

Article

Well-Being After Graduation from At-Risk Educational Frameworks: The Mediating Role of Basic Psychological Needs in Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

Emerging adulthood may be particularly challenging for young people who have graduated from educational frameworks for adolescents at risk, many of whom have faced complex social, emotional, or familial hardships, alongside academic challenges such as school dropout, yet the mechanisms linking such adversity to well-being remain insufficiently understood. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, this study examined whether satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) mediates the association between negative life events and mental well-being among emerging adults from at-risk educational backgrounds. Participants were 256 Israeli emerging adults (aged 18–25; 48.8% female) who had completed their secondary education in frameworks for youth at risk. Mental well-being was assessed across emotional, social, and psychological dimensions, alongside measures of negative life events and need satisfaction. Parallel mediation analyses indicated that exposure to a greater number of negative life events was associated with lower psychological need satisfaction. Direct effects of negative life events on well-being became nonsignificant once need satisfaction was included, whereas total indirect effects remained significant across outcomes. Competence emerged as the most consistent mediator, while autonomy was specific to emotional well-being and relatedness to social and psychological well-being. These findings identify need satisfaction as a key mechanism linking adversity to well-being and highlight the importance of maintaining supportive relational and developmental structures for young adults transitioning out of at-risk educational frameworks.

Keywords: emerging adulthood; early-life adversity; self-determination theory; psychological need satisfaction; multidimensional well-being; educational transition



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1. Introduction

1.1. Emerging Adulthood Among Young Adults at Risk

Emerging adulthood ([Arnett, 2000](#)) refers to the developmental period between the end of adolescence and the late twenties. During this period, individuals are no longer minors and are typically less dependent on their parents, yet they have not necessarily established the stable life structures more characteristic of adulthood ([Arnett, 2014](#)). It is considered a critical developmental phase, characterized by exploration and instability in education, employment, relationships, and personal identity, as well as by the gradual transition into adult roles. While this stage may offer opportunities for personal growth, it can be particularly challenging for young people who have experienced social or environmental adversity

earlier in life. For such young people, the normative developmental tasks of emerging adulthood may be complicated by prior experiences of instability, marginalization, and reduced access to supportive resources.

The term “youth at risk” refers to adolescents who experience multiple and overlapping social, emotional, familial, educational, and economic challenges that may compromise their development and future opportunities. Specialized educational frameworks have been established to support adolescents facing such difficulties and who struggle to succeed within mainstream educational settings. These frameworks are intended not only to promote academic achievement but also to provide emotional, social, and developmental support for vulnerable youth. These frameworks typically include second-chance schools that integrate formal secondary education with intensive psychosocial support. Students in these frameworks generally complete 12 years of secondary education, with some earning a full matriculation diploma and others receiving a vocational or general school-leaving certificate.

Considerable attention has been given to adolescents at risk while they are still embedded in educational, welfare, or therapeutic frameworks within the Israeli welfare and education systems. For example, previous research has examined future orientation, mentoring, life skills, and resilience among adolescents in educational frameworks for youth at risk (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2022). However, less is known about their mental well-being after they complete their secondary education and must increasingly negotiate educational, occupational, relational, and identity-related tasks outside the structured school environment.

Educational frameworks for youth at risk often provide more than academic instruction. Through close relationships with educators, structured routines, and opportunities for achievement, such settings may support young people’s sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy during adolescence. After graduation, however, many emerging adults transition into adulthood without comparable sources of support, while facing increasing expectations for multifaceted independence, including financial self-sufficiency, residential autonomy, and occupational integration (Greeson, 2013; Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2022; Wood et al., 2018).

The present study specifically examined young people from at-risk educational backgrounds during the first years after the completion of their secondary education within vocational and technological frameworks, a period corresponding to emerging adulthood. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the study examined the relationship between negative life events across the lifespan and different dimensions of mental well-being, as well as the role of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) in explaining these associations.

1.2. Negative Life Events and Mental Well-Being Among At-Risk Young People

Negative life events refer to stressful or adverse experiences, such as family conflict, loss of significant others, economic hardship, or major life transitions, that may disrupt psychological adjustment and well-being during development (Compas, 1987; Grant et al., 2003). A large body of research indicates that cumulative exposure to negative life events is associated with poorer psychological outcomes, including increased psychological distress and depressive symptoms (Felitti et al., 1998; Hammen, 2005). The impact of such experiences may be particularly pronounced when they occur during childhood or adolescence, as early life stress may influence long-term psychological development and mental health (Anda et al., 2006; Mersky et al., 2013). Recent empirical work has similarly found that exposure to negative life events is significantly associated with lower psycho-

logical well-being and life satisfaction among emerging adults, highlighting the challenges associated with this developmental period (Copeland et al., 2024; Matud et al., 2023).

Young people at risk often face multiple difficulties that may affect their psychological development and well-being. Research suggests that individuals who experienced social or familial difficulties early in life may continue to encounter challenges in areas such as employment, education, and social integration during emerging adulthood (Stone et al., 2012). These challenges are often accompanied by lower levels of psychological well-being and greater emotional distress compared to their peers (Greeson, 2013). More broadly, vulnerable young people may enter the transition to adulthood with fewer social, familial, and economic resources, making this developmental period especially challenging (Wood et al., 2018). This issue is especially important in emerging adulthood, when young people are expected to develop autonomy, establish meaningful relationships, and consolidate a sense of competence in educational, occupational, and social contexts (Jankowiak et al., 2025).

The impact of negative life events on the mental well-being of at-risk emerging adults may extend beyond a direct response to stress. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, persistent exposure to adversities such as family instability, social difficulties, or school dropout (Nicita et al., 2025; Martinez-Maireles, 2025) may undermine the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Previous research has suggested that satisfaction of these needs is closely associated with resilience, adaptive functioning, and well-being among young people facing stress or adversity (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Therefore, examining basic psychological need satisfaction may provide a useful framework for understanding how negative life experiences are linked to different dimensions of mental well-being.

1.3. Self-Determination Theory and Basic Psychological Needs

Although the association between adverse or negative life events and poorer mental health has been widely documented, less is known about the psychological mechanisms that may account for this association among young people at risk.

A useful theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms underlying these associations is Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to SDT, human well-being depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the need to experience volition and a sense of choice over one's behavior; competence reflects the need to feel effective in interacting with the environment; and relatedness represents the need to feel connected to others and to experience meaningful relationships. According to this theoretical model, when these needs are satisfied, individuals tend to experience greater psychological growth, motivation, and well-being (Howard et al., 2021; Guay, 2022). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis based on 881 independent samples found that interpersonal support for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is strongly associated with need satisfaction, which is in turn linked to subjective well-being (Slemp et al., 2024). Conversely, when these needs are frustrated or thwarted, individuals are more likely to experience impaired psychological functioning and lower well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although these needs are closely related and often reinforce one another, they represent distinct psychological functions. Autonomy reflects self-direction and volition, competence reflects effectiveness and mastery, and relatedness reflects social connection and belonging. Consequently, each need may contribute differently to developmental outcomes and mental well-being, particularly during transitional periods such as emerging adulthood.

From a SDT perspective, negative life events may be associated with poorer well-being because such experiences can interfere with the satisfaction of these basic psychological needs. Stressful or adverse experiences may reduce individuals' sense of agency and choice, weaken their sense of efficacy, and disrupt meaningful social relationships, thereby compromising autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Consistent with this theoretical account, research suggests that stressful or adverse circumstances may undermine basic psychological need satisfaction and increase need frustration, thereby heightening vulnerability to poorer psychological functioning (Weinstein & Ryan, 2011; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Consequently, basic psychological need satisfaction may serve as a central mechanism linking exposure to negative life events with mental well-being.

1.4. Multidimensional Mental Well-Being

In this study, well-being is examined through three distinct dimensions (Keyes, 2002): emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Emotional well-being refers to positive affect and life satisfaction; social well-being reflects perceived social integration, contribution, and functioning within society; and psychological well-being refers to aspects such as personal growth and self-acceptance. This multidimensional approach is essential for understanding how specific challenges may differentially affect different areas of a young person's life. Although these dimensions are positively associated, they capture different facets of optimal functioning and may therefore be influenced by different psychological processes. Examining emotional, social, and psychological well-being separately allows for a more nuanced understanding of how negative life events and personal resources contribute to mental well-being.

Negative life events and basic psychological need satisfaction may not be associated with all domains of well-being in the same way. For example, relatedness may be especially relevant to social well-being, whereas competence and autonomy may be particularly relevant to psychological well-being. Examining emotional, social, and psychological well-being separately therefore allows for a more nuanced understanding of the pathways through which negative life events are associated with different aspects of mental well-being.

1.5. The Present Study

The present study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) to examine whether the satisfaction of basic psychological needs mediates the association between exposure to negative life events and mental well-being among Israeli young adults who completed their secondary education in educational frameworks for youth at risk. Specifically, the study focuses on autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as potential mechanisms linking negative life events with emotional, social, and psychological well-being.

The study addresses three gaps in the literature. First, it focuses on a relatively underexamined developmental group: young adults from at-risk educational backgrounds after secondary education completion. Second, it examines basic psychological needs as potential mediating mechanisms, clarifying whether negative life events are associated with well-being indirectly through lower satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Third, it examines well-being as a multidimensional construct enabling separate analyses of emotional, social, and psychological well-being rather than reliance on a global index of mental health alone.

Although prior SDT research provides substantial theoretical and empirical support for the central role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in promoting well-being across diverse contexts (Martela et al., 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020), the extent to which these needs differentially mediate the association between negative life events and distinct

domains of well-being among young adults from at-risk educational backgrounds remains less clear. Differential associations across well-being domains were not specified a priori and were examined exploratorily within the analytic models.

Based on SDT and previous empirical research, it was hypothesized that exposure to a greater number of negative life events would be associated with lower satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn would be associated with lower mental well-being. The same indirect pathway was examined separately for emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Basic psychological need satisfaction, particularly competence, is expected to serve as a key mediating mechanism linking negative life events to well-being across multiple domains.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum sample size required for the planned analyses. Based on a linear multiple regression model with five predictors, assuming a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), an alpha level of 0.05, and desired statistical power of 0.80, the estimated minimum sample size was 92 participants. The final sample included 256 participants, indicating that the study exceeded the required sample size and was adequately powered to detect the hypothesized effects.

Participants were 256 emerging adults aged 18–25 years ($M = 20.66$, $SD = 1.94$; 48.8% female) who had graduated from designated secondary education frameworks for youth at risk in Israel. These schools serve adolescents facing significant social, emotional, and familial challenges, including risk of school dropout. Beyond academic instruction, they typically offer small classroom settings, individualized attention, close relationships with educators, and emotional and counseling support. Graduation years ranged from 2017 to 2024, with a majority (85.5%) having graduated between 2020 and 2024. Participants were recruited via a convenience sampling method, which was deemed appropriate given the hard-to-reach nature of this vulnerable population, through official alumni lists from eight cities: four located in central Israel (50.8%) and four in peripheral areas (49.2%), ensuring balanced geographical representation. Most participants were single (63.7%), while 34.0% were in a relationship and 2.4% were divorced or widowed. In terms of current occupation, 52.3% were employed, 18% were serving in the military or national service, 9.4% were studying, 11.3% were seeking employment, and 7% were engaged in other activities.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Mental Well-Being

Mental well-being was assessed using the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2002; Lamers et al., 2011). The MHC-SF includes 14 items assessing three dimensions of well-being: emotional well-being (e.g., “how often did you feel interested in life?”), social well-being (e.g., “how often did you feel that people are basically good?”), and psychological well-being (e.g., “how often did you feel that you had warm and trusting relationships with others?”). Participants indicated how frequently they had experienced each feeling during the past month on a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*every day*). In the present study, internal consistencies were high for emotional well-being ($\alpha = 0.86$), social well-being ($\alpha = 0.84$), psychological well-being ($\alpha = 0.90$). Mean scores were calculated for emotional, social, and psychological well-being, with higher scores indicating higher levels of well-being.

2.2.2. Negative Life Events

Negative life events were assessed using the Negative Life Events Scale for Students (Buri, 2018). The scale includes 25 items assessing exposure to stressful life events (e.g., “death of a close family member”). Participants indicated whether each event had occurred in their lives by responding “yes” or “no”. A total score was calculated based on the number of events endorsed, with higher scores indicating exposure to a greater number of negative life events.

2.2.3. Psychological Needs Satisfaction

Psychological needs satisfaction was assessed using the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Scale—In General (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné, 2003). The scale includes 21 items measuring satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (7 items; e.g., “I feel free to live my life the way I want”), competence (6 items; e.g., “I have been able to learn interesting new skills recently”), and relatedness (8 items; e.g., “I really like the people I interact with”). Participants indicated their agreement with each statement on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). In the present study, internal consistency was acceptable for autonomy ($\alpha = 0.69$), competence ($\alpha = 0.71$), and relatedness ($\alpha = 0.86$).

2.3. Procedure

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Data collection was performed through Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT, USA). To ensure that respondents matched the target population, the online survey link was not distributed publicly. Instead, it was sent directly and individually to potential participants based on the official alumni lists, ensuring they met the inclusion criteria. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Pearson correlations were used to examine associations between the study variables. Gender was dummy-coded (0 = male, 1 = female), meaning that Pearson correlations involving gender are equivalent to point-biserial correlations. To test the research hypotheses, parallel mediation analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4; Hayes, 2022), where the number of negative life events was the predictor and the three psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) were entered simultaneously as mediators. Three separate models were tested for emotional, social, and psychological well-being as outcome variables, reflecting the multidimensional conceptualization of mental well-being and allowing examination of domain-specific indirect effects. In all models, age and gender were included as covariates. Indirect effects were estimated using 5000 bootstrap samples with 95% confidence intervals. Because PROCESS estimates mediation effects using ordinary least squares regression rather than covariance-based structural equation modeling, the models were fully saturated (just-identified), and global fit indices were therefore not applicable.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. Exposure to a greater number of negative life events was associated with lower autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as lower emotional and social well-being. However, negative life events were not significantly associated with psychological well-being. As expected, the three psychological needs were strongly and

positively interrelated and were also positively associated with emotional, social, and psychological well-being.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables ($N = 256$).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	20.66	1.94	-								
2. Gender	-	-	-0.07	-							
3. Negative Life Events	-	-	-0.02	-0.06	-						
4. Autonomy	4.49	0.90	-0.04	0.04	-0.14 *	-					
5. Competence	4.57	1.04	0.02	-0.05	-0.16 *	0.81 ***	-				
6. Relatedness	4.74	0.86	-0.02	0.02	-0.20 **	0.70 ***	0.78 ***	-			
7. Emotional WB	3.69	1.17	-0.02	0.06	-0.12 *	0.59 ***	0.63 ***	0.55 ***	-		
8. Social WB	3.19	1.18	0.13 *	-0.01	-0.13 *	0.48 ***	0.58 ***	0.53 ***	0.74 ***	-	
9. Psychological WB	3.61	1.13	0.01	0.02	-0.08	0.64 ***	0.69 ***	0.65 ***	0.80 ***	0.77 ***	-

Note. WB = well-being. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Because the three basic psychological needs were highly intercorrelated, multicollinearity was examined using tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics. VIF values ranged from 1.031 to 4.112, with the highest value observed for competence. As all values were below the conventional threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2010), multicollinearity was considered acceptable, and the three needs were retained as simultaneous mediators in the parallel mediation models.

3.2. Mediation Analyses

Parallel mediation analyses were conducted separately for emotional, social, and psychological well-being, with negative life events as the predictor, autonomy, competence, and relatedness as parallel mediators, and age and gender as covariates. The results are presented in Tables 2 and 3, which report unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors, and 95% confidence intervals. The overall mediation model is shown in Figure 1, which reports standardized regression coefficients (β).

Table 2. Path coefficients for the mediator models and final outcome models.

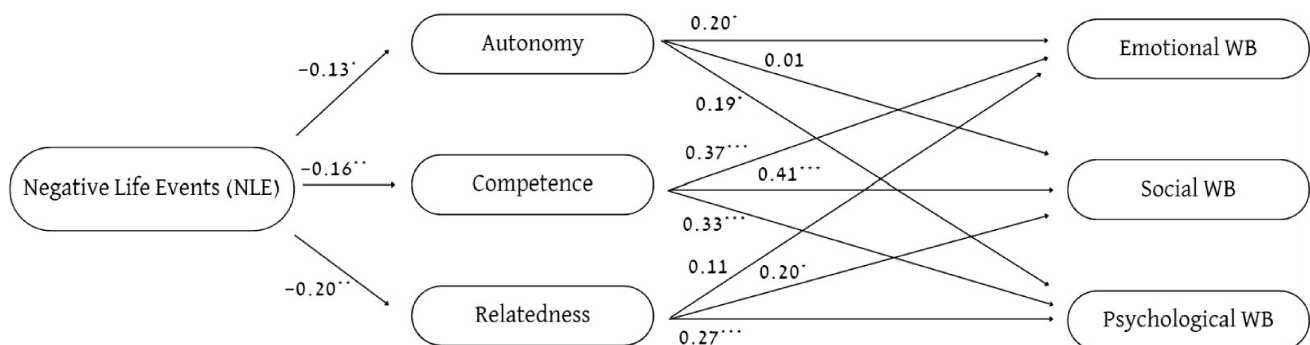
Panel A—Negative Life Events predicting the mediators			
Predictor	B (SE)		95% CI
Negative life events → Autonomy	−0.024 (0.011) *		[−0.045, −0.002]
Negative life events → Competence	−0.033 (0.013) **		[−0.058, −0.008]
Negative life events → Relatedness	−0.033 (0.011) **		[−0.054, −0.013]
Panel B—Final outcome models			
Predictor	Emotional WB B (SE) [95% CI]	Social WB B (SE) [95% CI]	Psychological WB B (SE) [95% CI]
NLE (direct effect)	−0.003 (0.011) [−0.025, 0.019]	−0.004 (0.012) [−0.028, 0.019]	0.012 (0.010) [−0.007, 0.032]
Autonomy	0.264 (0.110) * [0.048, 0.480]	0.011 (0.116) [−0.218, 0.241]	0.235 (0.096) * [0.046, 0.424]
Competence	0.413 (0.109) *** [0.199, 0.628]	0.462 (0.116) *** [0.234, 0.689]	0.355 (0.095) *** [0.168, 0.543]
Relatedness	0.153 (0.106) [−0.057, 0.363]	0.265 (0.113) * [0.043, 0.488]	0.349 (0.093) *** [0.166, 0.533]
Age	−0.010 (0.029) [−0.068, 0.048]	0.077 (0.031) * [0.016, 0.138]	0.011 (0.026) [−0.039, 0.062]
Gender	0.158 (0.109) [−0.058, 0.374]	0.034 (0.116) [−0.194, 0.263]	0.070 (0.096) [−0.119, 0.258]
R2	0.423	0.363	0.524

Note. NLE = Negative Life Events. Unstandardized coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses and 95% confidence intervals in brackets. The paths from negative life events to the mediators were identical across the three models because the same predictor and covariates were used in each analysis. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Total, direct, and indirect effects of negative life events on the three well-being outcomes.

Predictor	Emotional WB B (SE) [95% CI]	Social WB B (SE) [95% CI]	Psychological WB B (SE) [95% CI]
Total effect	−0.028 (0.014) [−0.056, −0.001]	−0.029 (0.014) * [−0.057, −0.001]	−0.017 (0.014) [−0.044, 0.010]
Direct effect	−0.003 (0.011) [−0.025, 0.019]	−0.004 (0.012) [−0.028, 0.019]	0.012 (0.010) [−0.007, 0.032]
Total indirect	−0.025 * [−0.043, −0.010]	−0.024 * [−0.041, −0.011]	−0.029 * [−0.046, −0.012]
Indirect via autonomy	−0.006 * [−0.015, −0.000]	−0.000 [−0.008, 0.007]	−0.006 [−0.013, 0.000]
Indirect via competence	−0.014 ** [−0.027, −0.003]	−0.015 ** [−0.030, −0.004]	−0.012 ** [−0.023, −0.003]
Indirect via relatedness	−0.005 [−0.019, 0.002]	−0.009 * [−0.023, −0.001]	−0.012 ** [−0.023, −0.004]

Note. WB = well-being. Total and direct effects are reported as unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Indirect effects are presented as bootstrap estimates with 95% confidence intervals in brackets, based on 5000 bootstrap samples. Age and gender were included as covariates in all models. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

**Figure 1.** Parallel mediation model of the relationship between negative life events and well-being dimensions through basic psychological needs. Note. WB = well-being. Values represent standardized coefficients (β). Age and gender were included as covariates. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Across all three models, exposure to a greater number of negative life events was associated with lower autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the final outcome models, competence was positively associated with all three well-being outcomes, whereas autonomy was significantly associated with emotional and psychological well-being but not with social well-being. Relatedness was significantly associated with social and psychological well-being but not with emotional well-being. The direct effects of negative life events on emotional, social, and psychological well-being were nonsignificant once the mediators were entered into the models. In contrast, the total indirect effects were significant in all three analyses, indicating that the association between negative life events and lower well-being operated primarily through reduced satisfaction of basic psychological needs.

More specifically, the indirect effect through competence was significant for emotional, social, and psychological well-being; the indirect effect through autonomy was significant only for emotional well-being; and the indirect effect through relatedness was significant for social and psychological well-being. Age was a significant positive predictor of social well-being ($B = 0.077$, $p = 0.014$) but was not significantly associated with emotional or psychological well-being. Gender was not significantly associated with any of the well-being outcomes. Importantly, the significance and direction of the primary pathways remained consistent after accounting for age and gender. Given the cross-sectional nature of these data, these statistical pathways describe patterns of association rather than definitive causal relations.

4. Discussion

The present study examined whether the satisfaction of basic psychological needs mediated the association between negative life events and mental well-being among emerging adults who had completed their secondary education in educational frameworks for

youth at risk. Overall, the findings suggest that negative life events were associated with lower well-being primarily through reduced satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, this pathway was not uniform across domains of well-being. Competence mediated the association between negative life events and all three dimensions of well-being. Autonomy mediated the association with emotional well-being, whereas relatedness mediated the associations with social and psychological well-being. These findings suggest that, in this population, the psychological implications of negative life events may be better understood through their impact on basic psychological need satisfaction, while also showing that different needs may be more central to different aspects of well-being.

These findings may also be understood in light of the educational transition that characterizes this population. During their secondary education, participants were embedded in structured frameworks that may have contributed to supporting their basic psychological needs through consistent adult relationships, opportunities for skill development, and a sense of belonging. After graduation, many young adults no longer have access to comparable environments, while facing increasing demands for autonomy and self-direction (Jackson et al., 2025). The present findings suggest that this transition may involve not only new developmental challenges but also reduced access to contexts that previously supported psychological need satisfaction.

These findings are consistent with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which conceptualizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs that are essential for adaptive functioning and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Howard et al., 2021; Martela et al., 2023; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The present study extends this literature by examining these mechanisms among emerging adults from at-risk educational backgrounds, a group whose post-school adjustment has received relatively limited empirical attention (Nicita et al., 2025; Martinez-Maireles, 2025). For these young adults, the transition to adulthood may involve increased expectations for independence, educational or occupational integration, and stable social relationships, often in the context of fewer social, familial, and economic resources (Arnett, 2000, 2014; Wood et al., 2018). The findings therefore suggest that basic psychological need satisfaction may be a key mechanism through which negative life events are linked to well-being during this vulnerable developmental transition.

Competence emerged as the most consistent mediator across all three well-being dimensions, suggesting that the sense of being capable of managing environmental demands may function as a broad psychological resource in this population—one that is particularly salient when negative life events erode young adults' sense of efficacy and mastery (Masten, 2001; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Autonomy and relatedness showed more domain-specific patterns. Autonomy mediated the association between negative life events and emotional well-being, suggesting that experiences of volition, choice, and self-direction may be especially relevant to how young adults feel about their lives. This is consistent with SDT's emphasis on autonomy as central to self-regulation, internalization, and integrated functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). For emerging adults from at-risk backgrounds, autonomy may be especially complex: the developmental demand for independence may occur alongside previous experiences of instability, constraint, or limited control. In this context, negative life events may be particularly harmful for emotional well-being when they are associated with a reduced sense of agency. The specificity of this association to emotional well-being, rather than social or psychological well-being, may reflect the particularly subjective and affective nature of autonomy. Emotional well-being, characterized by positive affect and life satisfaction, may be especially sensitive to experiences of choice and self-direction. When negative life events constrain agency, the immediate emotional experience of one's life may

be the first domain to be affected, preceding more stable changes in social functioning or psychological growth.

Relatedness mediated the associations between negative life events and both social and psychological well-being. This pattern is consistent with SDT's conceptualization of relatedness as the need to feel meaningfully connected to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020), as well as with broader theory emphasizing belongingness as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Its role in social well-being is especially expected, given that this domain concerns social integration, contribution, acceptance, and belonging (Keyes, 1998, 2002). The association with psychological well-being further suggests that meaningful relationships may also support broader aspects of positive functioning, including purpose, growth, self-acceptance, and positive relations with others, as emphasized in eudaimonic models of well-being (Ryff, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The absence of a significant indirect effect on emotional well-being may suggest that relatedness operates less through immediate affective experience and more through a sense of social belonging and meaningful engagement—processes more directly captured by social and psychological well-being. For young adults from at-risk backgrounds who may have experienced disrupted relationships, the quality of relational experiences may be particularly linked to how they perceive their place in society and their capacity for personal growth.

Taken together, the findings support the value of examining mental well-being as a multidimensional construct. Emotional, social, and psychological well-being are related but conceptually distinct dimensions of positive mental health (Keyes, 2002; Lamers et al., 2011). The present findings indicate that basic psychological needs may not operate uniformly across these dimensions. Rather, competence appears to represent a broad psychological resource relevant across domains, whereas autonomy and relatedness may be more closely tied to particular aspects of well-being. This contributes to the literature by showing that the pathway from negative life events to well-being may depend not only on the presence or absence of need satisfaction, but also on the specific domain of well-being under consideration.

The findings also have implications for research and practice with emerging adults at risk. Much research on youth at risk focuses on adolescents while they are still embedded in educational or welfare frameworks. Less is known about their well-being after leaving these structures and entering emerging adulthood, a period that may involve reduced institutional support alongside increased developmental demands. In the Israeli context, previous work on youth at risk has examined future orientation, mentoring, life skills, and resilience, but less is known about their well-being after leaving these frameworks and entering emerging adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan & Melkman, 2022). The present findings suggest that this transition should be understood not only in terms of risk exposure, but also in terms of the psychological resources that help young adults negotiate adversity. In particular, supporting competence may be especially important, as it was the only need that mediated all three well-being domains. At the same time, the domain-specific roles of autonomy and relatedness suggest that different forms of support may strengthen different aspects of well-being: autonomy-supportive practices may be especially relevant for emotional well-being, whereas relational and community-based support may be particularly important for social and psychological well-being.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about temporal ordering or causality. Although the mediation models were theoretically grounded, cross-sectional mediation cannot establish developmental processes over time (Maxwell & Cole, 2007). Longitudinal studies are therefore needed to examine whether negative life events predict later changes in basic psychological need satisfaction and well-being. Second, all variables were assessed using self-report questionnaires, which

may increase shared method variance and does not capture external indicators of functioning. Future studies would benefit from including multiple informants or behavioral indicators of adjustment, such as educational, occupational, or social functioning. Third, participants were recruited through convenience sampling from official alumni lists of designated educational frameworks for youth at risk. Although this approach was appropriate for reaching a hard-to-access population, it may introduce selection bias and limits the generalizability of the findings to all graduates of such frameworks. Moreover, the sample consisted of Israeli emerging adults who had graduated from educational frameworks for youth at risk; although this is a strength of the study, it also limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts and to young adults who experienced adversity outside such frameworks. Finally, negative life events were examined as a general cumulative index based on the number of adverse events reported by participants. This approach is consistent with cumulative-risk models, which are commonly used to examine the accumulation of adverse experiences, including in recent research on life events and well-being during emerging adulthood (LaNoue et al., 2020; Matud et al., 2023). However, this approach does not capture the severity, timing, chronicity, or subjective meaning of individual events and therefore does not distinguish between a single highly traumatic event and several less severe events. Future studies should examine both the number and perceived severity of negative life events, as different forms of adversity may relate differently to autonomy, competence, relatedness, and well-being.

5. Conclusions

The present study suggests that negative life events are linked to emotional, social, and psychological well-being among emerging adults from at-risk educational backgrounds through reduced satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Competence emerged as the most consistent mediator, whereas autonomy and relatedness showed more domain-specific patterns. These findings extend SDT by showing that basic psychological needs may function not only as general mechanisms of well-being but also as differentiated pathways linking adversity to distinct forms of positive mental health during the transition to adulthood. These findings suggest that the association between negative life events and well-being may be best understood not only in terms of exposure to adversity but also in terms of the psychological resources that support young people's capacity to feel effective, self-directed, and connected to others. Supporting continuity in need-satisfying relationships and structures following graduation from at-risk educational frameworks may represent an important educational and developmental priority for programs working with vulnerable young adults.

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