

# From Failure to Flourishing: The Roles of Acceptance and Goal Reengagement

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Published online: 21 September 2014  
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**Abstract** Two studies were conducted to examine the relationship between a proposed adaptive response to failure and subsequent flourishing. The cognitive/emotional level of the proposed adaptive response to failure, acceptance of negative emotions, is characterized by allowing negative emotions to surface without trying to control them. The behavioral level of response, goal reengagement, is characterized by reengaging with new, intrinsically meaningful goals. Study 1 ( $N = 50$ ) was based on a community sample (age range 32–90 years) and consisted of semi-structured interviews coded for participants' response to the biggest job-related failure ever experienced and current psychological flourishing. Study 2 ( $N = 101$ ), an online study based on a different community sample (age range 18–73 years), further tested the proposed adaptive response to failure by using questionnaires to assess participants' response to the biggest job-related failure ever experienced and current flourishing. Findings across both studies indicated that responding to failure by accepting negative emotions and reengaging with new, intrinsically meaningful goals was associated with greater subsequent flourishing, including more happiness and fewer depressive symptoms.

**Keywords** Failure · Flourishing · Happiness · Acceptance · Goal reengagement

Research in positive psychology has expanded the scope of traditional research in psychology to include the study of

happiness, growth, and flourishing (Seligman et al. 2005; Sheldon and King 2001). Recent research demonstrating that mental health and mental illness are distinct constructs underscores the need to study predictors of flourishing (Westerhof and Keyes 2010). If positive psychology is the study of “what works” and “what is right” with human functioning (Sheldon and King 2001), flourishing describes that optimal functioning. Flourishing has been defined as a state in which a person not only feels positive emotion and satisfaction with life but is also thriving psychologically and socially (Keyes and Haidt 2003). In search of factors that foster flourishing, the present study starts in an unlikely place—with failure. We propose and then test a cognitive/emotional and behavioral framework for responding to failure that could predict greater subsequent flourishing. Specifically, we suggest that an adaptive response to failure is characterized by acceptance of negative emotions at a cognitive/emotional level and reengagement with new goals that are intrinsically meaningful at a behavioral level.

## Why Failure?

Failure, as compared to success, promotes more reflection and reevaluation (Taylor 1991; Wong and Weiner 1981), providing a window of opportunity for change or growth. Whereas success is helpful in providing a sense of competence (Hall and Forster 1977) and self-efficacy (Bandura 1977, 1989), it also can foster complacency and increase risk aversion (Sitkin 1992). In contrast, failure can be a better impetus for learning (Hastie 1984) and a better catalyst for change (Ellis et al. 2006) and growth (King and Hicks 2007). Central to extracting the potential benefits of failure is knowing how to respond to it effectively.

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## Traditional Paradigms of Responding to Failure

Two bodies of literature, namely learning versus performance goal orientation (e.g., Dweck 1975) and attributional style/learned helplessness (e.g., Seligman 1975), have contributed significantly to understanding responses to failure. In both approaches, attributions in the context of failure have been found to predict responses to failure or other negative events (e.g., Buchanan and Seligman 1995). Attributing failures to external, temporary, and specific causes is credited with leading to an adaptive response, characterized by persistence, the presence of positive emotions (or the absence of strong negative emotions), and unimpaired performance on subsequent tasks. In contrast, attributing failures to internal, stable, and global causes has been shown to lead to helplessness (Alloy et al. 1984; Peterson and Seligman 1984), depressive-type affect, reduced persistence, and diminished performance on new tasks (Diener and Dweck 1978; Dweck 1975; Dweck and Leggett 1988; Kamins and Dweck 1999; Seligman 1972, 1975; Seligman et al. 1971).

Although past literature has demonstrated positive outcomes associated with attributing failures to external, impermanent, and specific causes (e.g., Abramson et al. 1978; Dweck 1975, Dweck and Reppucci 1973; Maier and Seligman 1976), there may be limitations to this cognitive response. For example, research on attributional style does not consider the accuracy of attributions (Peterson and Chang 2003). This may be particularly relevant when failure is due in part to internal factors (Duval and Lawani 1999).

In a similar way, there may be limitations to the assumed adaptive behavioral response to failure—persistence (e.g., Dweck 1975; Seligman 1975). In traditional paradigms of responding to failure, persistence in the face of failure is considered the hallmark of a non-helpless, mastery-oriented, adaptive response (e.g., Bandura 1977; Dweck 1975; Seligman 1975; Scheier and Carver 1985). Likewise, in American society in general, the idea that persistence is virtuous and adaptive is pervasive (Miller and Wrosch 2007). While persistence can be a meaningful, productive strategy (e.g., Bandura 1977; Dweck 1975; Seligman 1975; Scheier and Carver 1985), in some cases, it may be detrimental (Diener and Dweck 1978; Wrosch 2003a). Extreme persistence may reflect self-justification (Diener and Dweck 1978; Festinger 1957), and some individuals might persist with a strategy that has failed many times in an effort to convince themselves or others that their resources have not been spent in vain (Ross and Staw 1986; Staw 1981). Diener and Dweck (1978) argued that research is needed to investigate further the possibility that persistence can be a maladaptive strategy.

Further, past research has focused more on the negative consequences of negative emotions after failure and less on

the potential of negative emotions to motivate positive psychological or behavioral change (e.g., Dweck 1975; Seligman 1975). Investigating the possible benefits of negative emotions in the context of failure is particularly relevant given that much research has shown that in response to failures, such as interpersonal rejection or poor performance, negative emotions occur for virtually everyone (Deci and Ryan 1995; Leary et al. 1998; Swann et al. 1987).

## Acceptance of Negative Emotions

An emerging body of research has demonstrated the psychological benefits of accepting negative emotions (Hayes et al. 2004). Psychological acceptance, defined as a willingness to experience all psychological emotions without changing, avoiding, or controlling them (Hayes and Wilson 1994), has gained attention in clinical psychology, and acceptance-based strategies have been associated with positive change in a wide range of psychological conditions (e.g., Hayes et al. 2006). Mindfulness involves the “cultivation of an attitude of ‘acceptance’ and ‘allowing’ toward difficult and unpleasant experience” and has been found to have a positive impact on psychological well-being (Teasdale et al. 2003). The psychological benefits of mindfulness have been demonstrated in several therapies (e.g., Kabat-Zinn 1990; Segal et al. 2002) and empirical studies (Bränström et al. 2010). Further, in the context of expressive writing, acceptance of negative emotions was found to be an integral part of an adaptive response to major life problems, leading to improved emotional well-being (North et al. 2011).

## Goal Reengagement

Goal reengagement—defined as identifying new, intrinsically meaningful goals, committing to them and actively pursuing them—has been associated with greater subjective well-being in the context of confronting unattainable goals (Wrosch et al. 2003b). Goal reengagement has been shown to enhance positive well-being more consistently than it reduces negative indicators of well-being (Miller and Wrosch 2007), though it has been associated with reduced depressive symptoms and lower perceived stress in some studies (Wrosch et al. 2003b). More broadly, emerging research on the benefits of goal reengagement is consistent with previous literature demonstrating that reengaging with a new, meaningful goal gives purpose to life (Ryff 1989; Scheier and Carver 2001) and that a sense of purpose can foster long-term personal development (Goldenberg et al. 2000; Ryff 1989). It also squares with findings indicating that when individuals’ conscious goals are in step with their deeper needs and values,

psychological adjustment and well-being are enhanced (Deci and Ryan 1995; Sheldon 2002).

### Ecological Validity of Previous Research

Previous research on responding to failure often is lacking in ecological validity (Baumeister et al. 2003). For example, in many experiments, participants encountering failure have no opportunities to engage in alternative tasks or goals, which differs from most natural settings (Bandura 1989). Relatedly, most studies (e.g., Burhans and Dweck 1995; Dweck et al. 1980) have participants engage in tasks immediately after failure, which is also not reflective of most natural settings and does not account for the possibility that positive psychological changes in response to failure may be evident only after some time.

### Contribution of Present Studies

The present studies focus on responding to failure in the occupational domain. In conceptualizing life course theory, Elder et al. (2006) noted that most turning points in life “specifically involve work issues, including job changes and job insecurity” (p. 8). The current studies build on traditional paradigms of responding to failure in several ways. First, whereas previous research has emphasized reducing negative emotions as a function of attributional style, consistent with emerging research on psychological acceptance (Hayes and Wilson 1994; Hayes et al. 2006) and the related concept of mindfulness (Teasdale et al. 2003), the present studies focus on the adaptive value of accepting negative emotions. In addition, the present studies broaden the scope of previous research that emphasizes persistence as the most adaptive behavioral response to failure by examining goal reengagement. Moreover, these studies extend previous research through emphasizing ecological validity—by using real-world failures, accounting for the temporal component of responding to failure, and considering the role of engaging with new, alternative goals in the context of failure. Further, whereas traditional paradigms of responding to failure focus on who avoids depression and helplessness, consistent with research in positive psychology that has expanded the scope of traditional research in psychology to include the study of happiness and flourishing, these studies focus on positive, as well as negative, psychological outcomes after failure.

### Study 1

Using the context of semi-structured interviews about individuals’ biggest job-related failure, Study 1 tested how

individuals can respond to failure, at a cognitive/emotional and behavioral level, in a way that relates to subsequent psychological flourishing, operationalized by happiness. Happiness is defined as the level of meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction in an individual’s life; this layered definition of happiness maps onto Seligman’s tripartite model of happiness that includes meaning, engagement, and pleasure (Seligman 2002). It was predicted that acceptance of negative emotions and goal reengagement would be associated with greater subsequent happiness.

### Method

Participants were asked, in a semi-structured interview, to describe their biggest job-related failure, to elaborate on the trajectory of their response following the failure, and to describe their current view of the impact of the failure on their lives.

### Participants

Using a random sampling process to recruit participants, fifty individuals were selected from the Austin, Texas community. All participants earned \$10 compensation and a chance to win one of two raffles, with a cash prize of \$100 each. The sample ranged in age from 32 to 90 years ( $M = 59.65$ ,  $SD = 14.01$ ) and was fairly evenly distributed with respect to gender (males = 55.1 %, females = 44.9 %). The ethnic distribution was as follows: African-American = 4.3 %, Caucasian = 78.7 %, Latino = 12.8 %, Other = 4.3 %, and median annual income was \$80,000.<sup>1</sup> Three participants were Spanish-only speakers, and these interviews were conducted in Spanish.

To recruit participants for the study, individuals were randomly selected from the Austin, Texas community using a residential telephone directory and were initially contacted via postal mail. The letter indicated that recipients were being contacted on behalf of the Work and Life Study in the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and that they had been randomly selected to participate in research about people’s experiences in their jobs. There were no exclusion criteria. For example, Spanish-speaking individuals who were contacted were offered an opportunity to be interviewed in Spanish, and people who were never formally employed were told that they could talk about experiences in their primary life work (e.g., childrearing).

All letters were followed-up by phone calls asking participants if they would like to participate in the Work and Life Study, a one-hour interview about people’s

<sup>1</sup> Percent available data for each demographic category is as follows: age = 98 %, gender = 98 %, ethnicity = 94 %, income = 78 %.

experiences in their jobs. Of the 177 participants who were reached, 62 agreed to participate (35 %).<sup>2</sup> Of these 62 individuals, 50 people (80.6 %) came to the laboratory to participate in the interview, and of the people who showed up, 100 % completed the study.

Jobs that participants held at the time of their biggest failure included entrepreneurs and business owners, manual laborers, educators, and government workers. The majority of participants were mid-level employees at a company or organization, such as a salesperson or accountant (50 %) or were high-level employees, such as a manager or director (16 %). The types of job-related failures participants described included inadequate performance (24 %), significant personal problems that interfered with the job (20 %), difficulty with co-workers or supervisors (16 %), being fired (14 %), and being denied a promotion (14 %).

### Procedure

Following an introductory statement, the interviewer prompted the participant to identify his or her biggest job-related failure. The only criterion was that the failure had to occur more than one year ago; this time constraint was included to allow for the temporal component of responding to failure. Participants then were asked to describe the failure experience in detail. Next, they were asked about the trajectory of their response to failure, starting with how they “reacted right after the failure” and ending with how they “feel about it now.” Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed; the three interviews that were conducted in Spanish were translated to English before being transcribed.

Transcriptions of interviews were coded by two independent raters to assess acceptance of negative emotions, goal reengagement, and psychological flourishing. Psychological flourishing was operationalized as *happiness*—the level of meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction in an individual’s life. The three aspects of this definition of happiness map directly onto Seligman’s tripartite model of happiness encompassing meaning, engagement, and pleasure (Seligman 2002). *Acceptance of negative emotions* was operationalized as awareness and allowing of negative emotions following the failure, acknowledgment of the possible value of the negative emotions, and a lack of effort to suppress or control negative emotions. *Goal reengagement* was operationalized as the

<sup>2</sup> A total of eight hundred individuals were sent letters. The majority of them (58 %) were not able to be reached by phone for one of the following reasons: letter returned by the postal service, telephone number disconnected, wrong number, individual not available by phone, or the individual was deceased. For 20 % of people who were sent letters, there is no recorded information on subsequent communication.

**Table 1** Means and standard deviations of all variables and Pearson correlations among variables for Study 1 ( $N = 50$ )

	Mean (SD)	Pearson correlations	
		1	2
1. Acceptance of negative emotions	4.72 (1.21)	–	–
2. Goal reengagement	4.64 (1.63)	.17	–
3. Happiness	4.90 (1.29)	.41**	.41**

Possible range for all variables is 1–7

\*\*  $p < .01$  level (2 tailed)

extent to which individuals reengaged with goals that were new and intrinsically meaningful. The two raters, who were undergraduate research assistants, were aware of the overall purpose of the study to investigate adaptive responses to failure; however, they were blind to the study’s specific hypotheses.

To limit response biases of raters across categories, raters scored all interviews within a particular category before moving on to the next category.

Each category was rated on a 7-point scale indicating to what extent each construct was reflected in the writing (1 = not true at all, 7 = extremely true). The average of the two independent raters’ scores was used as the total score for each construct. The correlation between raters’ scores for each construct was as follows: *acceptance of negative emotions* ( $r = .75$ ,  $p < .01$ ), *goal reengagement* ( $r = .72$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and *happiness* ( $r = .51$ ,  $p < .01$ ),

### Results

Multiple linear regression analyses were used to examine the independent contributions of each predictor variable, *acceptance of negative emotions* and *goal reengagement*, to subsequent *happiness*. Table 1 shows means and standard deviations of all variables and correlations among variables.

In the regression model, both *acceptance of negative emotions* and *goal reengagement* were significant ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $\beta = .27$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). The individual effects of age and gender were also examined. Neither of these effects was significant, so the initial model was confirmed.

These findings revealed that in responding to failure both acceptance of negative emotions, characterized by allowing negative emotions to surface and acknowledging their possible value rather than suppressing them, and goal reengagement, characterized by reengaging with new goals that are intrinsically meaningful, are associated with

greater subsequent happiness. The following quotations from participants high in acceptance of negative emotions and in subsequent happiness represent the positive association between the two constructs:

(Age 52) I didn't really react with anger I guess it was more...disappointment, but yes I definitely felt it and I went through a period of time where I think you question yourself and question, um, whether, you know, why you weren't good enough and really kind of feeling not good enough and so I did have to work through that... I do not know that there was a point [when I felt better], I think it was more gradual turning. I just don't turn on a dime... I do the big circle (laughing) and so it was working around it and accepting it...I think that in reflecting on disappointments you really do learn much more from going through the disappointments than just from the successes...life is really a series of disappointments and successes...So it's just recognizing that all those things are chances for you as an individual to reflect on what is truly important in your life.

(Age 64) I was let go and it was very hurtful...I was more frightened than anything...I'm an eternal optimist; I believe for every door that is closed another one opens and that things happen for a reason. It was real hard when I was scared to death because it didn't seem that that would ever be true. So, I'm not saying I'm happy I lost my job at that time, but it has been a great benefit, and I've had a lot of life experiences that I would have never had...It made me a better person or made me realize that maybe I was better than I thought I was. I certainly realized that I can conquer and be forgiving, and caring, and grateful.

And these quotations from participants high in goal reengagement and in subsequent happiness reflect the positive association between these two constructs in the interviews:

(Age 37) I did look for new purposes...Experiment with different things and look for something that you like....Do not stop. If you failed, do not stop. Look for other purposes and other alternatives...Look for something you like...I became stronger. So, I said, if you do not value me, I am valuable to many people. I have my own value.

(Age 57) It outlined for me that that wasn't the kind of work that I wanted to be doing with my life...I would much rather be designing things than running an organization...what I do now is much more my pride...It's much more of what I wanted as a kid...You know, it took a long time before I realized,

but...I feel very much happier with what I'm doing now. It satisfies the urge to design, create, modify, build...it's a need that fulfills me. I wish I had done it a long time ago...I'm a whole lot happier than I had been...so for me it [the failure] was an affirmation of things that I clarified in my heart.

## Discussion

In sum, in responding to failure, accepting what *is*, at a cognitive and emotional level, and taking positive action toward intrinsically meaningful new goals, at a behavioral level, was associated with greater subsequent happiness, including greater meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction in life. Findings indicate that responding to a major life failure by accepting negative emotions and reengaging with new, meaningful goals is associated with greater subsequent happiness. The strength of Study 1 was allowing participants to describe their response to failure in an open-ended way. At the same time, open-ended responses are challenging to code. For example, a limitation of this study is that the inter-rater reliability associated with the happiness variable is not very high. One possible explanation is that the happiness construct was multifaceted, encompassing meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction. Moreover, the assessment of happiness was based on the whole interview, whereas assessment of individuals' response to the failure was gleaned from more specific parts of the interview. The limitation of this study provides a rationale for conducting a second study addressing the same research question using established questionnaires to assess response to failure, including both positive and negative dimensions of psychological well-being.

## Study 2

Study 2 built on the previous study by using a different method and different participant sample to provide converging evidence for the proposed adaptive response to failure. Specifically, this online study used established questionnaires to examine how people can respond to the biggest job-related failure in their lives in a way that relates to greater subsequent flourishing, defined by greater happiness and fewer depressive symptoms. This study used a community sample of 101 participants of slightly younger age (age range 18–73 years). Similar to Study 1, it was predicted that acceptance of negative emotions and reengagement with new, intrinsically meaningful goals would be associated with better psychological outcomes after failure. In addition, also similar to Study 1, this study emphasized ecological validity by examining real-world

failures, allowing time to assess participants' longer-term response to failure, and considering the role of engaging with new, alternative goals in the context of failure. Further, in the spirit of positive psychology, this study focused on a positive psychological outcome after failure—happiness—in addition to a measure of depressive symptoms.

## Method

### Participants

To increase the representativeness of the sample, adults were recruited from thirty cities in the USA and were either contacted via an advertisement on Craigslist or were selected randomly from the Austin community and contacted via telephone. Participants were given a chance to win one of four raffle prizes (for \$100, \$75, \$50, and \$25), if they completed the entire study. Of the 204 individuals who started the online study, 101 (50 %) completed the study.

The sample ranged in age from 18 to 73 years ( $M = 38.45$ ,  $SD = 15.26$ ) and included both genders (males = 26 %, females = 74 %). The ethnic distribution was as follows: American Indian or Alaskan Native = 2.1 %, Asian–American = 5.3 %, African–American = 8.5 %, Caucasian = 68.1 %, Latino = 13.8 %, Other = 2.1 %, and the median range of annual income was \$20,000–\$39,999.<sup>3</sup>

The types of jobs participants held at the time of their biggest failure included work in sales, government organizations, and childcare and work as telemarketers, entertainers, janitorial staff, managers of companies or organizations, and waitresses. The main categories of participants' jobs were company workers (17.8 %), managerial positions (9.9 %), and employees at nonprofit organizations or government agencies (9.9 %).

The types of job-related failures participants described included being fired (23.8 %), conflicts with co-workers (12.9 %), quitting a job (10.9 %), serious emotional issues (10.9 %) or health problems (7.9 %), and being denied a job, an advancement, or other opportunity (7.9 %).

### Procedure

Several strategies were used to obtain a sufficiently large sample. To solicit participation from a representative sample of cities in the USA, a list of 601 municipalities from the USA 2000 Census, rank-ordered by population,

was divided into thirds to represent large, medium-sized, and small cities, and three cities from each category were randomly selected. Advertisements were posted to the Craigslist Web site for these cities, as well as Austin, where the study was based. To increase participation in subsequent weeks, the advertisement was posted to the Craigslist Web site of several large US metropolitan cities and additional participants were randomly selected from the Austin residential white pages, contacted via telephone and asked if they would like to participate.

As selection criteria, participants were asked if they were eighteen years of age or older and if they had experienced a job-related failure or disappointment that occurred more than a year ago. Those who qualified were directed to the study Web site. First, participants were asked to identify the biggest job-related failure or disappointment they had ever experienced. Next, participants completed two sets of questionnaires. The first set of questionnaires related to participants' response to the selected failure and consisted of measures representing *acceptance of negative emotions* and *goal reengagement*. For the purposes of this study, the focus of the measures of response to failure—acceptance of negative emotions and goal reengagement—was changed from general tendencies, which are assessed in the original measures, to specific responses to the failure, and therefore, items were changed from present to past tense. The second set of questionnaires assessed *happiness* at the present time; in addition, to provide converging evidence for this outcome, a measure of *depressive symptoms* was used. Overall, the study was about 40–45 min in duration.

### Measures

*Acceptance of negative emotions.* Because of the lack of established measures of acceptance of negative emotions, two measures that are roughly equivalent to the opposite of acceptance—emotional control and emotional suppression—were used and reverse-scored. The Depressed Mood Subscale of the Courtald Emotional Control Scale (Watson and Greer 1983) consists of seven items rated on a 4-point response scale, ranging from 1, *almost never*, to 4, *almost always* (Watson and Greer 1983; Iwamitsu et al. 2005). Items are scored so that a higher score indicates greater control of emotional response. Item scores were summed to calculate a total score ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The scale is preceded by an item stem: “When I felt unhappy...” Sample response items are “I bottled it up” and “I smothered my feelings.” To index acceptance of negative emotions, items were reverse-scored. The other measure used to assess acceptance of negative emotions was the Suppression Subscale of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross and John 2003). This subscale consists of four items rated on a

<sup>3</sup> Percent available data for each demographic category is as follows: age = 83 %, gender = 95 %, ethnicity = 93 %, income = 80 %.

7-point response scale, ranging from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 7, *strongly agree* and measures the extent to which people suppress their emotions. Item scores were averaged to calculate a total score ( $\alpha = .68-.76$ ; Gross and John 2003). Sample response items are “I kept my emotions to myself” and “I controlled my emotions by not expressing them.” To index acceptance of negative emotions, items were reverse-scored.

**Goal reengagement.** The extent to which individuals reengaged with new, meaningful goals after the failure was assessed by the Goal Reengagement Scale (Wrosch et al. 2003b). This measure consists of six items rated on a 5-point response scale, ranging from 1, *not true at all*, to 5, *extremely true*. Item scores were averaged to calculate a total score ( $\alpha = .86$ ; Wrosch et al. 2003b). Sample items are “I put effort toward other meaningful goals” and “I thought about other new goals to pursue.”

**Happiness.** Happiness was measured by the Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire (Fordyce 1988). We chose this measure based on its track record as a frequently used measure for assessing current happiness in previous research (Seligman 2002) and because of its parsimony. The measure consists of two items: (1) an 11-point item assessing happiness/unhappiness, ranging from “extremely happy” to “extremely unhappy” and (2) an item asking for the amount of time (in percentages totaling 100) spent in “happy,” “unhappy,” and “neutral” moods. Test–retest reliability for 2-week period = .86 (Fordyce 1988). The final score is an average of (a) the scale score (0–10) from the first item, multiplied by ten, and (b) the percentage of time spent in “happy” moods.

**Depressive symptoms.** The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale (Radloff 1977) was used to assess depressive symptoms. This measure consists of 20 items. Using a 4-point response scale ranging from “1 = rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)” to “4 = most or all of the time (5–7 days),” participants are asked to respond to items about how they felt in the past week. Item scores are summed to calculate a total score ( $\alpha = .85$ ; Radloff 1977). Sample items include “I did not enjoy life” and “I felt hopeless about the future.”

## Results

Multiple linear regression analyses were used to examine the independent contributions of both predictor variables, *acceptance of negative emotions* and *goal reengagement*, to *happiness* and *depressive symptoms*. For both outcome variables, ceiling or floor effects led to significantly non-normal residuals, violating an assumption of ordinary least-squares (OLS) regression. For that reason, ordinal regression analysis was used in analyses with both outcome

**Table 2** Means and standard deviations of all variables for Study 2 ( $N = 101$ )

	Mean	SD	N
Acceptance of negative emotions (factor score)	.00	.91	101
Goal reengagement	3.48	1.28	101
Happiness	56.37	24.23	89
Depressive symptoms	21.80	16.43	100

variables.<sup>4</sup> The effects of the terms in the models were tested via likelihood ratio test with a Chi-square distribution. Significant effects in models were graphed to interpret the nature of the effect. Once the final model was determined for each analysis, the additional effects of age and gender were examined. Neither of these additional effects was significant, so the initial model was confirmed.

Since two measures were used to represent the underlying construct of *acceptance of negative emotions*, factor analysis was used to create a single predictor representing the underlying latent construct. Specifically, we ran a factor analysis with the two variables representing acceptance of negative emotions and saved the factor scores (standardized) from the first factor (see “refined methods, regression scores” in DiStefano et al. 2009). We then used these factor scores, which reflect where each individual scores on the factor, as a predictor variable in regression analyses. This process of merging two approaches to model fitting—factor analysis and regression—is analogous to structural equation modeling (Ecob and Cuttance 1987).

Ordinal regression analyses were conducted on both outcome variables: *happiness* and *depressive symptoms*.

The predictors in the regression models for both outcomes were *acceptance of negative emotions* and *goal reengagement*. Table 2 shows means and standard deviations of all variables, and Table 3 shows correlations among variables.

For *happiness*, the final ordinal regression model consisted of *acceptance of negative emotions* ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.80$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and *goal reengagement* ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.81$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Figure 1 shows graphical representations of these main effects (top left panel and bottom right panel, respectively). The final model for *depressive symptoms* also was comprised of *acceptance of negative emotions* ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and *goal reengagement* ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Figure 1 also shows graphical representations of the main

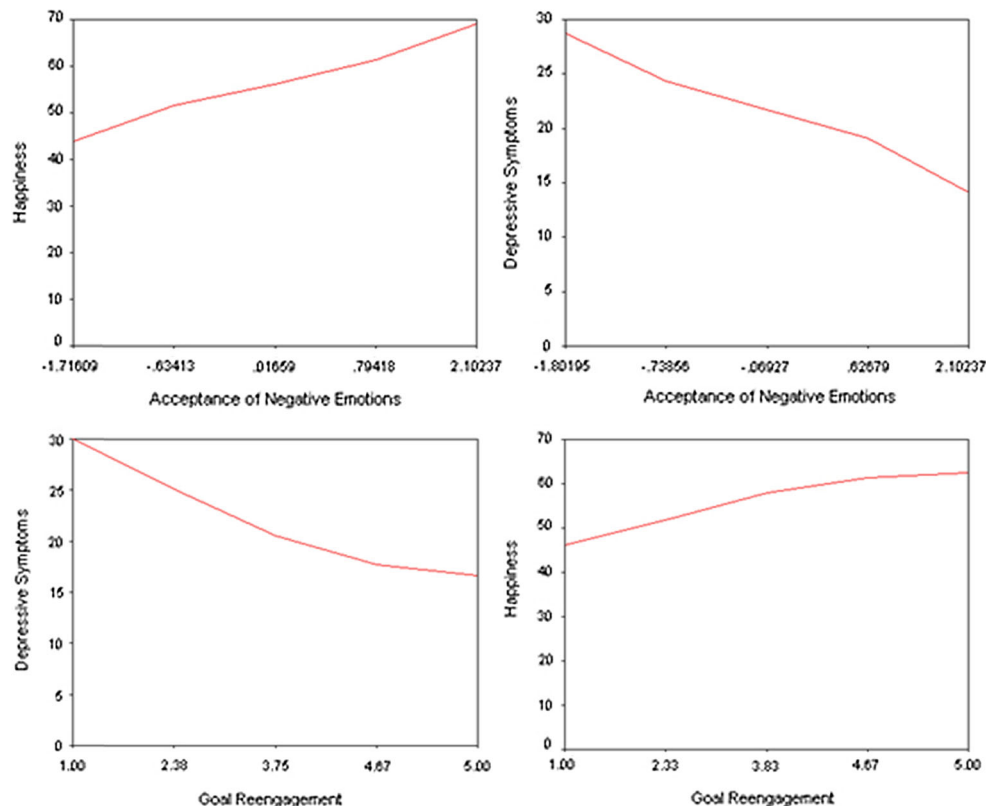
<sup>4</sup> Analyses were based on available data for relevant variables in each model. For cases in which there were missing items on questionnaires, if at least 75 % of the questionnaire had been completed, the scores of the missing items were imputed based on the other items. Based on this strategy, the overall sample size for analyses with the outcome variable of depressive symptoms was 100 and for analyses with the outcome variable happiness the sample size was 89.

**Table 3** Pearson correlations among variables for Study 2 analyses

	1	2	3
1. Acceptance of negative emotions	—		
2. Goal reengagement	.03 ( $n = 101$ )	—	
3. Happiness	.25* ( $n = 89$ )	.24* ( $n = 89$ )	
4. Depressive symptoms	-.21* ( $n = 100$ )	-.25* ( $n = 100$ )	-.61** ( $n = 88$ )

\*  $p < .05$  (2 tailed); \*\*  $p < .01$  (2 tailed)

**Fig. 1** The main effect of acceptance of negative emotions on happiness (top left panel) and depressive symptoms (top right panel), controlling for goal reengagement, and the main effect of goal reengagement on depressive symptoms (bottom left panel) and happiness (bottom right panel), controlling for acceptance of negative emotions



effects for depressive symptoms (top right panel and bottom left panel, respectively).

## Discussion

Study 2 further tested the proposed adaptive response to failure by using established questionnaires to assess participants' response to the biggest job-related failure ever experienced and current flourishing, including a measure of happiness and depressive symptoms. Consistent with hypotheses, findings revealed that responding to failure with greater acceptance of negative emotions, at a cognitive/emotional level, and greater goal reengagement, at a behavioral level, was associated with greater subsequent happiness and fewer depressive symptoms. Results from Study 2, using a different method and different participant

sample, provide converging evidence reinforcing Study 1 findings in support of the proposed adaptive response to failure.

## General Discussion

In extending previous research on predictors of psychological flourishing, the present studies started in an unlikely place—with failure. Previous findings have demonstrated that failure, more than success, can be a better impetus for learning (Hastie 1984) and a better catalyst for change (Ellis et al. 2006) and psychological growth (King and Hicks 2007). The present studies examined the relationship between a proposed adaptive response to failure and subsequent flourishing. Specifically, it was proposed that an adaptive response to failure is characterized by acceptance of negative emotions at a cognitive/emotional level and



reengagement with new, intrinsically meaningful goals at a behavioral level.

Providing converging evidence for the proposed adaptive response to failure, the same pattern of results emerged across these two studies with different participant samples and different methods. Specifically, findings from both studies demonstrated that a response to failure characterized by acceptance of negative emotions, at a cognitive/emotional level, and goal reengagement, at a behavioral level, is associated with greater subsequent flourishing, including greater happiness and fewer depressive symptoms. Taken together, the two studies involve individuals from diverse developmental stages of adulthood, ranging from emerging adulthood to late adulthood (age range 18–90), which increases the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the two participant samples represent overlapping but distinct age groups—with individuals in Study 1 tending more toward older middle age (average age = 59.65) and participants in Study 2 characterized more by younger middle age (average age = 38.45)—suggesting that accepting negative emotions and reengaging in new, intrinsically meaningful goals is an adaptive response for responding to failures across the lifespan.

The present studies extended previous research on responding to failure by examining the adaptive role of acceptance of negative emotions and broadening the scope of potentially adaptive behavioral responses by considering goal reengagement. Findings indicated that these two complementary processes make unique contributions to subsequent flourishing. It is worth noting that these two aspects of responding to failure were not correlated in either Study 1 ( $r = .17, p > .05$ ) or Study 2 ( $r = .03, p > .05$ ). These findings suggest that people who tend to accept negative emotions are not more likely to reengage with new, intrinsically meaningful goals. Similarly, people who are high in goal reengagement are not more likely to be accepting of negative emotions. This is significant because cultivating one's natural strength while trying to develop alternative and complementary aspects of an adaptive response to failure may help people respond more effectively to life challenges.

The current studies further built on previous research by emphasizing ecological validity—specifically, by using real-world failures, considering the role of engaging with new, alternative goals, and accounting for a long-term temporal component in responding to failure. Accounting for a long-term temporal component in responding to failure is consistent with research indicating that responding adaptively to developmental crises is a process that evolves across time (Robinson et al. 2013). These studies also focus on positive psychological outcomes, in addition to the traditional focus on negative psychological outcomes.

These findings highlight the importance of accepting negative emotions in responding to failure. Acceptance has been defined as a willingness to experience all psychological emotions without changing, avoiding, or controlling them (Hayes and Wilson 1994). In traditional paradigms of responding to failure, experiencing negative emotions after failure has been considered part of a maladaptive or helpless response (e.g., Dweck 1975; Seligman 1975). It is possible, however, that experiencing negative affect immediately following failure, and even the other symptoms of a helpless response, decreased persistence and diminished performance on subsequent tasks, might reflect a natural dip that people who will ultimately grow (i.e., not just hold their own) after failure must experience. This notion is consistent with findings from an emerging body of research that has demonstrated the psychological benefits of accepting negative emotions (Hayes et al. 2004).

Findings also underscore the value of reengaging with new, intrinsically meaningful goals when confronted by a failure. Because failure engenders reflection and reevaluation (Taylor 1991; Wong and Weiner 1981), it provides a window of opportunity for change or growth. It provides an opportunity to assess one's life and to determine whether one's work, relationships, and allocation of time reflect core values that are intrinsically meaningful. This opportunity is significant because although acting in a way that is concordant with one's core self and internal values is deeply satisfying (Deci and Ryan 1995; Sheldon 2002), many people are not clear about how to access their true centers (Bugental 1976). Failure may be an effective vehicle for getting to one's core self. Furthermore, results from these two studies illustrating a relationship between responding to failure by reengaging with new, intrinsically meaningful goals and greater subsequent happiness are consistent with previous research on responding adaptively to developmental crises in early adulthood that demonstrates the benefit of exploring new possibilities and then rebuilding one's life with commitments that are more intrinsically satisfying (Robinson et al. 2013).

More broadly, these findings on the benefits of acceptance of negative emotions and goal reengagement contribute to a growing body of the literature demonstrating that the dialectic of acceptance and positive action fosters positive psychological change. For example, within the clinical context, the empirically supported Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes and Wilson 1994) encourages clients to cultivate a willingness toward experiencing negative emotions while committing to action toward valued life goals. Further, in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan 1993), another empirically supported intervention, clients are taught to accept their feelings, while making positive changes to improve their lives. Similarly, research on post-traumatic growth has demonstrated the benefits of

being open to experiencing trauma-related cues and emotions while taking action toward valued life aims (Kashdan and Kane 2011). In a similar way, an experimental writing task demonstrated that responding to major life problems by accepting negative emotions and then seeking out positive aspects of the problem improves emotional well-being (North et al. 2011).

At a broad level, the topic of flourishing not only relates to the mental health of individuals but also has implications for public policy. Flourishing has been connected to positive physical health outcomes, productivity at work, and is negatively related to absenteeism (Keyes and Haidt 2003). In addition, many mental health researchers have suggested that the focus of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) of supporting research pertaining to identifying, treating, and preventing mental illnesses (see US Department of Health and Human Services 1995) is an inadequate approach to promoting mental health (Keyes and Haidt 2003). Another valuable focus would be to promote mental health, which would involve increasing the number of flourishing individuals (Keyes and Haidt 2003). This is especially significant in light of evidence that mental health and mental illness are not opposite ends of the same spectrum but rather two separate continua (Westenhof and Keyes 2010).

There are limitations to the present studies. These studies are correlational, and findings, therefore, cannot address causality. In addition, these studies were based on retrospective accounts of participants' responses to failure, which can be influenced by recall. Nevertheless, both of these concerns are reduced somewhat by corroborating findings from the two studies using different methods and different samples. Future research incorporating prospective analyses of real-life failures is needed to provide further tests of the proposed adaptive response to failure. In addition, future research should incorporate a broader range of psychological flourishing outcomes.

Although failure is painful, knowing how to respond to failure effectively may allow individuals to extract its potential benefits. Ultimately, failure may become a helpful, organic, even welcome, factor in the cycle of people's lives, assisting them in reaching deeper fulfillment. The Greek poet Aeschylus captured this sentiment of growth from failure when he wrote: "Even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God" (Hamilton 1993). By responding to failure with an acceptance of the negative emotions that accompany it and then by reengaging with new, intrinsically meaningful goals, failure can be a catalyst, or a portal, to an even more fulfilling, meaningful life.

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