

Positive Psychology in the Daily Experiences Lab

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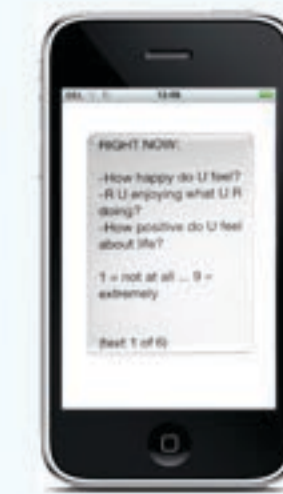
WHAT IS THE DAILY EXPERIENCES LAB?

The Daily Experiences Lab uses mobile technology to investigate emotional well-being in daily life. Founded by Dr. Tamlin Conner in 2008, the lab uses technology like mobile phone based text-messaging and daily internet surveys to capture feelings of happiness, joy, excitement, and other emotional states in real-time in daily life. Real-time assessment is important because emotional states are fleeting and momentarily experienced; once these states have dissipated, people rely on beliefs, heuristics, and stereotypes to re-construct events. By using a real-time approach, the Daily Experiences Lab bypasses issues of recollection bias that are associated with traditional memory-based measures of emotion. Over the past four years, our lab has conducted several large studies to examine profiles of well-being in daily life, as well as the cognitive, and genetic factors that influence our daily experiences, including happiness.

WHY IS OUR HAPPINESS RESEARCH SO IMPORTANT?

Current happiness literature suggests numerous benefits of happiness. Not only does happiness feel good (Howell, Kern, & Lyubomirsky, 2007), people high in happiness also tend to experience better social relationships (Harker & Keltner, 2001), better physical health (Steptoe et al., 2005; Subramanian et al., 2005) and fewer mental health problems (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Evidence suggests that being happy increases an individual's 'thought-action repertoire' which leads to enhanced physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources (i.e., Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions; Fredrickson, 2001) and an 'upward spiral' (Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001) to greater wellbeing. Yet the majority of happiness research measures only 'remembered' or 'global' happiness ("Am I typically happy?"), which can be quite different from 'experienced' happiness ("Am I happy right now?"). Yet emerging evidence suggests that experienced happiness may have even stronger links to health (Steptoe et al., 2005) and longevity (Carstensen et al., 2011). Thus, our lab investigates various types of research questions in relation to experienced happiness and other emotional states.

TECHNOLOGIES IN THE LAB

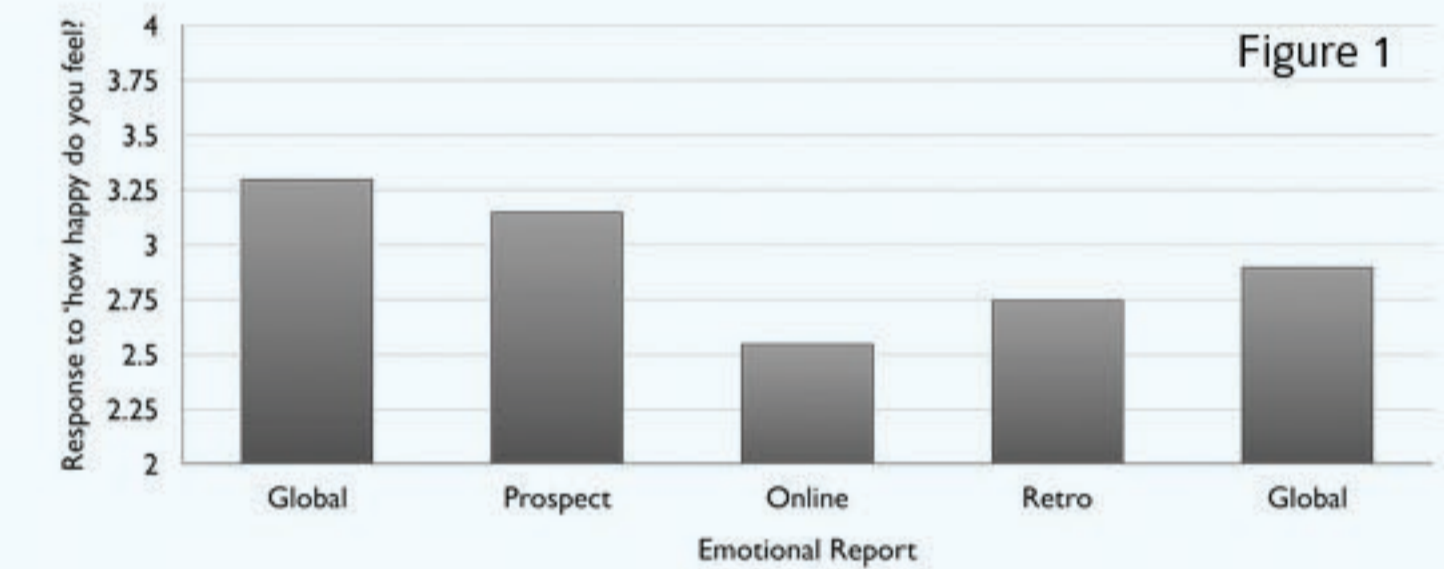


We're using SMS text-messaging experience sampling, as well as internet-based daily diary techniques to obtain real-time profiles of emotional states and other experiences over time in daily life. We've also begun collecting blood samples as part of our studies; blood samples will be used for genotyping.

RESEARCH PERFORMED BY THE DAILY EXPERIENCES LAB



Research shows that there is often a gap between what we experience and what we remember. For example, memories for emotions tend to be more intense than actual emotional experiences called the 'memory-experience gap'. One of the studies in the Daily Experiences Lab confirmed that this 'memory-experience gap' exists for daily happiness (Kladnitski & Conner, in preparation). As shown in Figure 1, people remember being happier than they actually reported being (using text messaging) across two weeks.



KEY REFERENCES

Conner, T. S., & Lehman, B. (in press). Getting started: Launching a study in daily life. Chapter to appear in M. M. Mehl and T. S. Conner (Eds.), *Handbook of Research Methods for Studying Daily Life*. New York, New York: Guilford Press.

Conner, T. S., & Reid, K. A. (in press). Effects of intensive reporting of happiness in daily life. University of Otago. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

Conner, T. S., Tennen, H., Fleeson, W. & Barrett, L. F. (2009). Experience sampling methods: A modern idiographic approach to personality research. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 3(3), 292-313.

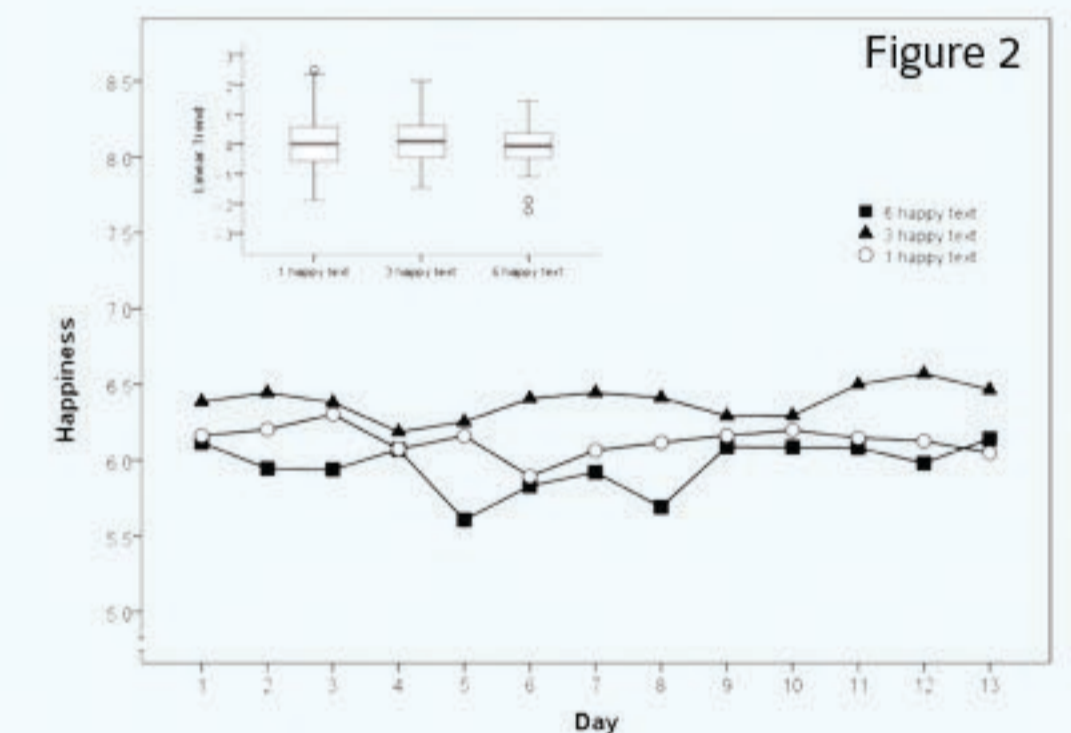
Kladnitski, N., & Conner, T. S., (in prep.). Memory for Happiness.

Mehl, M. M., & Conner, T. S. (in press). *Handbook of Research Methods for Studying Daily Life*. New York, New York: Guilford Press.

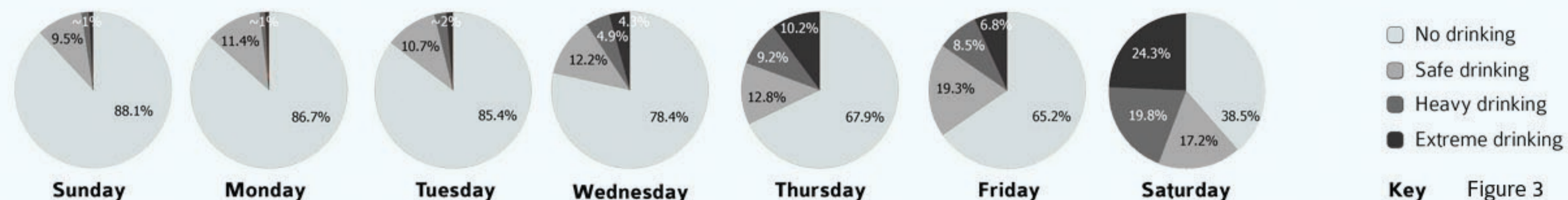
Polak, M. & Conner, T. S. (in prep.). To Function or not to Function: Impairments in Daily Functioning After Heavy and Extreme Episodic Drinking in Tertiary Students.



In today's society, people are focused on happiness more than ever before. But is focusing on happiness a good thing? In 2010, the Daily Experiences Lab investigated whether frequent reflection on happiness might adversely impair the experience of happiness. Young adults from the University of Otago were randomly assigned to report their happiness one, three, or six times per day (using text messaging) for 13 days. Findings showed no differences in changes in momentary happiness between the three experimental groups (see Figure 2), suggesting no reactivity as a result of monitoring happiness overall. But heightened focus on happiness was detrimental to those with greater vulnerability to lower mood – i.e. those with high neuroticism or high dysphoria (Conner & Reid, in press).



During the Daily Experiences Study (2008-2009), 287 students reported on their alcohol consumption and their physical, cognitive and emotional functioning the next day using a 21-day online diary. Safe drinking levels (up to 4 standard drinks for women and up to 6 standard drinks for men) were not associated with any impairment, but heavy drinking (over the safe threshold), and especially extreme drinking (twice over the safe threshold) was associated with significant decreases in physical and cognitive functioning the next day, indicating a need for further differentiation of drinking beyond the safe level (Polak & Conner, in prep.).



For more information about the Daily Experiences Lab, please see: <http://psy.otago.ac.nz/staff/conner.html>

