of the variation in flourishing can be explained by the model containing only self-control.

**Table 2. Correlation matrix of Self-control and Flourishing**

		FLOURISHING
<b>SELF CONTROL</b>	PEARSON CORRELATION	.321**
	SIG. (2 TAILED)	.000
	N	200



**Table 3. Simple Regression Analysis**

PREDICTOR	CRITERION	R	R <sup>2</sup>	ADJUSTED R SQUARE	F	SIG.
Self-control	Flourishing	.321	.103	.099	22.780	.000

This result is in congruence with the existing literature. Howell (2009) showed that students who were said to be flourishing individuals (21.4% of the sample) reported higher self-control. It has also been shown that the pathway to adolescents' flourishing is through linking self-control skills and positivity ratio, which were found to be consistent (Orkibi et al.,2018). The results are useful as they throw light on the need for acquiring and incorporating self-control in oneself.

The second research objective was to explore the relationship between self-control and happiness. Pearson correlation was found to be significant at .01 confidence level,  $r(200) = .436$  for self-control and happiness. Simple linear regression was carried out to investigate the relationship between self-control and happiness and the results showed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ). The R square value suggests that 19% of the variation in happiness can be explained by the model containing only self-control.

**Table 4. Correlation matrix of self-control and happiness**

		HAPPINESS
SELF CONTROL	PEARSON CORRELATION	.436**
	SIG. (2 TAILED)	.000
	N	200

**Table 5. Simple Regression Analysis**

PREDICTOR	CRITERION	R	R <sup>2</sup>	ADJUSTED R SQUARE	F	SIG.
Self-control	Happiness	.436	.190	.186	46.406	.000

The results are in sync with popular wisdom as well as empirical studies. The positive correlation between the two constructs, with self-control predicting happiness, in the present study further strengthens one side of the existing argument about self-control being good or bad. People with higher levels of self-control have been shown to report experiencing greater average happiness in daily life (Larson, 1989). Thus, a general sense of control is necessary for well-being and happiness in



day-to-day life. According to James Allen (1907), men seek enduring happiness in excitement and giving up on worthless pleasure; this permanent happiness is achieved only in the life of self-control.

The third research objective was to explore the relationship between happiness and flourishing. Simple linear regression was carried out to investigate the relationship between happiness and flourishing and the results showed a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .001$ ).

**Table 6. Correlation matrix of happiness and flourishing**

		FLOURISHING
HAPPINESS	PEARSON CORRELATION	.624**
	SIG. (2 TAILED)	.000
	N	200

**Table 7. Simple Regression Analysis**

PREDICTOR	CRITERION	R	R <sup>2</sup>	ADJUSTED R SQUARE	F	SIG.
Happiness	flourishing	.624	.389	.386	126.286	.000

The correlation between happiness and psychological flourishing was found to be  $r(200) = .624$ ,  $p = .01$ . The R square value suggests that 38.9% of the variation in flourishing can be explained by the model containing only happiness. This is in line with existing literature: higher hedonic well-being or happiness is known to be accompanied by higher eudaimonic well-being or flourishing (Senik, 2011). Thus, happiness and flourishing both go hand in hand and both share a positive correlation with self-control.

The fourth research objective was to explore the relationship between self-control and certain lifestyle conditions and factors of individuals. The results of the present study show that the people who believe that they have control over themselves have statistically significantly higher self-control ( $116.33 \pm 16.27$ ) than people who do not have perceived control over themselves ( $109.12 \pm 16.50$ ),  $t(196) = 3.030$   $p = 0.003$  as shown in Table 8.



**Table 8. Comparison of differences in self-control due to perception of control and smoking-drinking habits**

		SELF-CONTROL	
		MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
<b>PERCEIVED CONTROL</b>	YES	116.33	16.27
	NO	109.12	16.50
<b>SMOKING AND DRINKING</b>	NEVER TRIED	117.16	15.86
	DID ONCE OR TWICE	113.02	15.15
	OCCASSIONALLY	108.57	15.16
	REGULARLY	85.20	26.56

There was a statistically significant difference between the self-control between groups as determined by one-way ANOVA ( $F(3,196)=8.607, P= <0.001$ ). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that the self-control was statistically higher in people who have never tried smoking and drinking ( $117.16 \pm 15.86, p < .001$ ), people who have tried it once or twice ( $113.02 \pm 15.15, p = .001$ ) and people who do it occasionally ( $108.57 \pm 15.16, p = .010$ ) than people who smoke and drink regularly ( $85.20 \pm 26.56$ ). This shows that people engaging in substance abuse lack control over themselves. Arneklev et al. in 1993, conducted a study to examine the link between self-control and imprudent behaviors like smoking, drinking and gambling which are considered to be analogous to crime involvement and found significant results. Their study was based on 'A general theory of crime' by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) according to which indulging in criminal behavior is related to individual differences of self-control. The relationship between self-control and family type, schooling, religion, birth order, socio-economic status, dieting and family environment was not found to be statistically significant.

The fifth objective of the present study was to explore the relationship between flourishing and certain personal attributes and choices like age, socio-economic status, dieting, family type, schooling, family environment, perceived control, and smoking & drinking. The Independent T test done on the data of the present study show statistically significant differences between the flourishing levels of the groups (Table 9).

**Table 9. Comparison of differences in flourishing levels due to certain attributes**

		FLOURISHING	
		MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
<b>HAPPY WITH FAMILY</b>	YES	66.41	8.99
	NO	57.09	10.75
<b>PERCEIVED CONTROL</b>	YES	66.65	9.65
	NO	62.46	9.75



It was found that people who are happy with their present family environment have a higher level of psychological flourishing ( $66.41 \pm 8.99$ ) than people who are not happy with the present family situations ( $57.09 \pm 10.75$ ),  $p < .001$ . These results show the importance of interpersonal relationships and healthy family environment in the psychological well-being and happiness of an individual. According to Seligman, the goal of positive psychology is flourishing, but there has been very little importance given to the pillar of relationships (Caughlin & Huston, 2010). The role of relationships, of which family forms the main component, has also been explained by Reis & Gable (2003), as “almost without exception, theories of psychological well-being include positive relationships with others as a core element of mental health and well-being” (p.129). It was also found that the level of psychological flourishing in people having perceived self-control ( $66.75 \pm 9.65$ ) was more than in people with no perceived control over themselves ( $62.46 \pm 9.75$ ),  $p = .003$ . ‘The Handbook of Positive Psychology’ (Synder & Lopez, 2005) contains seven chapters highlighting the role of interpersonal aspects in personal flourishing. There were no statistically significant results found explaining the relationship between flourishing and socio-economic status, religion, birth order, dieting, smoking and drinking habits and family type.

The sixth objective of the study was to explore the relationship between happiness and certain personal attributes and choices like age, socio-economic status, dieting, family type, etc. The results of the present study show statistically significant differences in the happiness levels of different groups (Table 10). The level of happiness was found to be lower in people who have a conservative family ( $115.40 \pm 18.20$ ) than people with a liberal family environment ( $121.45 \pm 16.13$ ),  $p = .014$ . Girls who reported to be happy with their family environment also had higher levels of happiness ( $120.83 \pm 16.36$ ) than those who were not ( $107.65 \pm 18.29$ ),  $p < .001$ . This is in sync with the large number of researches which have shown strong relations between positive relationships and personal happiness (e.g. Argyle, 1987; Campbell, Converse, & Rogers, 1976). Argyle (1987) states that successful “social relationships are a major source of happiness, relief from distress, and health” (p.31).

It was also seen that the happiness was higher in people who have perceived control over themselves ( $121.40 \pm 16.25$ ) than those who do not think that they have self-control ( $114.82 \pm 18.33$ ),  $p = .009$ . The results explaining the relationship between happiness and factors like socio-economic status, religion, birth order, schooling and smoking-drinking habits were not statistically significant.



**Table 10. Comparison of differences in happiness levels due to certain characteristics**

		<b>HAPPINESS</b>	
		MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
<b>CONSERVATIVE FAMILY</b>	YES	115.40	18.20
	NO	121.45	16.13
<b>HAPPY WITH FAMILY</b>	YES	120.83	16.36
	NO	107.65	18.29
<b>PERCEIVED CONTROL</b>	YES	121.40	16.25
	NO	114.82	18.33

Overall, self-control emerges as an important factor for an individual to thrive and flourish. It is not a destructive process, but rather a constructive one. In times like today where dieting culture and the addiction to social media isn't rare, self-control holds a significant place. It is important that one realizes the optimum levels of usage of electronic media or the intake of junks and unhealthy food, and further takes the charge over oneself and has the control to stop. Children and adults spending their productive hours on phones and video games and then saying, "I couldn't control" is nothing but lack of control which further lead to addictions. Factors like family environment, interpersonal relationships, substance abuse and the perception of having control over self or not emerge as being important determinants of the studied constructs. The fact that the perception of having a sense of control over oneself affects the actual self-control of an individual shows how important it is to believe in oneself and the power of thought. Thus, to flourish and be happy, having control over oneself is the key. Control over negative emotions and thoughts to prevent them from overpowering one, control over positive emotions to have a state of balance and not go overwhelmed, control over the tongue to eat what's healthy for the body and to speak what's healthy for oneself and the other, control over actions to prevent impulsive mistakes leading to regret and guilt, and control over the mind and consciousness, are all pathways to happiness. One who achieves complete control over oneself experiences true happiness. The limitations of the study lie in a small sample size and that the data was taken only quantitatively. Further qualitative data collected would give deeper insights into the construct of self-control. The long-term effects of self-control could also not be seen which could be researched upon using longitudinal studies which would further enrich the field.



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