

# Want to be happy? Spend on others

**Melissa Sim**

Can happiness be taught? Two universities here are offering courses on the age-old subject – or at least the science behind it.

Far from self-help seminars promising to reveal the secrets to finding your happiness, lecturers are teaching students to ponder questions such as: How does the environment affect our happiness? Can money buy happiness? Can governments make their citizens happy?

Associate Professor of psychology Christie Napa Scollon of the school of social sciences at the Singapore Management University (SMU), makes it clear her class is not meant to make students happier.

The course, titled Subjective Well-being, helps debunk the myths about happiness. Students study the consequences of happiness, for example, and how it affects one's health and financial situation.

"The science of happiness shows there are some things that people can do that can lead to lasting increases in happiness. But you won't find any quick fixes," says Prof Scollon, 38, who is from the United States and has worked in the field of posi-

tive psychology for more than a decade.

Arguing that something as subjective as happiness can be studied, she says: "Just because something is subjective doesn't mean it is meaningless."

In fact, one of the examination questions for the course, which ran from August to November last year, required the 45 students to explain why the study of happiness is not frivolous.

Prof Scollon hopes to conduct the course every alternate year. It is open to SMU students who have taken the Introduction To Psychology module. Social science students get priority when signing up.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), the course called The Pursuit Of Happiness, conducted at the College of Alice and Peter Tan – a residential college in NUS' University Town – takes a multi-disciplinary approach.

Dr Siok Kuan Tambyah, 48, from the NUS business school, says she draws on research from various fields such as positive psychology, economics and consumer psychology.

For example, in one class, she discussed



Dr Siok Kuan Tambyah (far left) teaches The Pursuit Of Happiness at NUS while Associate Professor of psychology Christie Napa Scollon (left) conducts a similar course at SMU.

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a Harvard Business School study on how one has to find work that is "meaningful" and "make progress in it" before that job can lead to happiness.

"I want students to realise that happiness research affects their lives," says Dr Tambyah, who has been studying happiness for more than 10 years.

As part of the course, which was conducted from January to last month, students had to prepare two photo essays.

They were asked to photograph what makes them happy and what makes other people happy.

The course will run again from August and the class size will be capped at 15.

Students are given simply a pass or fail grade for the module, which is a junior seminar.

Students who are part of the University Town Residential Programme must complete one junior seminar as part of their col-

lege requirements.

"I hope students will be more aware of what makes them happy and maybe when they look for jobs, they will consider their strengths, what they want to go into and how they can find meaning in what they do," says Dr Tambyah.

While the courses do not claim to make students happier, there are tips that students can pick up.

In Prof Scollon's class, for example, she made students conduct everyday investigations, such as spending \$5 on themselves and then \$5 on a friend to see if one action made them happier than the other.

Research by Professor Elizabeth W. Dunn and other professors at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver has shown that participants who spent money on others experienced greater happiness than those spending on themselves.

Prof Scollon's students agreed with the findings, even though their exercise was not a scientific experiment.

"We think of happiness as 'my own business', but what if we think of ourselves as responsible for other people's happiness too?" she asks.

After learning that random acts of kindness can improve happiness, Mr Bob Sim, 23, a second-year social science graduate of SMU, says he has been applying it to everyday life.

"It could be something as simple as buying a packet of sweets for someone, or even just simple words of encouragement," he says.