



Adverse childhood experiences and fear of happiness: serial mediation by belongingness and dating anxiety

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Received: 30 October 2024 / Accepted: 9 October 2025 / Published online: 23 December 2025
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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) constitute the foundation of many problems in an individual's life. Among these are a diminished sense of belonging and heightened anxiety, particularly in the context of romantic relationships. Individuals who suffer from anxiety in romantic relationships frequently worry about being rejected or feeling inadequate. Under this emotional strain, people could doubt chances to capture happiness. In this study, the serial mediation effects of belongingness and dating anxiety were examined in the ACEs - fear of happiness link. The sample consists of 346 participants ($M=22.82$, $SD=3.37$). The mediating role was assessed using the bootstrap method through structural equation modeling (SEM) to verify the presence of mediation. SEM indicated that belongingness and dating anxiety were significant mediators in the association between ACEs and fear of happiness. According to the results, ACEs may increase fear of happiness, which may arise as a consequence of low belongingness and high dating anxiety. As a result, happiness may be hindered by ACEs as well as by poor connection with other people and the degree of anxiety they experience about establishing and maintaining romantic relationships. Based on these findings, it is recommended to develop early intervention programs and support services for individuals with ACEs. These programs can focus on enhancing feelings of belongingness and reducing dating anxiety, thereby mitigating fear of happiness.

Keywords Adverse childhood experiences · Belongingness · Dating anxiety · Fear of happiness · SEM

Introduction

Well-being has been studied for thousands of years, with historical figures such as Aristotle, Confucius, and Buddha defining the happy life (Diener et al., 2018). In psychology, this field focuses on people's values, emotions, and evaluations of their own lives (Diener et al., 1998; Lucas & Diener,

2008). This evaluation may cover cognitive states like contentment with one's spouse, career, and life, in addition to pleasant feelings and the lack of negative affect. Subjective well-being can be explained by an individual's ability to reach their goals, temperament, focus on engaging and pleasurable activities, and positive social connections (Diener et al., 1998). Individuals with high subjective well-being report being content with their living circumstances and feeling positive emotions most of the time and negative emotions less of the time (Akyıl et al., 2025). In the literature, "happiness" and "subjective well-being" are concepts that are interchangeably employed (Eddington & Shuman, 2005). Veenhoven (2010) described happiness as a positive evaluation of one's life in its entirety and regarded it as a subjective mental state. In certain cultural or individual belief systems, happiness may at times be perceived as a state that could lead to negative consequences. This perspective is conceptualized in the literature as the "fear of happiness" (Belen et al., 2020). Some individuals may believe that happiness is followed by misfortune or may feel discomfort toward certain experiences associated with happiness. From a cultural

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standpoint, social norms play a significant role in shaping how emotions are experienced and expressed. For instance, while American culture tends to celebrate personal achievement and high levels of happiness, such emotions may be viewed as disruptive and therefore suppressed in cultures that prioritize social harmony (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). In this context, Suh (2000) emphasizes that American social life encourages the frequent experience of emotions such as happiness and pride through practices that highlight individual worth and success. In contrast, East Asian societies place collective harmony at the core of their value systems, expecting individuals to subordinate their personal desires, goals, and aspirations for the benefit of the group. Accordingly, the quality of interpersonal relationships, rather than personal happiness, becomes the primary determinant of life direction in East Asian cultures. In such contexts, personal happiness is often seen as a potential threat to social cohesion (Uchida et al., 2004). Joshanloo and Weijers (2014) argue that in certain cultures, happiness is not regarded as a fundamental value and may even be avoided, as it is believed to lead to dissatisfaction. Furthermore, within the Taoist philosophical framework, which significantly influences East Asian cultures, contradictions are understood as comprising two opposing yet interdependent forces that balance and coexist in harmony (Peng et al., 2006). In line with this view, happiness is frequently conceptualized alongside sorrow or even seen as a precursor to misfortune. In addition to cultural factors, personal factors also play a significant role in the fear of happiness. Ahi et al. (2021) stated that traumatic life events can have detrimental and weakening effects on individuals, and that their responses to such events may shape their tendency to fear happiness. In this regard, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) may also trigger a fear of happiness in individuals. Although fear of happiness has been linked to various psychological variables such as hope, life satisfaction, and depression (Jordan et al., 2020; Tekke & Özer, 2019), ACEs should also be considered a significant contributing factor to this phenomenon.

ACEs are described as traumatic incidents that have a detrimental and long-term impact on well-being. These experiences include both abuse and children living in a developmentally detrimental setting (Boullier & Blair, 2018). When children are punished in any way when they are having fun or pleased, they may associate pleasant emotions with undesirable outcomes (Gilbert, 2007). Gilbert et al. (2012) give a memorable example in this regard. For example, a patient whose mother has agoraphobia may recall that when she was thrilled about going to the beach or the movie, her mother had a panic attack and collapsed, resulting in arguments with her father and a “scary atmosphere” at home. She may consequently believe it is best not to look forward to things. Given the principles of classical

conditioning, the individual in the example may fear happiness, believing that something horrible would happen to her if she feels pleasant feelings for the rest of her life. In the literature, it is seen that there are studies in which ACEs are positively related to fear of happiness (Ahi et al., 2021; Arslan, 2023; Satici et al., 2024). Satici et al. (2024) conducted a study with adults aged 19 to 73 and found that higher levels of childhood abuse were associated with increased external shame. This elevated sense of shame negatively impacted family communication, which in turn heightened the fear of happiness. In a different study, data collected from 387 university students showed that ACEs triggered fear of happiness through students’ use of more maladaptive and less adaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies (Ahi et al., 2021). Moreover, the negative impact of ACEs on romantic relationships may also contribute to an increased fear of happiness. Attachment theory explains how ACEs can undermine secure attachment and trust in others, leading to a weakened sense of belonging in later life (Bowlby, 1969). When this fundamental sense of belonging is low, individuals may feel more vulnerable to rejection and less confident in forming close romantic connections, which can increase anxiety in dating contexts. From the perspective of self-determination theory, the need for relatedness is a fundamental psychological requirement for healthy functioning and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2002), and the experience of dating anxiety can hinder the fulfillment of this need. In a cyclical way, when this need remains unmet, individuals may struggle to feel securely connected to others and may withdraw from close relationships. This disconnection can make them more vulnerable to negative thoughts and defensive attitudes toward positive emotions such as happiness, as feeling disconnected often brings uncertainty and insecurity in social situations. In this context, belongingness and dating anxiety can be considered as mediators.

Belongingness and dating anxiety as mediators

Belongingness refers to the feeling of being valued and respected as an individual. This sense develops through reciprocal relationships with others, based on shared experiences, beliefs, or personal characteristics (Mahar et al., 2013). According to self-determination theory, relatedness—one of the basic psychological needs—reflects the sense of forming secure and integrated bonds with others (Ryan & Deci, 2002), and this need encompasses the feeling of belongingness. When belongingness is examined within the frameworks of self-determination theory and attachment theory, it becomes evident that adverse experiences in childhood are a crucial factor influencing the development of belongingness. In particular, abuse experienced during early developmental stages may intensify the need for

relatedness and supports attachment theory by illustrating how such experiences contribute to the formation of insecure attachment (Corrales et al., 2016). In this context, children who receive insensitive and unhealthy care from their parents may develop negative expectations regarding the availability and trustworthiness of others (Cicchetti & Toth, 2015). This supports findings linking negative expectations to loneliness (de Heer et al., 2024) and, in turn, a diminished sense of belonging. However, loneliness is known to feed hopeless thoughts (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Considering that negative beliefs are the most critical factor that feeds fear of happiness (Joshanloo et al., 2013), it can be said that an individual with a low sense of belonging may increase fear of happiness through loneliness and negative beliefs.

Consistent with attachment theory, adverse caregiving in childhood can lead to insecure bonding and negative expectations about relationships (Cyr et al., 2010; Cicchetti & Toth, 2015; de Heer et al., 2024). When individuals struggle to trust others and establish emotional connections, their sense of belonging weakens, which may increase concerns about being judged or rejected in romantic contexts. This fragile sense of belonging may therefore fuel dating anxiety, as those who doubt their worth and acceptance may feel more anxious about forming and maintaining close relationships. Based on this connection, dating anxiety is proposed as another mediator between ACEs and fear of happiness. Dating anxiety is a type of social anxiety characterized by feelings of worry, discomfort, and dissatisfaction that arise during interactions with dating partners or individuals of the opposite sex (Glickman & La Greca, 2004). Adverse experiences in childhood are known to be closely associated with social anxiety (Meng et al., 2021). The schema therapy model (Young et al., 2003) also supports the link between ACEs and social anxiety. According to this model, early maladaptive schemas originate in childhood and are shaped by lifelong experiences and temperament. The disconnection/rejection domain includes schemas such as abuse and defectiveness, which reflect the belief that one's needs for acceptance and respect will not be met (Calvete, 2014). Calvete et al. (2013) demonstrated that this schema domain is strongly related to social anxiety. For instance, fears of rejection triggered by ACEs may carry over into dating relationships, contributing to increased anxiety in romantic contexts. Fear and avoidance are core components of social anxiety and, by extension, dating anxiety (Heeren & McNally, 2018). Individuals experiencing dating anxiety often face an approach-avoidance conflict between the desire for social connection and the fear of being rejected or experiencing distress in social interactions (Kashdan, 2007). From this perspective, individuals with dating anxiety may avoid positive experiences due to the anticipation of anxiety; in other words, they may develop a fear of happiness.

The present study

This research investigates the pathway between ACEs and the fear of happiness, focusing on the mediating roles of belongingness and dating anxiety. The study offers significant insights into the complex effects of ACEs on the psychosocial development of young adults. By employing a serial mediation model, it provides a unique framework to understand the indirect influences of ACEs on belongingness, dating anxiety, and fear of happiness, shedding light on how these processes interact. The findings may be instrumental in developing interventions to support the formation of healthy romantic relationships and enhance the psychological well-being of young adults. The connections between these variables underscore the importance of research aimed at helping young adults build fulfilling relationships and lead happier lives. Drawing on the findings and literature, the authors put forward the following hypotheses:

- H1. Belongingness mediates the link between ACEs and fear of happiness.
- H2. Dating anxiety mediates the link between ACEs and fear of happiness.
- H3. The link between ACEs and fear of happiness is serially mediated by belongingness and dating anxiety.

Methods

Participants and procedure

The study included 346 volunteers from Türkiye. Of the 346 participants, 291 were female (84.1%) and 55 were male (15.9%). The mean age of the participants was 22.82 years ($SD=3.37$). Of the participants, 39 (11.3%) were primary school, 20 (5.8%) were middle school, 225 (65.0%) were high school, 38 (11.0%) were associate's degree while 24 (6.9%) were bachelor's degree graduates. In addition, 53 (15.3%) of the participants indicated their socioeconomic status as low, 211 (61.0%) as average, and 82 (23.7%) as high. Among the participants, 239 (69.1%) were not working, 80 (23.1%) were working in the private sector and 27 (7.8%) were working in a government agency. Table 1 presents specific demographic data in detail.

Convenience sampling was used as the data collection method for this research. The data were collected online via Google Forms. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The survey was designed to be completely voluntary, with clear instructions on how to exit at any time without any penalties. On average, it took participants twenty to twenty-five minutes to complete the measures.

Table 1 Participants' information

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	291	84.1
Male	55	15.9
<i>Educational level</i>		
Primary school	39	11.3
Middle school	20	5.8
High school	225	65
Associate's degree	38	11
Bachelor's degree	24	6.9
<i>Perceived economic level</i>		
Low	53	15.3
Average	211	61
High	82	23.7
<i>Working status</i>		
Not working	239	69.1
Working in the private sector	80	23.1
Working in a government agency	27	7.8

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the researchers' affiliated institution.

Measures

Adverse childhood experiences questionnaire Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE), originally developed by Felitti et al. (1998) and subsequently translated and validated in Turkish by Gündüz et al. (2018). The ACE is a self-report scale consisting of 10 items (e.g., "During the first 18 years of your life, did a parent or other adult in the household, often or very often swear at, insult, or put you down? Often or very often act in a way that made you afraid that you would be physically hurt?"). Respondents mark "yes" for applicable items, leaving others blank. Scores on the ACE-TR range from 0 to 10, with higher scores reflecting a greater frequency of ACEs. There is no established cut-off value for this scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Turkish version of the scale was reported as 0.74 by Gündüz et al. (2018), and the same value was obtained in the current study.

General belongingness scale The 12-item self-report scale created by Malone et al. (2012) comprises two dimensions: acceptance/inclusion (e.g., "I feel accepted by others.") and rejection/exclusion (e.g., "I feel like an outsider."). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 7 represented "strongly agree". Higher scores indicated a stronger predisposition toward belongingness, resulting in total scores that range from 12 to 84. The original version had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.94. The Turkish translation was conducted by Satici and Gocet-Tekin (2016), yielding a Cronbach's alpha

coefficient of 0.86. In this research, the reliability coefficients were found to be 0.89.

The dating anxiety scale The 21-item Likert scale, rated on a 5-point scale, was created by Glickman and La Greca (2004). It encompasses three dimensions: social stress-flirting (e.g., "I often feel tense when talking to someone of the opposite sex whom I find attractive."), fear of negative evaluation (e.g., "I usually worry about the impression I make while on a date."), and social stress-group (e.g., "I usually feel nervous or tense in ordinary gatherings where both boys and girls are present."). Responses are scored from 1, indicating "strongly disagree", to 5, indicating "strongly agree." Total scores on the scale range from a minimum of 21 to a maximum of 105. The Turkish adaptation was conducted by Öz Soysal et al. (2023), with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82. In this research, the reliability coefficient was found to be 0.95.

Fear of happiness scale The scale developed by Joshanloo (2013) is based on the belief that luck or happiness may lead to sadness or serve as a precursor to unfortunate events. It consists of five items (e.g., "Joy and fun causes bad things.") and is unidimensional, employing a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Turkish adaptation, conducted by Türk et al. (2017), demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89. In the present study, the reliability coefficient was found to be 0.93.

Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23 and AMOS version 22. Skewness and kurtosis values were examined to assess the normality assumption. Pearson's correlation coefficients were utilized to identify relationships between the variables. A correlational analysis was carried out to explore the associations among measurements of ACEs, belongingness, dating anxiety, and fear of happiness.

Initially, the mediating roles of belongingness and dating anxiety were examined following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) approach, which involves both the measurement model and the structural model. We began by assessing the measurement model to confirm that each latent variable was accurately represented by its indicators. Once the measurement model demonstrated acceptable fit, the structural model was analyzed in AMOS Graphics using maximum likelihood estimation, controlling for gender and age. To assess the model's fit to the data, we utilized the indices suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999), including the χ^2/df ratio, SRMR, CFI, NFI, IFI, GFI, and TLI.

To assess the statistical significance of the mediating variable, we employed 5000 bootstrap samples, generating 95% confidence intervals (CI) for indirect effects. In the bootstrapping process, confidence intervals that excluded zero were deemed statistically significant at the 95% confidence level (Hayes, 2022).

Results

Preliminary analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability, and Pearson’s correlation coefficients for the variables in the study. The correlation analysis revealed that fear of happiness was positively correlated with ACE and dating anxiety, negatively correlated with belongingness. It was discovered that ACE had a negative correlation with belongingness and a positive correlation with dating anxiety. Skewness and kurtosis values were examined to assess the normality assumption, and acceptable thresholds were determined based on the guidelines of George and Mallery (2016).

Measurement model

The measurement model was evaluated during the initial phase. The measurement model included four latent variables (fear of happiness, ACE, belongingness, and dating anxiety) and twelve observable variables. The fit indices for the measurement model were assessed according to the standards outlined by Hu and Bentler (1999). After comparing the model’s goodness of fit indices to the criteria, the p -value of the χ^2 was significant ($p < .01$). Acceptable fit ranges were established for $\chi^2/df = 3.382$, and $SRMR = 0.0445$, as well as $CFI = 0.957$, $NFI = 0.941$, $TLI = 0.941$, $GFI = 0.931$, and $IFI = 0.958$. Factor loadings for the measurement model ranged from 0.69 to 0.96, all of which were significant ($p < .01$). In order to test the structural model, the measurement model was verified.

Structural model

This study examined a variety of structural models. The partial serial mediation model fit well ($\chi^2 = 162.32$, $df = 48$, $\chi^2/$

$df = 3.38$, $CFI = 0.957$, $NFI = 0.941$, $IFI = 0.958$, $GFI = 0.931$, $SRMR = 0.0445$). However, as the model included nonsignificant paths, these paths were removed, and the model was re-tested with gender and age added as control variables. Figure 1 displays the standardized path coefficients for the full serial mediation model. As illustrated in Fig. 1, ACE was negatively associated with belongingness ($\beta = -0.43$, $p < .01$); belongingness was negatively associated with dating anxiety ($\beta = -0.57$, $p < .01$), and fear of happiness ($\beta = -0.18$, $p < .05$) while dating anxiety was positively associated with fear of happiness ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < .01$). The p -value of χ^2 was within the good fit range, and the results show that $\chi^2/sd = 2.892$, $SRMR = 0.050$, $CFI = 0.953$, $NFI = 0.930$, $TLI = 0.937$, $IFI = 0.953$ ve $GFI = 0.927$ met the requirement of acceptable fit.

In the final stage of the serial multiple mediation analyses, a bootstrap analysis with 5000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval (CI) was performed to examine the serial mediation effect of belongingness and dating anxiety in the relationship between ACEs and fear of happiness. The study revealed that ACE was associated with fear of happiness through the serial mediation of belongingness and dating anxiety, with a standardized indirect effect coefficient of 0.116. Bootstrapping indicated that the confidence intervals ranged from a lower limit of 0.053 to an upper limit of 0.228. Hayes (2022) states that an indirect effect is deemed significant when both the lower and upper limits of the confidence interval exclude zero. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that belongingness and dating anxiety serve as serial mediators in the association between ACEs and fear of happiness. Table 3 presents the standardized coefficients from the bootstrapping analysis for the model.

Discussion

Individuals’ experiences during childhood, especially those related to feelings of threat and trust, play an important role in their physiological, psychological and social development and functioning (Gerhardt, 2014). Given the significant influence of negative childhood experiences on individuals’ romantic relationships, understanding the connection between ACEs and fear of happiness is highly important. In this context, it is crucial to determine the mediating roles

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variables	Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities				Correlations		
	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1. Fear of Happiness	13.92	7.76	0.726	-0.306	-		
2. ACE	1.68	1.96	1.24	0.963	0.11*	-	
3. Belongingness	64.40	12.33	-0.619	0.132	-0.34**	-0.35**	-
4. Dating Anxiety	57.08	20.56	0.220	-0.729	0.42**	0.27**	-0.49**

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

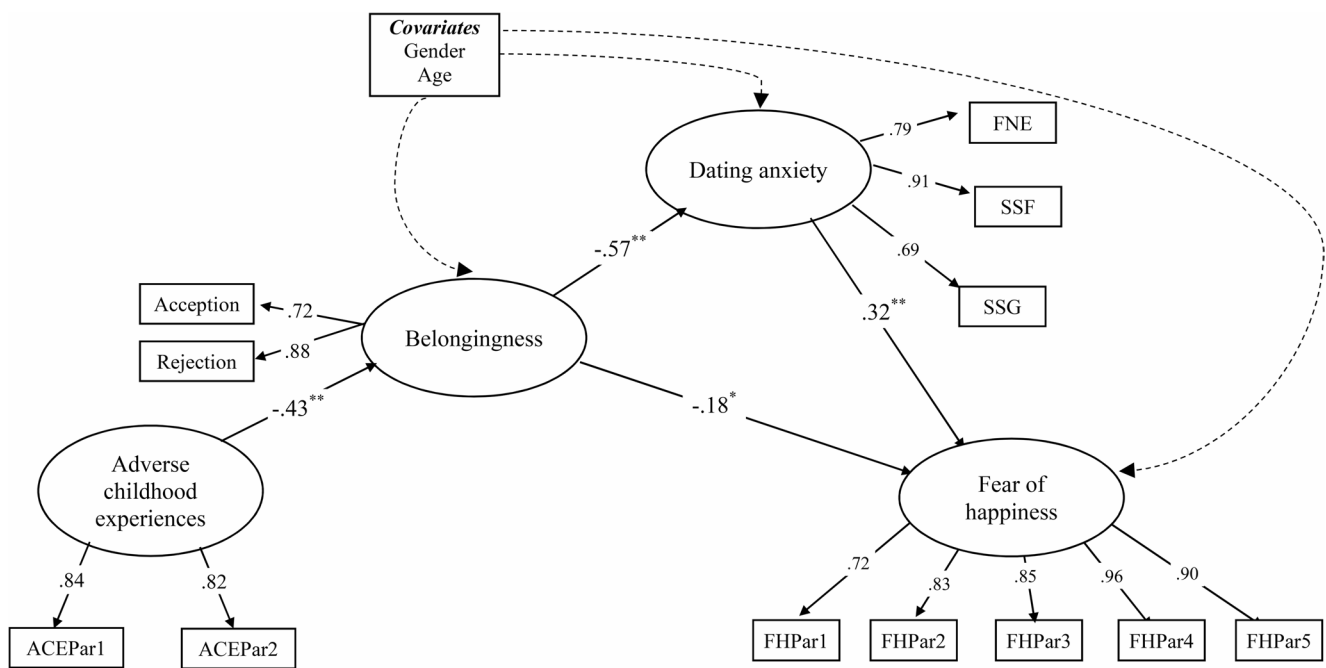


Fig. 1 Full serial mediation model. Note. N=346; ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, AcePar: parcel of adverse childhood experiences, FNE: fear of negative evaluation, SSF: social stress-flirting, SSG: social stress-group, FHPar: item of fear of happiness

Table 3 Standardized bootstrapping coefficients for the model

Model pathways	Coefficient*	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper
Indirect effect			
Belongingness → Dating anxiety → Fear of happiness	-0.051	-0.087	-0.025
ACE → Belongingness → Fear of happiness	0.117	0.019	0.256
ACE → Belongingness → Dating anxiety → Fear of happiness	0.116	0.053	0.228

*Because the CIs do not cover zero, all the coefficients are significant; CI: confidence interval

of dating anxiety and feelings of belongingness in romantic relationships. This study hypothesized that dating anxiety and a sense of belonging mediate the relationship between ACEs and fear of happiness. The findings are examined in detail in the following section.

A primary finding of the study is that belongingness serves as a mediator in the link between ACEs and fear of happiness. In other words, the analyses indicated an indirect association between ACEs and fear of happiness through a diminished sense of belonging. Thus, people have negative childhood experiences may have a higher fear of happiness because they lack a sense of belonging. This finding supports H1 and is consistent with previous research suggesting that early adverse experiences negatively influence the development of belongingness, which in turn partially explains the link between childhood adversity and psychological distress

(Corrales et al., 2016). For example, Arslan (2022) found that psychological maltreatment in childhood significantly weakens individuals' overall sense of belonging. Also it was found that family belongingness, family cohesion, and loneliness mediate the link between childhood psychological maltreatment and adult mental health (Karaagac et al., 2024). While there isn't any concrete evidence linking belongingness and fear of happiness, people who had a difficult upbringing may grow to have unfavourable expectations about the reliability and availability of other people (Cicchetti & Toth, 2015), which can result in loneliness (de Heer et al., 2024) and prevent belongingness. Considering that loneliness is associated with negative perceptions and is a critical factor feeding fear of happiness (Joshani et al., 2013), it can be said that low sense of belonging may increase fear of happiness through loneliness and negative

beliefs. To put it another way, people who don't feel like they belong usually don't feel happy. Our findings suggest that ACEs are associated with lower levels of belongingness, which is in turn related to higher fear of happiness. Although parents may not be able to fully protect their children from painful life events, it may be possible to strengthen an individual's sense of belonging. Consequently, instead of fearing happiness, these individuals may begin to experience it more frequently.

According to the second finding of the study, dating anxiety does not directly mediate the association between ACEs and fear of happiness. While H2 was not supported by the findings, this result should be interpreted with caution. Therefore, it can be interpreted that ACEs show an indirect association with dating anxiety through their relationship with belongingness. Even though a simple mediation pathway from ACEs to fear of happiness through dating anxiety may not be significant, dating anxiety plays a critical role as the second mediator in the serial chain. The key finding is that the effect of ACEs on dating anxiety is actually mediated by belongingness. Dating anxiety is an important component of the overall mechanism, but its influence occurs downstream from the more fundamental effect of ACEs on the sense of belonging. Research shows that people who grow up with ACEs such as domestic abuse are more likely to have an avoidant attachment style, avoid close relationships, and lack trust (Holt et al., 2008). People who have an avoidant attachment style typically shy away from intimate relationships and place a strong emphasis on their independence. Their chances of developing strong and lasting social ties decrease as a result (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Consequently, given that emotional ties and intimate relationships frequently reinforce a person's sense of belonging, their belongingness may be lacking. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style have negative expectations and thoughts about marriage, romance and love. Since they are extremely uncomfortable opening up to their partners in romantic relationships, their attitudes and behaviors towards romantic relationships are quite cold. For this reason, they exhibit avoidance behaviors by choosing not to enter into romantic relationships or marriages (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). In a longitudinal study conducted by Simpson (1990) with 144 lovers, the effects of secure, anxious and avoidant attachment styles on romantic relationships were examined. The study concluded that securely attached men and women reported higher levels of commitment, belonging, trust, and satisfaction in their romantic relationships compared to those with anxious or avoidant attachment styles. Based on this, if individuals with negative childhood experiences have an unhealthy attachment with their caregiver, they may continue to have an unhealthy attachment in their romantic relationships in adulthood, and this may cause the

individual to not feel a sense of belonging, to show commitment, and to be unable to trust in their romantic relationship. Therefore, it can be said that adults' inability to experience a sense of commitment, trust and belonging causes them to avoid romantic relationships. This supports attachment theory predictions about how early caregiving affects later relationship anxiety. Negative expectations can make it difficult for individuals to meet their social relationship needs and push them into loneliness (de Heer et al., 2024). Considering that loneliness is associated with negative perceptions and is a critical factor that feeds the fear of happiness (Joshani et al., 2014), it can be said that a low sense of belonging can increase the fear of happiness through loneliness and negative beliefs. These individuals generally desire to establish close and warm relationships with others; however, due to their intense fear of abandonment and rejection, they tend to display suspicious, obsessive, angry, and overly jealous behaviors toward their partners, which in turn hinders their ability to experience happiness and other positive emotions (Cooper et al., 1998; Demir, 2023; Morsünbül & Çök, 2011).

The main finding of this study is that belongingness and dating anxiety fully mediate the association between ACEs and fear of happiness. Put differently, adverse experiences during childhood are associated with fear of happiness through low belongingness and anxiety in dating relationships. This finding addresses H3 of the study. The obtained result from the analyses indicates that individuals who experienced ACEs tend to develop lower feelings of belongingness compared to others, leading to anxiety in dating relationships and consequently triggering fear of happiness. This result is further supported by the study conducted by Kong and Martire (2019), which demonstrated that individuals with ACEs tend to experience more negative emotions such as loneliness and anxiety, and are more likely to avoid positive emotions like happiness. Children who have positive relationships with family members are more likely to develop positive feelings about life, whereas those raised under strict control or in environments characterized by negative and problematic family dynamics tend to exhibit more negative emotions and behaviors (Veenhoven, 2015). Similarly, Joshani (2018) found that individuals with insecure attachment to their parents report greater fear of happiness compared to others. Considering that individuals' perspectives, thoughts, and beliefs about life are largely shaped during childhood, exposure to adverse experiences in this formative period may significantly impact their capacity to experience positive emotions.

Beyond the individual-level mechanisms, it is also important to interpret our findings within a broader cultural framework. Previous scholarship has shown that cultural norms shape how emotions such as happiness are experienced,

valued, or even avoided. For instance, Western individualistic cultures often emphasize the pursuit and expression of personal happiness as a marker of success, whereas many collectivistic cultures, particularly in East Asia, prioritize social harmony and interdependence, sometimes regarding overt displays of happiness as disruptive to group cohesion (Mesquita & Albert, 2007; Uchida et al., 2004). From this perspective, the association we observed between ACEs, belongingness, and fear of happiness may be more pronounced in contexts where interpersonal bonds and group belonging are considered central to well-being. In such cultures, disruptions in belongingness due to early adversity could be especially detrimental, not only undermining close relationships but also reinforcing the belief that happiness is fragile or potentially threatening. Conversely, in more individualistic contexts, where happiness is tied to personal agency and achievement, the same mechanisms may operate differently, suggesting that cultural values may moderate the pathways linking ACEs to fear of happiness. Thus, our findings highlight the need for future research to examine these processes cross-culturally and to consider how cultural belief systems interact with developmental experiences in shaping individuals' emotional lives (Joshani & Weijers, 2014; Peng et al., 2006).

In conclusion, while the present study provides evidence for a serial mediation mechanism whereby ACEs are associated with lower belongingness, which is in turn related to higher dating anxiety and, subsequently, greater fear of happiness, it should be noted that alternative pathways may also exist. For example, a parallel mediation model could be plausible, in which ACEs are simultaneously associated with reduced belongingness and increased dating anxiety, with both factors independently related to fear of happiness. Although the current findings lend stronger support to the proposed serial chain, acknowledging these alternative explanations highlights the complexity of the psychological processes involved. Therefore, future research would benefit from testing and comparing different models to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how ACEs, belongingness, dating anxiety, and fear of happiness interact. Such efforts can guide more nuanced intervention strategies aimed at improving well-being among individuals with ACEs.

Limitations and recommendations

Even if the study's conclusions have significant ramifications, there are some restrictions to be aware of. The cross-sectional methodology used in the study makes it more difficult to determine the causal links between ACEs, a sense of belonging, anxiety when dating, and a fear of happiness, and it does not allow for the examination of potential

bidirectional relationships or feedback loops. For instance, high dating anxiety could lead to social withdrawal, which in turn may erode an individual's sense of belonging. Consequently, to more thoroughly establish both the directionality and the cause-and-effect correlations between these variables, future research should make use of experimental and longitudinal approaches. Convenience sampling was used to gather the data from a Turkish sample, which is another limitation. The use of convenience sampling further limits the extent to which these results can be generalized to the wider population of young adults in Türkiye or other contexts. Moreover, the sample was predominantly female (84.1%), which may limit the generalizability of the findings, as social norms, emotional expression, and experiences related to dating anxiety can differ between genders. Future research should aim to include more balanced and diverse samples to enhance external validity. Another weakness of the study is the use of self-report measures collected from a single source at a single point in time, which raises the possibility of social desirability bias and Common Method Bias (CMB). CMB refers to a situation where the variance in measurement arises from the method used rather than from the constructs being measured (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Although procedural remedies such as ensuring anonymity may have been employed, CMB cannot be entirely ruled out. Future studies should therefore consider combining self-report data with objective measures, informant reports, or observational methods to minimize potential bias and strengthen the validity of findings. Additionally, the use of a dichotomous 'yes/no' ACE Questionnaire limits the granularity of the measurement of ACEs, as it does not capture the severity, frequency, duration, or developmental timing of each experience. Future research could benefit from using more nuanced instruments, such as the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein et al., 1994), to allow for a more precise examination of potential dose-response effects. To address this issue, future studies could employ multiple data sources (e.g., peer reports for dating anxiety) and use a variety of data collection techniques, including longitudinal designs, to provide more robust evidence for the proposed causal pathways.

This study demonstrates how dating anxiety and belongingness fully mediate the link between ACEs and fear of happiness, providing valuable insights in a research area where comprehensive studies are limited. The findings reveal that individuals with ACEs tend to have lower feelings of belongingness, increased dating anxiety, and consequently, a heightened fear of happiness. While adverse experiences during childhood can not be prevented, fostering a greater sense of belonging may help reduce dating anxiety and enable individuals to embrace positive emotions such as happiness more fully. These results should

guide researchers and practitioners in the mental health field to develop psycho-education programs and intervention strategies that strengthen belongingness and alleviate dating anxiety among individuals who have experienced childhood trauma. By doing so, mental health providers can help these individuals shift their negative attitudes toward happiness and support their overall psychological well-being, ultimately leading to more positive outcomes.

Conclusion

This study highlights the mediating effects of belongingness and dating anxiety on the relationship between ACEs and the fear of happiness. The findings suggest that individuals with ACEs may experience lower levels of belongingness and higher levels of dating anxiety. An individual's inability to develop a sense of belonging to a group, place, or person may contribute to anxiety when initiating and maintaining romantic relationships, which in turn may lead them to avoid positive emotions such as happiness. Therefore, based on our findings, enhancing the sense of belonging among individuals with ACEs could help reduce dating anxiety and, consequently, alleviate their fear of happiness.

Funding The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability Data will be available on request.

Declarations

Ethical approval The study protocol has been approved by Yildiz Technical University Scientific Research and Ethical Review Board (Issue No: 20240402806). The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its following updates.

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all the individual participants that were included in the study.

Conflict of interest No conflict of interest exists for this manuscript for any of the authors.

Pre-registration This study was not pre-registered.

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