

# Future-focused negative thoughts undercut present joy predicts depression more strongly than researchers expected

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Credit: Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels

Imagine you are at a party having the time of your life—then you start thinking about the fact that these good feelings will fade as soon as it

ends, triggering those good feelings to diminish in the moment. A [recent article in \*Clinical Psychological Science\*](#) examined this phenomenon, called dampening, and how it relates to depression symptoms.

Dampening can be defined as minimizing positive emotions, according to Liesbeth Bogaert, a researcher at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

"It's not only about those super large or big positive emotions like excitement or enthusiasm," Bogaert said. "It's also about upcoming positivity or glimmerings."

The researchers used network analyses and machine learning to analyze data sets from 13 prior studies conducted by Bogaert's lab. The data sets included participants from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies that measured dampening and depression levels. The sets included Flemish-speaking Belgian adolescents, university students, and adults.

Bogaert's team analyzed how phrases like "I don't deserve this" and "this won't last" predicted depressive symptoms such as negative emotion, pessimism, and negative self-perception (Bogaert et al., 2026). They found that these phrases had a high level of predictive utility for depression symptoms; this wasn't unexpected, but the researchers found the strength of the connection surprising.

"One thing that we didn't expect was the robustness ... [and] how consistently we found those future-focused dampening thoughts stood out in relation to depressive symptoms," Bogaert said.

Bogaert explained that specific predictors had the highest utility. "It was really these items, 'these positive feelings won't last' and 'my luck or my streak of luck is going to end soon.'" These were really the strongest predictors across those different analyses," she explained.



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The researchers also noted that dampening may seem harmless, but it can undermine well-being over time by depriving people of positive emotions. "Those positive feelings ... we actually need them, we need them to deal with struggles in life, to bounce back more easily from stressful life events," Bogaert said.

The causes of dampening are not yet fully understood. Culture is an important piece to consider, but it's not a direct contributor. However, some cultural values, such as humility, are relevant in studying dampening.

It's important to distinguish between genuine humility and dampening. Bogaert explained that dampening is diminishing positive news or

accomplishments because one believes, for instance, they are undeserved rather than being humble because that aligns with social or cultural norms.

"Being humble could be an expression of dampening, but what's critical here is why you are humble. What's the underlying reason?" Bogaert said. "When you're humble to act in line with the cultural or social norm, then the impact on mental health may be smaller than when it's driven by the belief you are undeserving of positivity."

What can people do once they become aware of dampening behavior in themselves? The opposite tendency, overplaying positivity, is not a long-term solution and is also correlated with low self-esteem and self-worth, Bogaert explained. The most sustainable solution is savoring, allowing oneself to enjoy and share positive emotions.

"Savoring positive feelings is more about paying attention to positive feelings, trying to intensify and prolong them, but in a balanced and gentle way," she said. "This is really more about sharing some good news with a friend or recalling positive memories."

**More information:** Liesbeth Bogaert et al, When Joy Feels Wrong: Identifying Key Dampening Features Predicting Depressive Symptoms Using Machine Learning and Network Analysis, *Clinical Psychological Science* (2026). [DOI: 10.1177/21677026251413535](https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026251413535)

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