

You're happy if you think you are

Through attending workshops and reading books, more people are learning they can be in control of their happiness



JOAN CHEW

Over seven years, she worked her way up from being a secretarial assistant to a senior secretarial manager. She achieved her work goal but her personal happiness rating was just five out of 10.

Ms Tan Jun Mi, 37, used to work at least 12 hours a day and did not enjoy the rigid corporate culture. In a bold move, she quit her cushy job in 2011 to set up her own company, so that she now works fewer hours and enjoys the flexibility of managing her own time.

She attends motivational seminars and reads self-help books to learn how to find happiness.

When she wakes up each morning, she consciously makes positive assertions, ranging from stating what she is grateful for, to naming the things she can look forward to that day. Before she hits the sack at night, she thinks about the people she helped that day or what she did well in.

Last year, Ms Tan began posting motivational quotes on her Facebook account each day to create positive energy for herself, she said. They get plenty of "likes". The single woman also volunteers with the Tanjong Katong Neighbourhood Committee and donates at least 10 per cent of her company's revenue to charity each month.

These are reasons why she said, without hesitation, that she has reached the 10 on the happiness scale now.

She said: "I've learnt that you must create your own happiness and not blame others if you're not happy."

LEARNING TO BE POSITIVE

Ms Tan is among a growing number who are actively learning how to be happier by attending talks and courses, and reading self-help books.

It may sound strange that she can learn to be happy, but what workshop trainers, lecturers and self-help authors do is use positive psychology – sometimes known as the scientific study of happiness – to teach people how to turn negative

perceptions of events into positive attitudes and action.

And people are becoming believers. The Centre for Effective Living, a psychology-based firm offering counselling and mental-wellness training, conducted 58 workshops for 16 companies last year, compared with 18 workshops for 11 companies in 2011.

At the School of Positive Psychology, a private education centre, founder Stephen Lew said demand for diploma courses on positive psychology has risen 10 per cent year-on-year since 2007.

One of its students, independent financial adviser Sean Lim, 37, has published a self-help book. He said there is no shortage of companies which want to engage his services.

Demand is so high that two universities have started offering courses in positive psychology. Associate Professor of psychology Christie Napa Scollon at the Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences teaches a course on subjective well-being, which debunks myths about happiness and gives her young students insights into their own lives. She said: "There is certainly no shortage of people with advice on how to be happier, but science can help people understand what works and what doesn't."

Some might say there is much to be learnt: Results of a Gallup poll released last year found Singaporeans to be the least positive and most emotionless of citizens in 148 countries.

Just last month, however, the United Nations' second World Happiness Report listed Singapore climbing three spots to become the 30th happiest country in the world. That report used a number of indicators to arrive at its conclusions, unlike the Gallup poll, which asked for people's perceptions.

Whichever way you view it, people here, like anyone else, want more to life than material goods. A survey of 4,000 people for the Our Singapore Conversation released last month found the majority would choose a more comfortable pace of life over career advancement.

It is a "natural progression of societies" to focus on subjective well-being after they have achieved



BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

DO WHAT I LOVE LOVE WHAT I DO

BELIEVE + MINDSET + ACTIONS = RESULTS

LIFE IS ABOUT CREATING YOURSELF

Last year, Ms Tan Jun Mi began posting motivational quotes on her Facebook account daily (left) to create positive energy for herself. They get many "likes".

PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

material sustenance, said Dr Tambyah Siok Kuan from the National University of Singapore Business School, who started offering a new course, The Pursuit of Happiness, in January.

THE HAPPINESS QUOTIENT

Happiness is both an emotion and a state of mind. A person is said to experience positive emotions when he experiences happiness, joy, excitement, calmness, pride, love and affection.

These can be brief feelings or permanent character traits.

Indeed, some people are just sunnier than others. According to Associate Professor Maureen Neihart, head of the Psychological Studies Academic Group at the National Institute of Education and author of the book Happiness Is A State Of Mine, 50 per cent of people's subjective well-being come from their genetic make-ups. About 10 per cent is due to external circumstances and the remaining 40

per cent can be controlled by the individual.

The world is made up of roughly two-thirds who are born optimists and the rest pessimists, said psychiatrist Christopher Cheok.

But pessimists can practise optimism and become good at it, said the head of psychological medicine at Khoo Teck Puat Hospital who, with a colleague, published a toolkit on happiness for World Mental Health Day on Oct 1.

Dr Cheok also holds workshops teaching strategies that maximise this 40 per cent to boost one's happiness level. These aim at boosting substances in the brain, such as the "reward" chemical dopamine, which sends one into a good mood when an achievement is accomplished, and oxytocin, an "attachment" hormone released when a person is around people he is close to.

SMU's Prof Scollon said there is no "signature physiological profile" but happy people experience more positive moods than negative moods, though

this does not mean they are never sad.

What is clear from research is that experiencing positive emotions yields short- and long-term health benefits. Prof Scollon said negative emotions, such as anger and fear, increase a person's heart rate and blood pressure to aid survival – the classic "fight or flight" response.

But these physiological changes are not sustainable as they wear down the body. Positive emotions help the body return to a balanced state (homeostasis) more quickly.

Experiments have shown people in a positive mood have quicker cardiovascular recovery after a stressful task than those exposed to neutral or negative mood inductions.

One study tracked the mortality of 180 Catholic nuns who had written autobiographies in early adulthood. It found the greater the number of positive words and sentences, the greater the probability of the nun being alive 60 years later.

Fortunately, the number of negative emotions reported was not conversely associated with mortality.

Another study showed that those with high levels of positive emotions were less likely to develop a cold when exposed to a virus. Dr Cheok said large-scale studies have shown optimistic people face a 48 per cent reduced risk of stroke, up to 20 per cent reduced risk of heart disease and a 7 per cent reduced risk of cancer death.

A positive mindset can permeate all aspects of life. Ms Mabel Ang (right), a 36-year-old secretary, used to consider buying coffee for her boss and colleagues demeaning.

She recalled: "I even told my boss he might as well engage a maid."

Things changed after she had coaching sessions with Mr Lew at the School of Positive Psychology and completed a graduate diploma there last year.

These days, she takes pride in the task, even taking the initiative to pick up snacks at the same time. She said with a chuckle: "I know I'm helping the team to be more engaged in meetings so they can bring in more sales and we can all benefit from increased bonuses."

Mr Lew also helped her identify her strengths during coaching. Knowing that she relates well to others, she has taken it upon herself to orientate newcomers to the workplace. She said: "Life becomes more meaningful when you help others."



Joan Chew asks experts for their strategies to achieve happiness

✓ Count your blessings

Keep a gratitude journal, listing what you are grateful for that day or in the past week. It can be about things, events, situations or people, and helps to foster an attitude of thanksgiving.

A similar exercise is to reflect on three good things that happened in the day and why they went well.

Another version of this is a gratitude visit. First, you pen a letter to someone who made a difference in your life but you never

thanked properly. You then visit the person to read the letter to him and use the opportunity to discuss your feelings, helping to strengthen the relationship.

Dr Martin Seligman, known as the father of positive psychology, found that people who practised gratitude visits were less depressed and reported greater happiness than those who did not, one month later.

Source: *Happiness Is A State of Mine* by Maureen Neihart

✓✓✓ Consider different viewpoints

Whenever you encounter a setback in life, look at your situation through a different lens.

If your boss said the report you have submitted is not up to par, you may be very upset initially. But if you looked through a longer lens, you might see how much that remark could mean to you in the future. You are likely to feel less upset about it or even forget about it.

Using an alternative lens also lets you view the situation from someone else's perspective. A colleague may point out that the

comment provides a learning opportunity for you. The wide lens provides the big picture, which is how you can learn and grow from the experience. For instance, learn the kind of reports your boss expects.

Know that you do not have the power to change your boss nor to quit your job at the drop of a hat, but you do have the ability to control how you feel and respond to a situation.

Source: Ms Elizabeth Sarah Ragen and Ms Marlene Chua, psychologists at the Centre for Effective Living at the Camden Medical Centre

✓✓ Identify strengths and values

In positive psychology, "flow" occurs when people are fully engaged in activities they enjoy so much that they lose track of time.

Using one's strengths is one way to achieve greater engagement. For example, instead of working just for a salary, find a job which appeals to you, matches your skill set and fits your personality.

Ensure your behaviour is in line with your values, which set your direction in life. If you value filial piety, then spending time with your parents is a meaningful activity that boosts your happiness.

Use online resources, such as www.behaviourlibrary.com/strengths.php to identify your strengths.

Source: *Achieving Happiness In Singapore* by Dr Christopher Cheok and Angelina Esther David (available at www.thrive.org.sg/simple_event/detail/21)

✓✓✓ Stop incessant comparisons

Life is like a carousel ride – it is full of ups and downs and there is always someone in front of and behind us.

We should concentrate on improving ourselves, not because others are doing better, but because we are able and want to do better.

Accept that there will always be someone better, cleverer and luckier than you. See yourself as your biggest competitor and aim to be better than you were yesterday.

Once we learn to be happy with ourselves, others will accept us for who we are.

Source: *Happiness Within Your Reach: 52 Ideas To A Happier You* by Sean Lim

✓✓✓✓ Learn to regulate your emotions

Life will always hand you setbacks and make you experience feelings such as sadness, anger, grief and disappointment. They are all part of the human experience.

Those who are good at regulating their emotions do not necessarily lead perfect lives, but they do not dwell on negative experiences and know how to soothe themselves.

People can use strategies such as distraction (doing something else to take the

mind off the upsetting event), reappraisal (reinterpreting events in a more positive way) and suppression (trying not to think about the upsetting event).

In general, people should direct their attention to people or things which bring them joy and gratitude and make it a habit to create and savour happy memories.

Source: Associate Professor of psychology Christie Napa Scollon of the School of Social Sciences at the Singapore Management University