

Depressed Individuals Want to Feel More Unpleasant Emotions in Daily Life, but Try Harder to Decrease Them

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Prior research has demonstrated that depressed individuals want to feel relatively more intense sadness and less intense happiness than nondepressed individuals do. However, it has rarely been tested whether these differences extend to daily life and how they might be related to attempts to regulate emotions. We assessed what depressed ($n = 58$) and nondepressed ($n = 62$) individuals wanted to feel in daily life and how much they tried to regulate their emotions, using Ecological Momentary Assessments. To better understand motivated emotion regulation in depression and what underlies it, we moved beyond sadness and happiness and targeted four discrete emotions that differ by valence and arousal (i.e., sadness, anxiety, happiness, and calmness). Data were collected during 2021–2022. We found that while both depressed and nondepressed individuals reported wanting very low levels of unpleasant emotions, depressed individuals wanted to feel more sadness and anxiety and less happiness in daily life than nondepressed individuals did. At the same time, depressed individuals attempted to decrease their sadness and anxiety more than nondepressed individuals did. Our conclusions are limited to a sample of relatively young adult students. Our findings suggest that emotion dysregulation in depression may involve a misalignment between what individuals want to feel and how they attempt to regulate their emotions.

Keywords: depression, motivation, emotion regulation, Ecological Momentary Assessments

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Depression has been linked to deficits in emotion regulation (Joormann & Stanton, 2016). Such deficits pertain to how depressed individuals regulate their emotions and what they try to achieve when doing so (Vanderlind et al., 2020). Prior research indicates that depressed individuals may want to feel relatively more sadness and less happiness than nondepressed individuals do (Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019; Millgram et al., 2015). Here, we tested whether such patterns replicate in daily life. We also moved beyond sadness and happiness, by targeting four discrete emotions that differ in valence and arousal (sadness, anxiety, happiness, and calmness). Finally, we tested how the levels of discrete emotions people wanted to feel were related to their attempts to regulate these emotions in daily life.

Motivated Emotion Regulation in Depression

Research on motivated emotion regulation in depression has focused primarily on emotion goals, which refer to the intensity with which people want to experience certain emotions (Tamir, 2021). Such research has demonstrated that depressed individuals want¹ to

¹ We use the term “want” at face value, as reflecting people’s responses to the question: “How much do you want to experience X.” We assume ratings above the minimum end-point of the scale capture different levels of wanting. This interpretation has been further validated by established associations between such self-report ratings and objective behavior (e.g., choosing emotion-inducing stimuli; Millgram et al., 2015). Relatively higher levels of wanting may indicate either higher levels of attraction or lower levels of avoidance (i.e., higher tolerance).

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This study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/HRF_GCM). All data, analysis code, and research materials are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF; Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2025) at https://osf.io/gz5ke/?view_only=e0788b8fc3ec49198848cec45d3cbf32.

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investigation, and project administration. Danfei Hu played an equal role in data curation, formal analysis, and writing—review and editing. Yael Millgram played a supporting role in project administration and an equal role in conceptualization, investigation, methodology, and writing—review and editing. Mor Nahum played an equal role in data curation, resources, and software. Orly Shimony played an equal role in data curation and software. Elad Zlotnick played an equal role in data curation. Maya Tamir played a lead role in funding acquisition and supervision and an equal role in conceptualization, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, and writing—review and editing.

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feel relatively more intense sadness and less intense happiness than nondepressed individuals do (e.g., Arens & Stangier, 2020; Millgram et al., 2015; Yoon et al., 2020). Unpleasant emotion goals in depression have been linked to the maintenance of unpleasant emotions both inside (Millgram et al., 2015) and outside the laboratory and have been prospectively linked to clinical symptoms (Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019). However, it is unclear whether differences between depressed and nondepressed individuals in the intensity with which they want to experience certain emotions extend to daily life as findings from laboratory studies do not always replicate in daily life (Growney & English, 2024; Kuppens et al., 2022). Research on emotion regulation in depression in daily life has typically focused on strategies (e.g., Li et al., 2017; Schricker et al., 2022; Vanderlind et al., 2022). For instance, elevated depressive symptoms were associated with using less positive rumination and more dampening (Vanderlind et al., 2022). Given that strategy use in emotion regulation might be linked to what people want to feel (Millgram, Sheppes, et al., 2019), to understand emotion regulation in depression, it is important to examine emotion goals in daily life. Therefore, the first goal of this investigation was to test whether depressed individuals differ from nondepressed individuals in what they want to feel in daily life.

Desired Discrete Emotions, Arousal or Valence?

Prior research has demonstrated that what people want to feel has multiple implications. Emotion goals can shape individuals' choices of environments, stimuli, people to interact with, and emotion regulation strategies (e.g., Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019; Tamir et al., 2008; Tsai, 2007). People may differ in what they want to feel as a function of valence, arousal, or both. Such differences, in turn, carry important implications. For instance, people can differ in how much they want to experience pleasant versus unpleasant emotions (i.e., by valence). People who want to feel more pleasant emotions are more likely to savor pleasant experiences (Miyamoto et al., 2014). People can also differ in how much they want to experience active versus nonactive emotions (i.e., by arousal). People who want to feel high (vs. low) arousal pleasant emotions are more likely to go for a run than take bubble baths to regulate their feelings (Tsai, 2007). Given such implications, identifying what characterizes emotion goals in depression is essential for predicting how depressed individuals regulate their emotions and can potentially uncover why they sometimes fail in doing so.

To date, research on emotion goals in depression has focused mainly on happiness and sadness. Little research has tested the extent to which people with depression want to experience other emotions. This makes it difficult to infer whether emotion goals in depression are specific to valence, arousal, or differ by discrete emotions (Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2020). For instance, how sad people want to feel may reflect the desired level of unpleasant states, low arousal states, or sadness per se. Similarly, how happy people want to feel may reflect the desired level of pleasant states, high arousal states, or happiness per se. To better understand emotion goals in depression and what underlies them, we went beyond sadness and happiness and assessed desired levels of four discrete emotions that systematically differ by valence and arousal.

There is some evidence regarding desired levels of affective states in depression, beyond sadness and happiness. In one study,

depressed and nondepressed participants listened to happy, sad, and fearful music clips that were high or low in arousal, and neutral clips (Yoon et al., 2020). Participants listened to pairs of music clips from different categories and selected the clips they wanted to listen to. Although depressed participants preferred low arousal sad music to low arousal happy music, on average, they selected more low-arousal and fewer high-arousal clips than nondepressed participants did. This suggests that emotion goals in depression may reflect greater desirability of low arousal states. It is unclear, however, whether such patterns are specific to what music people want to listen to or apply more generally to what people want to feel.

In another investigation, depressed and nondepressed participants listened to music clips that captured different combinations of valence and arousal (sad, happy, fearful, and calm clips) and selected the clips they prefer (Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023). Participants also rated their desired level of sadness, happiness, fear, and calmness. Depressed (vs. nondepressed) individuals wanted to listen to music that was lower in arousal. However, depressed (vs. nondepressed) individuals reported wanting to feel more intense unpleasant emotions, regardless of arousal levels. These findings suggest that preferences for low arousal music may or may not capture what depressed individuals want to feel, more generally.

Studies on motivated emotion regulation in depression in daily life (e.g., Hu et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023) have focused primarily on valence, with less attention to arousal. Only one study to date has examined desired pleasant affect as a function of arousal (Yoon et al., 2025). In this study, an increased desire for low-arousal pleasant states attenuated the temporal continuity of depressive affect, whereas a desire for high-arousal pleasant states was unrelated to changes in depressive affect over time. However, this study did not examine negative affect. In addition, the sample included only depressed participants, and so it is unclear whether these patterns are specific to depression.

Taken together, it is important to test whether regulation of emotions in everyday contexts in depression varies by both valence and arousal. If differences by valence and arousal in daily life mirror those found in laboratory settings (Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2020), this would suggest that deficits in emotion regulation in depression may be specific to discrete emotions, rather than to pleasant or unpleasant emotions, more broadly. To test this, it is essential to assess states that vary in both valence and arousal in daily life. Therefore, the second goal of this investigation was to test what depressed individuals want to feel in their daily life, focusing on emotional states that vary by both valence and arousal (i.e., sadness, anxiety, happiness, and calmness).

Emotion Goals and Attempted Emotion Regulation in Daily Life

According to the cybernetic model of emotion regulation (Tamir, 2021), the activation of an emotion goal can trigger a comparison between how one feels and how one wants to feel. When a discrepancy is detected, an emotion regulation goal (i.e., a desired change in emotion) is activated. This, in turn, should trigger attempts to regulate emotions in the desired direction (i.e., effortful emotion regulation). To date, research on emotion goals in depression has demonstrated that what depressed people want to feel can shape the direction in which they regulate their emotions and how they subsequently feel (Millgram, Sheppes, et al., 2019; Millgram et al., 2015). This research, however, has been conducted primarily in controlled laboratory settings where emotional stimuli were carefully

selected to minimize potential differences between depressed and nondepressed participants in experienced emotions. Given that effortful emotion regulation depends on the discrepancies between experienced emotions and emotion goals, when experienced emotions are similar, emotion goals are likely to carry the most weight in shaping effortful emotion regulation (the discrepancy between current and desired emotional states is driven mostly by goals). In daily life, however, depressed individuals often differ from nondepressed individuals in their emotional experiences (e.g., [Bylsma et al., 2011](#); [Khazanov & Ruscio, 2016](#); [Watson et al., 1988](#)). When both emotional experiences and emotion goals differ, emotion goals may no longer carry the most weight in shaping effortful emotion regulation.

We know relatively little about how depressed and nondepressed individuals differ in their attempts to influence emotions in daily life. [Liu et al. \(2023\)](#) found that depressed (vs. nondepressed) individuals regulated emotions more frequently in daily life. Although both depressed and nondepressed individuals mostly reported that they regulated their emotions pro-hedonically, depressed individuals were more likely to try to increase unpleasant affect and pleasant affect simultaneously. How such patterns might be associated with the extent to which depressed individuals want to feel pleasant and unpleasant emotions has not yet been tested. The third goal of this investigation, therefore, was to test whether depressed and nondepressed individuals differ in their attempts to change their emotions in daily life and whether these group differences are consistent with potential differences in emotion goals.

If emotion goals and effortful emotion regulation are not always aligned, this would point to the need to reexamine previous interpretations and could point to new types of deficits in emotion regulation that have previously gone undetected. In terms of interpretations, such misalignment could imply that what people want to feel is not necessarily aligned with how they try to influence their emotions. In terms of deficits, misalignment could imply a disconnect between desired states and regulatory behavior, which is likely counter-productive. Moreover, if emotion goals and effortful emotion regulation are not always consistent, this would highlight the need to consider them separately and examine their associations in emotion regulation in both healthy and unhealthy populations.

The Current Investigation

To assess emotion goals and intentional attempts at emotion regulation in daily life, we conducted a 10-day Ecological Momentary Assessments (EMA) study, with four assessments per day. To measure emotion goals, in each assessment, participants rated how much they wanted to feel sadness, anxiety, happiness, and calmness. Based on previous findings ([Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023](#)), we predicted that depressed participants would want to feel more sadness and less happiness than nondepressed participants. We had no a-priori predictions regarding anxiety and calmness.

To measure attempts at emotion regulation, participants rated the extent to which they tried to decrease their sadness, decrease their anxiety, increase their happiness, and increase their calmness. We focused on pro-hedonic attempts at emotion regulation (i.e., attempts to increase pleasant or decrease unpleasant emotions), as these tend to be the most common in daily life ([Kalokerinos et al., 2017](#)). Because there was no published research on attempts at emotion regulation in depression when the study was launched, we

had no a priori predictions regarding this measure. To ensure that potential group differences are not explained by differences in emotional experiences, we measured and controlled for current emotional experiences in our analyses. Finally, we also examined whether at the within-person level, emotion goals were associated with attempts at emotion regulation in depressed and nondepressed individuals, respectively. This analysis allowed us to test whether attempts to regulate emotions in people with and without depression matched what they wanted to feel (e.g., when people wanted to feel more intense happiness, did they also attempt to increase their happiness more?). Such within-person comparisons highlight the potential association (or lack thereof) between emotion goals and regulation attempts.

Method

Transparency and Openness

This study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/HRF_GCM). The preregistration includes additional hypotheses and exploratory questions that were not the focus of this investigation and, therefore, were not reported here. These hypotheses involved expected effort in emotion regulation, success in emotion regulation, and emotion regulation goals. We elaborate on these preregistered hypotheses in the [Supplemental Materials](#). All data, analysis code, and research materials are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF; [Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2025](#)) at https://osf.io/gz5kc/?view_only=e0788b8fc3ec49198848cecc45d3cbf32.

Data were collected as part of a larger study ([Millgram et al., 2023](#)).² All deviations from the preregistration are disclosed below. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The study was approved by the Hebrew University's ethical review board.

Participants

The final sample included 58 depressed (75.9% identified as females, 24.1% identified as males, $M_{\text{age}} = 25.5$) and 62 nondepressed (74.2% identified as females, 25.8% identified as males, $M_{\text{age}} = 24.6$) Jewish Israeli participants. As reported in the preregistration, we sought to recruit 102 participants (51 per group). Based on an a-priori power analysis, we set the sample size to 102, to detect a small effect size of $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$ of group differences in a mixed design. To increase statistical power, we continued recruiting participants until the end of the academic semester, which resulted in a final sample of 120 participants (depressed individuals = 58, nondepressed individuals = 62). All analyses were conducted after data collection had been completed. The recruitment occurred in two phases. In the first phase, participants were prescreened based on their score on the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; [Kroenke & Spitzer, 2002](#)), administered online to a large sample of students ($N = 1990$). Participants who scored either 10 or above or 5 or below on the PHQ-9 were invited to participate in the study. In the second phase, to examine if participants met eligibility criteria, trained clinical psychology graduate students individually administered the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview

² The larger study addressed multiple unrelated research questions. A list of measures which are irrelevant for this investigation are available upon request.

5.0.0 (M.I.N.I.; Sheehan et al., 1998). After all participants provided written informed consent, the M.I.N.I. was administered by phone and audiotaped. A total of 226 students were screened and 123 students, who met the inclusion criteria, were invited to participate in the study.

Participants were considered depressed ($n = 58$, $M_{\text{PHQ-9}} = 15.90$, $SD = 4.47$), if they scored 10 or above on the PHQ-9 and were diagnosed with a current major depressive disorder. We excluded participants with a Bipolar I or II diagnosis or any psychotic disorder. Participants were considered nondepressed ($n = 62$, $M_{\text{PHQ-9}} = 2.89$, $SD = 1.64$), if they scored 5 or below on the PHQ-9 and had no history of mental health disorders. There were no significant differences between groups in gender, age, education level, or employment status (for additional demographic information and clinical characteristics, see Supplemental Table S1). We also included an attention check in each survey in the EMA and excluded individual assessments where participants failed the attention check. Two depressed participants dropped out before the EMA period. One depressed participant failed most attention checks and therefore was excluded. For reliability assessments, we randomly selected 20% of interviews. Evaluators agreed on 93% of diagnoses, $\kappa = .80$, $p < .001$.

Procedure

The study consisted of a baseline survey and a 10-day EMA period. All the variables used in the current analyses were drawn from the EMA period. Four surveys were sent daily at 10:00 A.M., 2:00 P.M., 6:00 P.M., and 9:00 P.M., and remained open for 1 hr.³ Links to each survey were sent through SMS messages to participants' mobile phones. Participants were paid the equivalent of \$1 for each completed survey and could earn up to \$40. Data were collected during 2021 and 2022.

EMA Measures

Emotional Experiences

Participants rated how much they currently felt sad, anxious, happy, and calm (e.g., "To what extent do you feel sad right now?"; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*).

Emotion Goals

Participants rated how much they wanted to feel sadness, anxiety, happiness, and calmness in the past 2 hr (e.g., "In the past two hours, how much did you want to feel happy?"; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*).

Attempts at Emotion Regulation

Participants rated how much they tried to decrease their sadness and anxiety in the past 2 hr (e.g., "In the past two hours, to what extent did you try to decrease your sadness?"; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *to a large extent*), and increase their happiness and calmness in the past 2 hr (e.g., "In the past two hours, to what extent did you try to increase your happiness?"; 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *to a large extent*).

Analytic Approach

To account for the nested structure of our data (assessments nested within participants), we ran multilevel models using lme4 package in R

(Bates et al., 2015). The p values were calculated using lmerTest (Kuznetsova et al., 2017), bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals were derived using the confint() function, and effect sizes for fixed effects were calculated as adjusted R^2 using r2glmm (Jaeger et al., 2017). We used a stepwise approach for model building to understand differences between depressed and nondepressed individuals and whether any potential between-group differences held when controlling for potential confounds. All models included random intercepts and slopes for Level-1 predictors, which were person-mean centered. When models did not converge using default settings in the lme4 package, we used the "bobyqa" optimizer and reran these models (Bates et al., 2015).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Participants completed 3,805 surveys in total. Forty-two surveys that were completed in less than 60 s were removed (1% of total completed surveys), resulting in 3,763 surveys.⁴ The average number of surveys completed per person was 31.71 out of 40 surveys ($SD = 7.03$, 79.28% compliance). Depressed participants completed fewer surveys on average ($M = 30.19$, $SD = 7.68$), than nondepressed participants ($M = 33.13$, $SD = 6.09$), $t(108.68) = 2.31$, $p = .022$. Repeating all key analyses controlling for the number of surveys completed did not change the results. Supplemental Table S2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations between emotional experiences, emotion goals, and attempts at emotion regulation for the entire sample.

Depression and Emotion Goals

To test our first prediction regarding group differences in emotion goals, we used a stepwise approach. In Step 1, group (nondepressed = -1 , depressed = 1) was included as the Level-2 predictor of each emotion goal.⁵ In Step 2, we controlled for a set of Level-1 covariates that could represent alternative explanations for the potential between-group differences in each emotion goal. These covariates included the respective discrete emotions participants experienced (i.e., emotional experience), and the respective discrete emotions participants felt at the previous assessment (i.e., lagged emotion). In Step 3, we controlled for emotion goal in the previous assessment (i.e., lagged emotion goal) as a Level-1 covariate, to control for preexisting differences in emotion goals and to improve the precision of parameter estimates by reducing residual variance (e.g., Hamaker et al., 2023; see Table 1).⁶

³ Due to technical issues, 3.7% of our sample completed more than 40 surveys in total. We included all observations in our analyses, and excluding these additional surveys did not alter the findings.

⁴ Results were consistent when including these surveys in the analyses.

⁵ Our preregistration indicated a different coding scheme for the depression variable (1 = *nondepressed*, -1 = *depressed*). However, to simplify the interpretation, we reversed the coding in the final analyses (-1 = *nondepressed*, 1 = *depressed*). This change had no impact on the results.

⁶ In the preregistration, we indicated that we would control for emotional experiences. In the final analyses, we also included the respective discrete emotions participants felt at the previous assessment and the respective emotion goal in the previous assessment as covariates. Controlling for these variables provides a more conservative test of group differences and reduces the likelihood that observed effects reflect confounding influences. The direction and statistical significance of all reported findings was consistent with and without the inclusion of these covariates. We report the preregistered analyses in Supplemental Table S3.

Table 1*Fixed Effects in Multilevel Models Examining Group Differences in Emotion Goals*

Emotion goal	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²
Sadness												
Intercept	1.40 (0.05)	<.001	[1.29, 1.50]		1.40 (0.05)	<.001	[1.30, 1.50]		1.40 (0.05)	<.001	[1.31, 1.50]	
Group	0.13 (0.05)	.013	[0.04, 0.24]	.03	0.14 (0.05)	.003	[0.04, 0.23]	.03	0.14 (0.04)	.002	[0.05, 0.23]	.03
Emotional experience					0.13 (0.03)	<.001	[0.08, 0.18]	.04	0.12 (0.02)	<.001	[0.08, 0.17]	.04
Lagged emotion					0.02 (0.02)	.210	[−0.01, 0.05]	.00	−0.00 (0.01)	.830	[−0.03, 0.02]	.00
Lagged emotion goal									0.10 (0.04)	.007	[0.03, 0.18]	.01
Anxiety												
Intercept	1.28 (0.04)	<.001	[1.21, 1.36]		1.30 (0.04)	<.001	[1.21, 1.38]		1.31 (0.05)	<.001	[1.23, 1.39]	
Group	0.14 (0.04)	<.001	[0.07, 0.22]	.04	0.14 (0.04)	.001	[0.06, 0.23]	.03	0.15 (0.04)	.001	[0.07, 0.23]	.04
Emotional experience					0.05 (0.02)	.008	[0.01, 0.08]	.01	0.04 (0.02)	.019	[0.00, 0.07]	.00
Lagged emotion					0.02 (0.02)	.405	[−0.02, 0.06]	.00	0.02 (0.02)	.423	[−0.03, 0.05]	.00
Lagged emotion goal									0.07 (0.04)	.081	[−0.01, 0.13]	.00
Happiness												
Intercept	5.64 (0.18)	<.001	[5.28, 5.95]		5.71 (0.18)	<.001	[5.36, 6.08]		5.71 (0.18)	<.001	[5.38, 6.04]	
Group	−0.38 (0.18)	.032	[−0.74, −0.03]	.06	−0.33 (0.17)	.056	[−0.66, 0.00]	.05	−0.34 (0.17)	.049	[−0.65, 0.02]	.05
Emotional experience					0.28 (0.03)	<.001	[0.22, 0.35]	.07	0.27 (0.03)	<.001	[0.21, 0.33]	.07
Lagged emotion					0.08 (0.02)	.001	[0.03, 0.12]	.01	0.03 (0.02)	.117	[−0.01, 0.08]	.00
Lagged emotion goal									0.14 (0.03)	<.001	[0.08, 0.19]	.02
Calmness												
Intercept	6.52 (0.15)	<.001	[6.23, 6.79]		6.58 (0.15)	<.001	[6.29, 6.86]		6.58 (0.15)	<.001	[6.31, 6.87]	
Group	−0.14 (0.15)	.354	[−0.45, 0.16]	.01	−0.07 (0.15)	.640	[−0.37, 0.21]	.00	−0.09 (0.14)	.545	[−0.38, 0.20]	.00
Emotional experience					0.11 (0.03)	<.001	[0.05, 0.16]	.01	0.10 (0.03)	.001	[0.05, 0.16]	.01
Lagged emotion					0.02 (0.03)	.369	[−0.03, 0.07]	.00	0.00 (0.02)	.891	[−0.04, 0.05]	.00
Lagged emotion goal									0.18 (0.03)	<.001	[0.12, 0.23]	.03

Note. Group: −1 = nondepressed individuals, 1 = depressed individuals. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.

Figure 1 displays the means of each type of emotion goal over time by depressive status and number of EMA survey. Overall, depressed and nondepressed participants wanted to feel relatively intense happiness and relatively low sadness in daily life. As predicted, in Step 1, depressed participants wanted to feel more sadness ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 1.13$) than nondepressed participants ($M = 1.27$, $SD = .87$, $p = .013$; see Figure 2). This group difference remained significant in Steps 2 and 3 ($p = .003$ and $p = .002$, respectively), suggesting that depressed participants wanted to feel more intense sadness than nondepressed participants in daily life, regardless of their experienced sadness, their sadness in the previous assessment, or their desired sadness in the previous assessment.

With respect to anxiety, in Step 1, depressed participants wanted to feel more anxiety ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.08$) than nondepressed participants ($M = 1.15$, $SD = .60$, $p < .001$). This group difference remained significant in Steps 2 and 3 ($ps = .001$). Thus, depressed participants wanted to feel more intense anxiety than nondepressed participants did, regardless of their current anxiety, their experienced anxiety in the previous assessment, or their desired anxiety in the previous assessment.

Consistent with our prediction, in Step 1, depressed participants wanted to feel less happiness in daily life ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 2.62$) than nondepressed participants ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 2.40$, $p = .032$). This finding was not significant in Step 2 ($p = .056$), when controlling for participants' experienced happiness in the current and previous assessments. However, when controlling for desired happiness in the previous assessment in Step 3, the group difference in happiness goals was significant ($p = .049$).

Finally, depressed and nondepressed participants did not differ in the extent to which they wanted to feel calmness in Step 1 (depressed

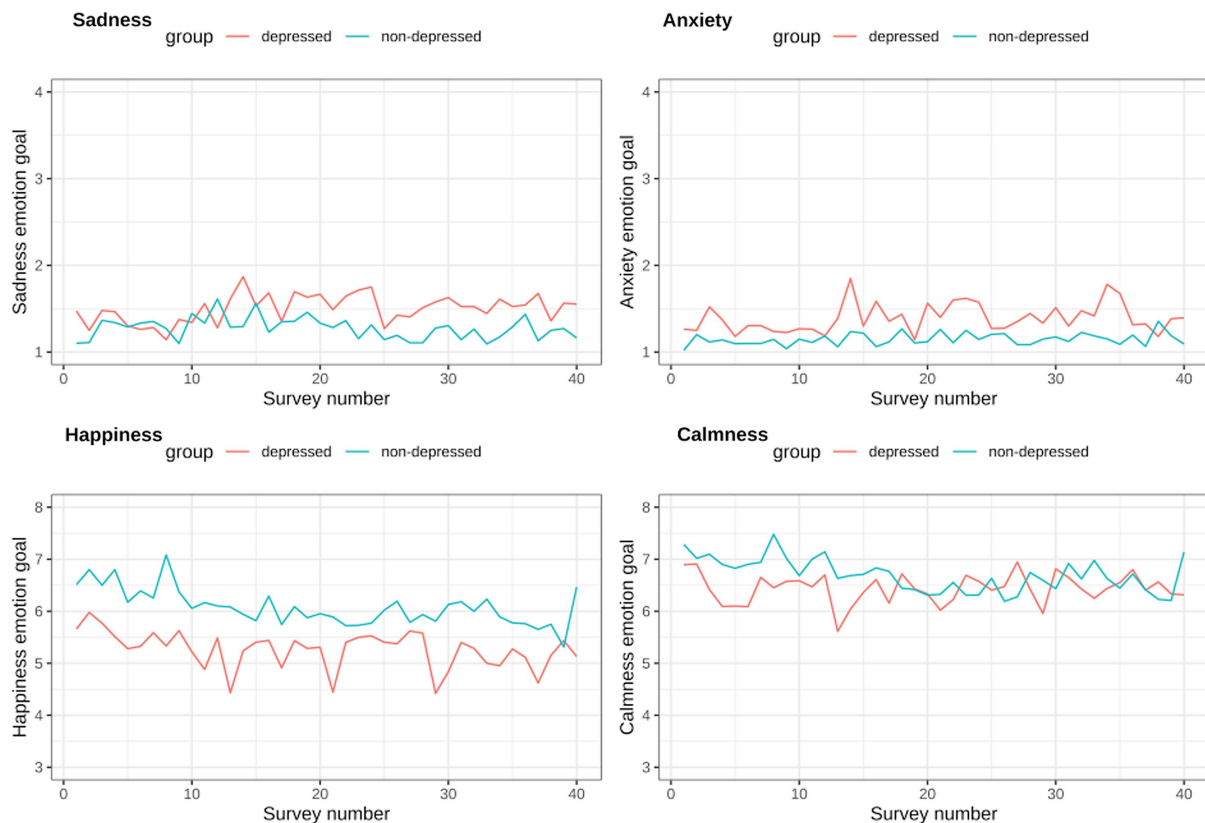
participants: $M = 6.41$, $SD = 2.40$, nondepressed participants: $M = 6.69$, $SD = 2.11$, $p = .354$), or in Steps 2 and 3 ($p = .640$ and $.545$ respectively).

Attempts at Emotion Regulation

To assess group differences in attempts at emotion regulation, we followed the analytical approach described above, predicting attempts at emotion regulation. Steps 1 and 2 were as described above, but in Step 3, we controlled for attempts in emotion regulation in the previous assessment (i.e., lagged attempt) as a Level-1 covariate instead (see Table 2). Figure 3 displays the means of attempts at emotion regulation for each emotion by group and number of EMA survey. We found that in Step 1, depressed participants attempted to decrease sadness more ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 2.28$) in daily life, compared to nondepressed participants ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.90$, $p = .001$; see Figure 4). This difference remained significant in Steps 2 and 3 ($p = .008$ and $p = .003$, respectively). Depressed participants were more likely to try to decrease sadness, regardless of their current sadness, their experienced sadness in the previous assessment or how much they tried to decrease their sadness in the previous assessment.

Depressed participants attempted to decrease anxiety more ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 2.46$), compared to nondepressed participants ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 2.05$, $ps < .001$) in Steps 1 and 2 and in Step 3 ($p = .001$). This finding indicates that depressed (vs. nondepressed) participants were more likely to try to decrease their anxiety in daily life, regardless of their current anxiety, their experienced anxiety in the previous assessment or how much they tried to decrease their anxiety in the previous assessment.

Figure 1
Mean Emotion Goals by Survey Number and Depressive Status



Note. Scales ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*. We excluded survey numbers greater than 40 because only a few participants completed more than 40 EMA surveys. EMA = Ecological Momentary Assessments. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

With respect to happiness, depressed and nondepressed participants did not differ in how much they tried to increase happiness in daily life (depressed participants: $M = 3.42$, $SD = 2.37$, nondepressed participants: $M = 3.42$, $SD = 2.25$, $p = .778$). We found similar results in Steps 2 and 3 ($p = .744$ and $p = .740$, respectively). Finally, depressed and nondepressed participants did not differ in the degree to which they tried to increase their calmness in daily life (depressed participants: $M = 4.29$, $SD = 2.49$, nondepressed participants: $M = 3.81$, $SD = 2.34$, $p = .130$). We found similar results in Steps 2 and 3 ($p = .313$ and $p = .325$, respectively).

Within-Person Associations Between Emotion Goals and Attempts at Emotion Regulation

We assessed within-person associations between emotion goals and attempts at emotion regulation, separately for depressed and nondepressed individuals. Table 3 presents within-person correlations between emotion goals, and attempts at emotion regulation, by group. For pleasant emotions (i.e., happiness and calmness), in the nondepressed group, the more happiness and calmness individuals wanted to feel, the more they tried to increase happiness and calmness ($r_{\text{Happiness}} = .24$, $r_{\text{Calmness}} = .23$, $ps < .001$). In the depressed group, similarly, the more individuals wanted to feel happiness and calmness, the more they tried to increase these emotions ($r_{\text{Happiness}} = .31$, $r_{\text{Calmness}} = .29$).

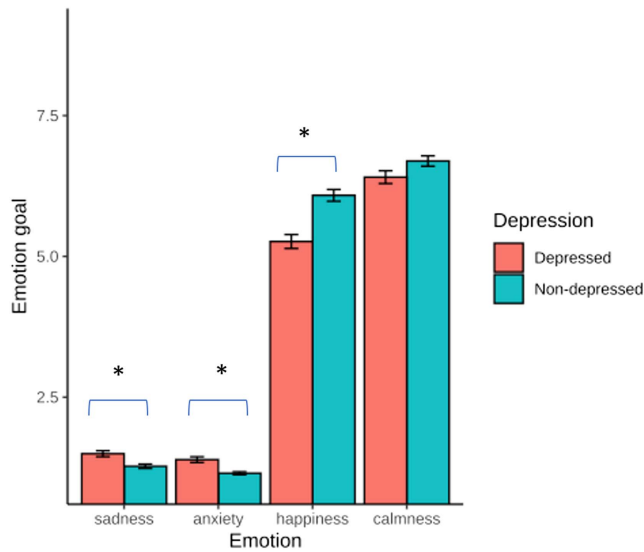
For unpleasant emotions (i.e., sadness and anxiety), in the nondepressed group, the more sadness and anxiety individuals wanted to feel, the more they tried to decrease sadness and anxiety⁷ ($r_{\text{Sadness}} = .11$, $r_{\text{Anxiety}} = .09$, $ps < .001$). However, in the depressed group, no significant associations were found between the extent to which individuals wanted to feel sadness and anxiety and their attempts to decrease these emotions ($r_{\text{Sadness}} = -.02$, $p = .407$; $r_{\text{Anxiety}} = .03$, $p = .188$). We also tested whether the association between emotion goals and regulation attempts differed between depressed and nondepressed individuals across discrete emotions, and found significant differences for anxiety and sadness ($ps \leq .001$), but not for happiness and calmness ($ps > .05$).

Discussion

What do depressed individuals want to feel and how much do they try to regulate their emotions in daily life? This research shows

⁷ When we entered unpleasant emotion goals (i.e., sadness and anxiety) as predictors of attempts to decrease unpleasant emotions, controlling for experienced unpleasant emotions, the correlations between unpleasant emotion goals and attempts were no longer significant, $ps > .091$. This suggests that the positive association between unpleasant emotion goals and attempts to decrease them may be driven by links to current unpleasant emotional experiences.

Figure 2
Emotion Goals by Depressed and Nondepressed Participants



Note. Error bars represent 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

* $p < .05$.

that compared to nondepressed individuals, depressed individuals wanted to feel more sadness and anxiety, and less happiness in daily life, but they did not differ in how much calmness they wanted to experience. However, we also found that compared to nondepressed

individuals, depressed individuals attempted to decrease their sadness and anxiety more in daily life, but did not differ in their attempts to increase happiness and calmness.

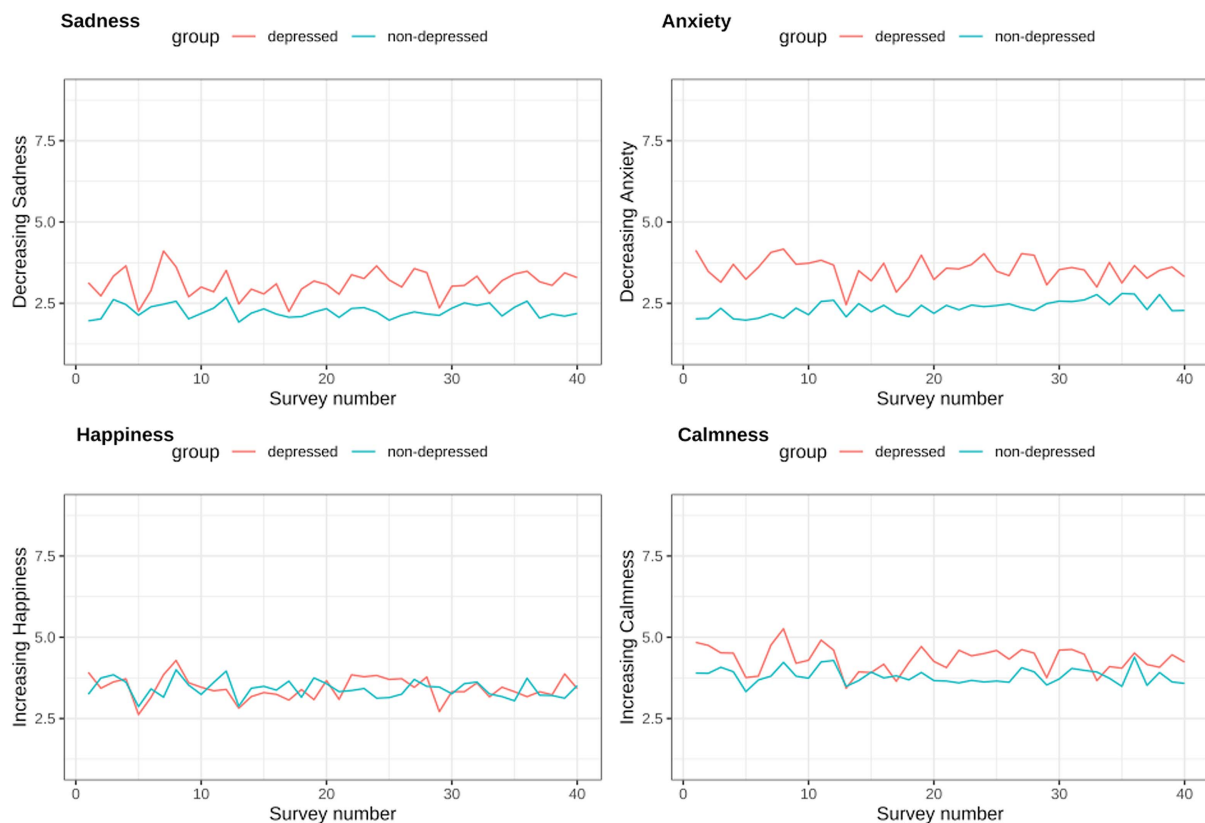
Discrete Emotion Goals in Depression in Daily Life

People who suffer from depression want to feel more intense sadness and less intense happiness than nondepressed people (Arens & Stangier, 2020; Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019; Millgram et al., 2015; Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023). This pattern was found in self-reports (Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019; Millgram et al., 2015) and in behavioral tasks (Arens & Stangier, 2020; Millgram et al., 2015; Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023). We found that this pattern also replicates when assessed in real time, as people go about living their daily lives. To better understand emotion goals in depression and what underlies them, we also assessed motivation for anxiety and calmness. We found that depressed individuals wanted to feel more anxiety than nondepressed individuals, whereas the groups did not differ in the extent to which they wanted to feel calmness. Our findings did not point to emotion-specific preferences in depression. Instead, it appears that compared to nondepressed individuals, depressed individuals wanted to feel more unpleasant emotions (i.e., sadness and anxiety), and less happiness. This pattern is largely consistent with a valence-driven account, according to which people who suffer from depression (vs. not) are less pro-hedonically driven. Depressed and nondepressed individuals did not differ, however, in their desire for calmness. The absence of group differences in the motivation for calmness suggests that it may be important to distinguish between high- and low-arousal pleasant states. This distinction may help reconcile inconsistencies in prior findings

Table 2
Fixed Effects for Multilevel Models Examining Group Differences in Attempts at Emotion Regulation

Emotion goal	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>	95% CI	<i>R</i> ²
Sadness												
Intercept	2.66 (0.13)	<.001	[2.42, 2.90]	.08	2.78 (0.14)	<.001	[2.47, 3.08]	.05	2.79 (0.14)	<.001	[2.52, 3.08]	.07
Group	0.44 (0.13)	.001	[0.17, 0.72]		0.35 (0.13)	.008	[0.09, 0.61]		0.39 (0.13)	.003	[0.12, 0.63]	
Emotional experience					0.29 (0.05)	<.001	[0.20, 0.38]		0.27 (0.04)	<.001	[0.18, 0.36]	
Lagged emotion					0.19 (0.03)	<.001	[0.14, 0.25]		0.12 (0.03)	<.001	[0.07, 0.18]	
Lagged attempt									0.18 (0.03)	<.001	[0.13, 0.24]	
Anxiety												
Intercept	−2.89 (0.14)	<.001	[2.61, 3.17]	.11	2.95 (0.15)	<.001	[2.68, 3.24]	.10	2.95 (0.15)	<.001	[2.68, 3.24]	.10
Group	0.58 (0.14)	<.001	[0.31, 0.87]		0.53 (0.14)	<.001	[0.25, 0.79]		0.51 (0.14)	.001	[0.21, 0.80]	
Emotional experience					0.35 (0.05)	<.001	[0.25, 0.46]		0.35 (0.05)	<.001	[0.25, 0.45]	
Lagged emotion					0.19 (0.03)	<.001	[0.13, 0.26]		0.14 (0.03)	<.001	[0.07, 0.20]	
Lagged attempt									0.13 (0.03)	<.001	[0.08, 0.19]	
Happiness												
Intercept	3.41 (0.15)	<.001	[3.11, 3.71]	.00	3.47 (0.16)	<.001	[3.15, 3.79]	.00	3.48 (0.16)	<.001	[3.19, 3.82]	.00
Group	0.04 (0.15)	.778	[−0.25, 0.37]		−0.05 (0.15)	.744	[−0.34, 0.25]		−0.05 (0.15)	.740	[−0.34, 0.26]	
Emotional experience					0.18 (0.03)	<.001	[0.11, 0.24]		0.17 (0.03)	<.001	[0.11, 0.22]	
Lagged emotion					−0.02 (0.03)	.429	[−0.07, 0.03]		−0.06 (0.03)	.039	[−0.11, −0.00]	
Lagged attempt									0.17 (0.03)	<.001	[0.11, 0.23]	
Calmness												
Intercept	3.98 (0.16)	<.001	[3.67, 4.29]	.02	4.07 (0.16)	<.001	[3.78, 4.36]	.01	4.08 (0.16)	<.001	[3.73, 4.40]	.01
Group	0.24 (0.16)	.130	[−0.07, 0.55]		0.16 (0.16)	.313	[−0.17, 0.50]		0.15 (0.16)	.325	[−0.19, 0.47]	
Emotional experience					0.04 (0.03)	.171	[−0.02, 0.11]		0.02 (0.03)	.460	[−0.04, 0.08]	
Lagged emotion					−0.07 (0.03)	.010	[−0.13, −0.02]		−0.07 (0.03)	.013	[−0.13, −0.01]	
Lagged attempt									0.16 (0.03)	<.001	[0.11, 0.22]	

Note. Group: -1 = nondepressed individuals, 1 = depressed individuals. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.

Figure 3*Mean Attempts at Emotion Regulation by Survey Number and Depressive Status*

Note. Scales ranged from 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*. We excluded survey numbers greater than 40 because only a few participants completed more than 40 EMA surveys. EMA = Ecological Momentary Assessments. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

regarding pleasant emotion goals in depression, by clarifying that depressed individuals may be less motivated to experience some, but not all, pleasant emotions (see also Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2020). These findings also highlight the importance of moving beyond a valence-based account of emotion goals in depression. Whereas prior work has typically emphasized reduced pro-hedonic motivation in depression (Arens & Stangier, 2020; Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019; Millgram et al., 2015), our results suggest that arousal might also shape what emotions depressed individuals want to feel (see also Yoon et al., 2020). Clinically, these insights suggest that interventions could aim not only to increase pleasant emotions in depression, but low-arousal pleasant emotions, more specifically. By demonstrating that arousal plays a role not only in self-reports and behavioral tasks (Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2020), but also in real-daily life, our study extends prior laboratory-based evidence, highlighting the role of arousal in the daily emotional experience of depressed individuals.

These findings suggest that depressed individuals differ from nondepressed individuals primarily in their preferences for unpleasant emotions. This pattern may indicate that they think about, interpret, or respond to potentially negative situations in distinct ways. However, such differences appear to be less pronounced with respect to pleasant emotions.

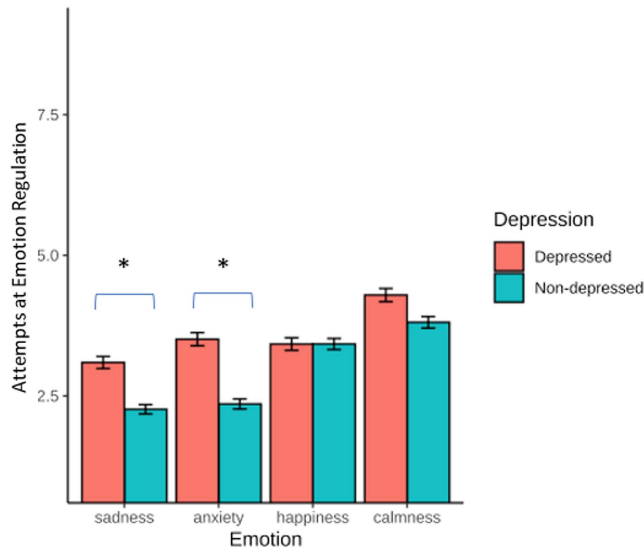
Emotion Goals Versus Attempts at Emotion Regulation in Depression

Both depressed and nondepressed individuals wanted to feel more pleasant emotions than unpleasant emotions, in general. However, compared to nondepressed individuals, depressed individuals wanted to feel more sadness and anxiety in daily life. Yet, they also attempted to decrease their sadness and anxiety more. Also, at the within-person level, for pleasant emotions (i.e., happiness and calmness), in both groups, the more individuals wanted to feel happiness and calmness, the more they tried to increase these emotions. However, whereas unpleasant emotion goals were associated with attempts at emotion regulation among nondepressed individuals, no such associations were found among depressed individuals.

Among nondepressed individuals, those who wanted to feel more intense unpleasant emotions also tried harder to decrease them. This pattern may suggest that, for nondepressed individuals, effectively decreasing unpleasant emotions may first require a willingness to engage with them rather than to avoid them. The positive correlation between emotion goals and attempts to decrease unpleasant emotions among nondepressed individuals may suggest, that wanting to experience relatively more intense unpleasant emotions does not necessarily imply trying to increase them. Rather, it may indicate

Figure 4

Attempts at Emotion Regulation by Depressed and Nondepressed Participants



Note. Error bars represent 95% CIs. CI = confidence interval. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

* $p < .05$.

that some level of engagement is required to regulate emotions, even when these emotions exceed their desired level. Contrary to non-depressed individuals, depressed individuals may experience a disconnect between their momentary motivations to experience unpleasant emotions and their motivations to decrease these emotions, potentially reflecting difficulties in translating emotion goals into regulatory action, resulting in less flexible and less effective emotion regulation.

Table 3

Within-Person Correlations Among Key Variables by Group

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Nondepressed individuals								
1. Sad goal	—							
2. Anxious goal	.24***	—						
3. Happy goal	-.32***	-.11***	—					
4. Calm goal	-.16***	-.18***	.47***	—				
5. Decrease sadness	.11***	.05*	.11***	.10***	—			
6. Decrease anxiety	.05*	.09***	.03	.12***	.43***	—		
7. Increase happiness	.01	.03	.24***	.12***	.40***	.26***	—	
8. Increase calmness	.02	.04	.13***	.23***	.33***	.46***	.56***	—
Depressed individuals								
1. Sad goal	—							
2. Anxious goal	.53***	—						
3. Happy goal	-.21***	-.13***	—					
4. Calm goal	-.22***	-.33***	.46***	—				
5. Decrease sadness	-.02	.03	.19***	.15***	—			
6. Decrease anxiety	.01	.03	.12***	.22***	.57***	—		
7. Increase happiness	-.08**	-.01	.31***	.15***	.49***	.34***	—	
8. Increase calmness	-.01	-.04	.16***	.29***	.44***	.57***	.51***	—

Note. Correlations for the nondepressed group are shown below the diagonal, and correlations for the depressed group are shown above the diagonal. Values in bold indicate correlations between emotion goals and attempts at emotion regulation targeting the same emotion.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Taken together, in daily life, emotion goals of depressed individuals were not consistent with their attempts to regulate emotions. This pattern is inconsistent with prior findings. For instance, Liu et al. (2023) did not find group differences in attempts at emotion regulation. These different patterns of findings could be due to the different measures used in the two investigations. For instance, Liu et al. used a categorical measure (i.e., participants indicated whether they tried to increase, decrease or maintain unpleasant and pleasant affect), whereas we assessed emotion regulation attempts using a continuous scale. It may be that examining motivation continuously afforded the detection of nuanced group differences that went undetected when assessing motivation categorically. This pattern also differs from patterns previously found in laboratory studies, where emotion goals were consistent with emotion regulatory behavior. What might explain this inconsistency? One possibility is that unlike laboratory settings, where emotional stimuli are carefully selected and equated across groups, in daily life, depressed and nondepressed individuals encounter different stimuli and have different emotional experiences. Attempts to regulate emotions likely depend on the discrepancy between one's experienced emotions and one's desired emotions (Tamir, 2021). Even though depressed (vs. nondepressed) individuals want to feel more intense unpleasant emotions, they also experience more intense unpleasant emotions in daily life, resulting in a stronger motivation to decrease unpleasant emotions.

Another possibility is that group differences in attempts to decrease unpleasant emotions (i.e., how much people reported trying to decrease sadness or anxiety) reflect differences in the effort required to decrease such emotions in each group. Although depressed individuals may be able to withstand relatively more intense unpleasant emotions, any attempt to decrease such emotions requires substantially more effort in depressed than in nondepressed individuals. Depressed individuals wanted to feel more unpleasant emotions, compared to nondepressed individuals, but they tried harder to attain that goal, not only because of differences in their

starting points (i.e., experienced emotions), but also because of differences in the amount of effort required to close this gap. This possibility is consistent with some existing evidence (e.g., [de la Fuente et al., 2024](#); [Liu et al., 2023](#)). For instance, perceived emotion regulation effort was positively correlated with depressive symptoms in daily life ([de la Fuente et al., 2024](#)), and depressed individuals reported more frequent emotion regulation efforts in daily life, compared to nondepressed individuals ([Liu et al., 2023](#)).

A third possibility is that depressed and nondepressed individuals differ in their ability to match effort in emotion regulation to regulatory needs. Depressed individuals may be less sensitive to the discrepancy between experienced and desired emotions ([Hu et al., 2024](#); [Liu et al., 2023](#)). Whereas in nondepressed individuals, attempts at emotion regulation are tailored to achieve emotion goals, this association may not be as strong in depression, such that depressed individuals are always motivated to change how they feel, even when their experienced emotions are relatively close to their desired emotions. Thus, although depressed (vs. nondepressed) individuals want to feel relatively more intense unpleasant emotions in their daily life, they also try to decrease these emotions more. This possibility is consistent with evidence for other types of inflexibility in emotion regulation in depression ([Aldao et al., 2015](#); [Bonanno & Burton, 2013](#); [Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010](#)). For instance, depressive symptoms are linked with inflexible regulation involving difficulties matching regulation to contextual cues ([Chen & Bonanno, 2021](#)).

In laboratory studies, stronger motivation to experience sadness in depression was found to be maladaptive, to the extent that it led individuals with depression to refrain from trying to make themselves feel better ([Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019](#); [Millgram et al., 2015](#)). However, our findings suggest that in everyday contexts, depressed (vs. nondepressed) individuals had a stronger motivation to feel unpleasant emotions, but they also attempted to decrease their unpleasant emotions more. These findings might suggest that stronger motivation to feel unpleasant emotions in daily life is not necessarily maladaptive as previously suspected, as it does not always lead people to refrain from regulation.

Study Implications

To understand emotion regulation in depression, it is important to measure both what people want to feel and what they try to do to change how they feel, as these may not always point to the same pattern of unhealthy emotion regulation in depression. We moved beyond existing studies by assessing emotion goals and attempts at regulation of four discrete emotions that differ in valence and arousal. We found that although depressed individuals were less hedonically motivated than nondepressed individuals (i.e., they wanted to feel more intense sadness and anxiety and less intense happiness), they attempted to decrease their sadness and anxiety more in daily life. Our findings suggest that what depressed people want to feel may not be consistent with how they try to change their emotions. Thus, emotion dysregulation in depression may not be characterized by a lack of overall emotion regulation attempts. Instead, depression may be characterized by relatively indiscriminate emotion regulation attempts in relation to emotion goals.

These findings also extend prior research by indicating that what links emotion goals and effortful emotion regulation is not as direct as was previously assumed. It highlights the need to consider them separately and examine their associations in emotion regulation in both healthy and clinical populations. These findings also reflect a

possible disconnect between emotion goals and regulatory behavior, one that could undermine effective regulation. One reason this misalignment may impair regulation is that it might indicate the presence of a conflict. Behaving in a way that is somewhat inconsistent with one's goals has been shown to result in less favorable outcomes and has been linked with depressive symptoms ([Boudreaux & Ozer, 2013](#)). Additional research is needed to identify the factors that inform the association between emotion goals and regulatory behavior.

The present findings may have several clinical implications. Many types of psychotherapies for depression target emotion regulation skills ([Berkling et al., 2008](#); [Renna et al., 2017](#)). Training in emotion-regulation skills can be integrated into the cognitive behavioral therapy-based treatment ([Berkling et al., 2008](#)) or serve as a stand-alone intervention, aimed at enhancing motivational responses and their associated regulatory characteristics ([Renna et al., 2017](#)). However, it remains unclear which aspects of the emotion regulation process are more critical to target to alleviate symptoms and improve functioning ([Gratz et al., 2015](#)). Our findings suggest that depressed individuals engage in emotion regulation to influence their emotional experiences, but their efforts do not necessarily reflect what they want to feel. This, in turn, might limit the effectiveness of their efforts, can exacerbate clinical symptoms and ultimately maintain the very states that characterize depression. Future research should further investigate the potential implications of this inconsistent association between emotion goals and effortful emotion regulation for clinical symptoms and well-being in depression. Furthermore, calmness was the only emotion in which no differences were found between depressed and nondepressed individuals, neither in emotion goals, nor in attempts at emotion regulation. This suggests that calmness may be a potentially useful target for regulation in depression, as it might entail less conflict. Therefore, there may be benefits to cultivating calmness over happiness goals in depression.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our investigation has several limitations. First, EMA studies constrain the number of items that can be included in each assessment. This constraint forced us to focus on some variables, at the expense of others. Specifically, we assessed only pro-hedonic attempts at emotion regulation, as such attempts are the most common in daily life ([Kalokerinos et al., 2017](#)). However, even if it is less common, depressed individuals may be more likely than nondepressed to engage in contra-hedonic emotion regulation, especially to decrease pleasant emotions ([Beblo et al., 2012](#)). Future research should assess both pro-hedonic and contra-hedonic attempts to better understand motivated emotion regulation in depression.

This same constraint also led us to focus on four discrete emotions that systematically capture combinations of valence and arousal. A stronger motivation to experience a specific emotion (e.g., sadness) could be driven by the desirability of that particular emotion, or the desirability of the valence and arousal combination that it represents (e.g., low arousal, negative valence). To tease these explanations apart, future research could assess the desirability of more than one emotion within each quadrant of the affective circumplex (e.g., sadness, boredom, fatigue).

Second, whereas [Liu et al. \(2023\)](#) used a categorical measure to assess emotion regulation attempt (i.e., participants indicated whether

they tried to increase, decrease or maintain unpleasant and pleasant affect), we used a continuous scale (e.g., How much did you want to decrease your unpleasant emotions?). Using a continuous measure of regulation attempt afforded more nuanced findings than a binary one, as it captures differences in the degree of such attempt rather than its direction alone. Future research can more directly compare the implications of using binary and continuous scales to study motivated emotion regulation in general, and in depression, specifically.

Third, many studies to date have assessed emotion goals. Our measure of emotion goals is similar to existing measures in the literature (e.g., Arens & Stangier, 2020; Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019; Mizrahi Lakan et al., 2023), allowing for direct comparisons with prior research. This measure tracks motivation, however, it does not distinguish between appetitive (i.e., approach-oriented) motivation and aversive (i.e., avoidance-oriented) motivation. Therefore, our data do not allow us to conclude whether, compared to nondepressed individuals, depressed individuals are more attracted to sadness or whether they are less averse to it (or more tolerant of it). Future research can develop new measures that would assess approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented motivation in emotion regulation in depression.

Fourth, we found that depressed individuals are less pro-hedonically driven than nondepressed individuals are. What underlies the relatively higher preference ratings for unpleasant emotions in depression remains to be tested. It is possible that depressed people are somewhat attracted to unpleasant emotions, perhaps because these emotions feel more authentic to them (e.g., Arens & Stangier, 2020). They may also perceive such emotions as more familiar and therefore more tolerable. Moreover, as unpleasant emotions are expected to occur and perceived as realistically attainable, depressed individuals may feel more resigned to experiencing them, which may lead them to rate such emotions as more tolerable. Future research should examine what underlies self-reported preferences for emotions in depressed individuals, potentially probing desirability and attainability separately, and also using in-depth personal interviews.

Finally, EMA studies rely primarily on self-report. Accordingly, we relied on self-report to assess emotion goals and attempts at emotion regulation. Future research could assess attempts at emotion regulation using more objective behavioral indices (Gutentag & Tamir, 2022). Finally, clinical symptoms have been linked to emotion goals in depression (Millgram, Joormann, et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that clinical symptoms may be differentially linked to emotion goals and to attempts at emotion regulation. However, it remains unclear how attempts at emotion regulation predict clinical symptoms over time. Future research should examine the potentially unique clinical implications of emotion goals and attempts at emotion regulation in depression.

Constraints on Generality

Our sample consisted of relatively young adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 25.04$), who were Jewish-Israeli university students. Therefore, our findings may not generalize to older, less educated samples, and should be replicated in other (i.e., non-Western) cultural contexts. Future research should test motivated emotion regulation in daily life among older depressed and nondepressed individuals.

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that, compared to nondepressed individuals, depressed individuals are less hedonically driven: They wanted to

feel more sadness and anxiety and less happiness in daily life. At the same time, they also attempted to decrease their sadness and anxiety more, compared to nondepressed individuals. Thus, emotion dysregulation in depression may involve a misalignment between what individuals want to feel and how they attempt to regulate their emotions.

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