Two pathways to academic achievement: along with well-being and away from it.

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The background. In PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) achievement is conceptualized as one of five main constituents of integral well-being. It is not rare, however, that in our race for success we sacrifice other aspects and domains of our well-being and the success is reached at the expense of well-being, even if we consider only true tangible success rather than illusory symbolic one. The results of numerous studies show that success (achievement) in life and psychological well-being are generally not related. In particular, there are contradictory evidence regarding association of achievement at school and at the university with well-being. The aim of this study is to check whether it is possible to be both successful (in academic domain) and happy.

The study. The sample consisted of 166 students from prestigious chemistry department of Lomonosov Moscow State University. We investigated them twice in the middle of the second semester and then followed for two years for their academic achievement. Academic achievement was operationalized as Grade Point Average across four examination sessions spanning first 2 years. To measure personality variables, a battery of tests was used including Russian versions of Hardiness survey (Maddi, Khoshaba, 2001), Noetic Orientations Test (Leontiev, 1992), modified version of ASQ (Peterson et al., 1982, Gordeeva et al., 2009), LOT (Scheier & Carver, 1985), Grit scale (Duckworth et al., 2007), Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientation scale (Amabile et al., 1994), Flow in professional activity (FPA) scale (Leontiev, 2011), academic motivation scale (AMS-C, Vallerand et al., 1992), academic self-control scale (Perry et al., 2001), and social desirability scale (BIDR, Paulhus, 1998). Well-being was assessed using Satisfaction with life scale (Diener et al., 1985) and Subjective happiness scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Summary of the results. As expected, well-being was unrelated to academic success. The successful part of the sample was split (by median) into two parts on their well-being scores. Successful and happy students (N=54) scored significantly higher than successful and unhappy ones (N=37), as well as their less successful classmates, on three types of measures: 1) measures of personal potential (hardiness, optimistic attributional style, and self-control, 2) measures of intrinsic motivation, meaningfulness of life, curiosity, flow and motivational beliefs, and 3) measures of grit, perseverance, and purposefulness. The path model shows that grit mediates the relationship between intrinsic motivation and academic achievement. Besides, students with ascending dynamics of academic achievement compared to students with descending dynamics revealed more optimistic attributional style explaining success, and lower dispositional optimism. This confirms our previous findings (Gordeeva, Osin, 2009, 2011) regarding controversial nature of dispositional and attributional optimism.

Conclusions. The findings suggest that there are two different pathways to academic success. The first path is through the use of personal potential (and certain character strengths), implementation of intrinsic motivation and perseverance, based on curiosity and sense of meaning. The results of this process are accompanied by well-being and flourishing. The second path to success is through introjected extrinsic motivation, careful planning of learning activity and use of negative emotions as incentives to this activity.