Reviewer’s report

Title: Less is more: limited positive life changes can reduce depressive symptoms

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Reviewer: Dana L McMakin

Reviewer’s report:

This manuscript is very well-written/organized, enjoyable to read, and addresses a set of questions that are thoughtfully construed and examined. That is, the degree to which the amount of change and the valence of positive life events contribute to change in depressive symptoms (dimensionally defined) is a clearly defined goal. Moreover, the impact of addressing these questions could be substantial as understanding the values and limits of positive life changes during this period of vulnerability for depressive symptoms is an important one. The methods are well described and are appropriate for addressing these questions (see below for two possible limitations). The data are drawn from a large, longitudinal sample. Limitations related to reliance on self-report and an absence of total number of life event changes are appropriately noted in the discussion. Results are reported clearly. The discussions and conclusions are thoughtful, clear and well-balanced in terms of strengths and limitations. The authors do a nice job of linking this work to the broader literature.

Major:

1. In the introduction the authors argue compellingly that discrepancies in the literature regarding the impact of life events on depressive symptoms may reflect that a) amount of change and b) negative events should both increase depressive symptoms, while c) positive events should decrease (or protect against) depressive symptoms. As such, the authors argue that data regarding the impact of positive events is confusing because positive valence and amount of change impact depressive symptoms in opposing directions. Given these clear hypotheses regarding how positive versus negative valence should be related to outcome, I wasn’t clear on why the authors chose to create a difference score by subtracting negative from positive events. Could it be cleaner for interpretation to consider positive valence, negative valence, and amount of change separately in the models (as well as relevant interaction terms)? This approach would also fit with literature suggesting positive and negative affect do not fit a bipolar continuum (e.g. see Cacioppo for relevant summaries). If the authors stay with the difference score approach—which may be necessary given some limits in data acquired—it seems important to clearly justify (or add) interpretations. For example, it is stated that findings reflect that more positive events protect against depressive symptoms, but it seems findings could also reflect fewer negative events. That is, two people could have the same number of positive events, but the person having fewer negative events would have a higher score for valence,
and I’m not sure why this is interpreted as greater positive valence predicting outcomes.

2. The manuscript frames the research in terms of depression and mental health problems, but the mean and range of scores on the Affective Scale (as well as change from T2 to T3) appear relatively low and not necessarily reflective of mental health “problems”. It will be important to consider this in terms of framing of the manuscript, limitations and interpretation of findings (see Discretionary for other thoughts).

Minor:
1. If authors agree with above comments, it may be important to adjust title and abstract to reduce the emphasis on positive life events reducing depressive symptoms.
2. Were the symptom dimensions built on factor analytic work?
3. Additional notation on Figure 1 could help with interpretation (define what positive and negative scores reflect etc.)

Discretionary:
1. To address the issue noted above regarding mental health problems, I wonder if there are opportunities to conduct sensitivity analyses with a subset of youth with symptoms elevated above a certain threshold on the Affect Scale? This might get closer to clinically meaningful findings.
2. Are these findings specific to the Affect Scale specifically, or overall psychological distress (total YSR) more generally?

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interest