Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Thomas Olino

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The present study examines the influence of life events on depression. However, the authors go well beyond the basic question and propose a rather compelling model of optimal levels of positive events and distinctions between valences of life changes. Despite the clarity in the report, there are some concerns that are present for the manuscript as it is currently articulated. I hope that the comments are (presented and) taken as constructive feedback. I do like the manuscript as I think that it does move the field forward.

Major Compulsory Revisions

The primary concern I have for the manuscript is in the operationalization of the valence of life change. Upon first reading the manuscript, I was very happy to see that the authors commented on the complexity of life events as being composed of both positive and negative qualities and that for clarity of writing (and reading) that they would follow simple language. However, as I read through the description of the construction of the valence variable and related analyses, I became concerned that the analyses were missing a lot of the nuance in this variable. For example, two individuals may have a valence score of 3, however, one may have 6 positive changes and 3 negative changes whereas another individual may have 3 positive life changes and no negative life changes. Thus, these are highly different individuals. I am curious if the authors could comment on their choice of difference from positive life change minus negative life change versus a ratio of positive to negative life changes, which might provide a more nuanced lens on the balance of positive and negative life changes.

The discussion of valence of changes and the amount of change led me to expect an examination of the interaction between these characteristics for overall and domain levels of depressive symptoms. Did these factors significantly interact to predict depression?

Minor Essential Revisions

The authors should comment as to why they focused on the T2 and T3 data, as opposed to the full complement of T1-T3 data. Or, clarify if some measures were not available at T1.

The statement that pleasantness in peoples' lives is so strong as to create a ceiling effect makes it seem that the only important characteristic then would be
the number of negative life changes. This may need to be re-worded.

The authors’ discussion of cognitive vulnerability in the introduction was nice. However, as individual differences in cognitive vulnerability were not assessed in the present report, the authors should include this as a limitation (as opposed to a future direction) of their work. Surely, they would expect that individuals with greater cognitive vulnerability would exhibit stronger associations between life changes and depression, particularly cognitive-affective symptoms.

As the R-squared values for the quadratic effects were < .01, the authors should comment on this small effect in the discussion (as well as comment on the proportion of variance in T3 depression that is explained by factors other than T2 depression).

Discretionary Revisions

I would like the authors to investigate school transitions. There is a literature on school transitions being associated with increased depressive symptoms and reduced self-esteem that seems relevant to the current work. As only 3% of youth endorsed this at T2, it might just be a footnote about how the general pattern appeared.

It would be nice to present the full correlation matrix, with the point-biserial correlation coefficients for gender being presented in Table 2.

I think that tables 3-5 can be condensed into one larger table for ease of viewing.

Can any additional detail be provided about the types of life changes? For example, were any free responses provided by participants to describe what changes too place? In the context of counting changes in domains, a friend moving away is quite different from a parental divorce. However, they would be weighted equally.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests