



Let's be happy

BY ELEANOR YAP

Being happy can be quite simple. Learn some tips from a local author who wrote a book on happiness



During a recent happiness workshop at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, there were 26 staff members finding out about Zaibun Siraj's secrets to happiness. Notice the various items around the room as well as on the tables. It took her two days to decorate the room that exudes happy and fun thoughts. Siraj conducts workshops on various topics including positive thinking, body language and confidence.

Being happy has lots of benefits. It calms the soul and as a result, wards off stress, which is certainly terrible for the heart. It puts a smile on our faces and this tends to rub off to others that we are with, making them happy. Happy people also have good relationships, including at home and at work. So how do we bathe ourselves in happiness? And is it as easy as it looks?

Who better to shed light on this topic than 61-year-old Zaibun Siraj, who came out this year with her version of happiness in her book "Zany, zeal, zest and zing: The z way to happiness" and who does training on happiness and other subjects at Ngee Ann Polytechnic for its staff. A former president of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), Siraj is passionate about helping others live their lives to the fullest and to be happy, and hopes to carry her training outside of the polytechnic. She shares her thoughts and let's not

forget, we had to ask about her chic bob haircut with a purple patch in the front:

Singapore is 131 out of 178 countries in terms of the 2006 Index on Happy Nations. Why do you think we are so unhappy and what are some simple steps that we can do to make ourselves happier?

One reason is that we live in an urban, materialistic society. We tend to be very competitive and this may put a lot of stress on people. Hence, we become less happy with our lives.

Some simple steps might be to have more balance in our lives and to practise ways to combat stress. We need to take more care of ourselves and learn how to avoid feeling fatigued. We should recognise the importance of taking vacations, exercise, and getting enough rest and proper sleep. Following a healthy diet will contribute to our sense

leisure



of well-being and inner sense of balance. Music and singing also help. I am a great believer in time management and in being organised as this will help you to feel more relaxed.

Besides the above, it helps too to treat others well, to have friends and to avoid toxic personalities. Find a purpose in life and live life to the fullest. Laugh and at times play outrageously. Most important of all, be grateful for what you have in life and maintain a positive attitude.

You talk about living in the present, but I feel we are too wrapped up in working towards our future that we tend to not live in the present at all. Do you agree?

Yes, we tend to work towards our future, which is good, but we should learn how to strike a balance and enjoy life to the fullest now. Life is fragile and things can happen which could prevent us from doing all that we wish to do in the future.

Happiness is very hard to attain all the time. Can you share some of your down moments and how you picked yourself up?

There have been times when I have felt unhappy with myself for something that was not successful, or had not gone as well as I had wished it to be or for some comment I may have made. I try not to dwell too much on the issue, the incident or the occasion and instead I tell myself that this is a learning experience and that I can learn something from the whole episode.

Name five things that make you happy.

Paul Drayson, my husband; my friends; my mother M Siraj (who is actually on a video in the National Museum); my sister Dr Mehrun Siraj (who lives in Kuala Lumpur); my nephew Huzir Sulaiman; successful training sessions and talks. I love to train and talk.

Do you belong to a local Laughter Club?

I have just been trained as a Laughter Club leader by Dr Madan Kataria, the founder of Laughter Clubs throughout the world. I have started a Laughter Club at Ngee Ann Polytechnic for the staff and we meet every Tuesday and Thursday. I am also a member of the NUS (National University of Singapore Society) Laughter Club. I am currently working with Cairnhill Community Club to start a Laughter Club there for the people who live in that area. I hope we can meet in the mornings as the laughter exercise will keep us in good stead for the rest of the day. I will be delighted to help others set up clubs elsewhere as I believe that laughter is essential to happiness. My vision in life now is to spread happiness to others.

How long have you been married and what are your secrets to a happy and long marriage?

I have been married for 32 years. My husband and I knew each other for six years before we were married in 1976. We are good friends and we communicate well with each other. We respect each other and we give each other space to be ourselves. We have some similar interests and we find pleasure in books, music, comedies, travel, food and wine. We hold hands as we walk and we find time to be together often.

You talked about having a purpose in life to make you happy. What is yours?

My purpose in life right now is to help people lead happy and successful lives. I want to do this by training, writing and inspiring people. I have always done voluntary work and helping others is something I will continue to do.

What made you decide to write your book in the first place?

When I was researching for my first book, "Managing oneself ... footprints to success", I recognised the importance of happiness to success in life. At the time too, there was the release of the Index on Happy Nations and Singapore was ranked quite low. I decided that I should write on happiness to help others to learn how to be happy. Happiness is taught in schools and universities abroad and as it is not taught here, a book on happiness for Singaporeans would be helpful. (EDITOR'S NOTE: As of press time, in the recently released Happiness Index, Singapore ranked 31st out of 97 countries.)

Coming out with 95 pages on happiness would be a challenge certainly for me, was it for you? Anything that you learned while writing?

Yes it was a challenge. I had to read up on the research on happiness and the theories put forward by philosophers and writers. I learned quite a lot from this and I realised that there were similarities. I have from writing this book learned how to be a

better person and to be a happier person.



How did you come up with the formula – be zany, apply zeal, have zest and put the zing into your life? Yes, it also happens to start with z like your name!

After researching the work of philosophers and writers on the subject I started to group their ideas together. I realised that I could put them together under separate categories. To provide a simple framework for

people I opted for something memorable. I spent time in the library going through dictionaries and finding the appropriate “z” words. I wanted to make it easy and practical. This book is for everyone, young and old.

What are your zany (“to be eccentric, bizarre, play the fool”), zeal (“enthusiastic devotion to a cause, ideal or goal and tireless diligence in its furtherance”), zest (“spirited enjoyment”) and zing (“the quality that makes you lively or interesting”) in your life?

As stated in the book, I have practised the strategies that I have mentioned in the book ... organising parties, sending cards, complimenting people, colouring my hair purple, dancing, having great friends, having a purpose in life and doing things with passion.

Being sick or suffering from a debilitating condition can make anyone unhappy. What’s your advice?

Try to keep happy. Laugh often as laughter helps to overcome pain. Watch comedies. Think of others and try to involve yourself in activities you enjoy. Music helps as well.

You have a lot of wonderful and inspiring quotes in your book. Which are two that are your favourites?

Joseph Addison: “Three grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love and something to hope for.”

Mark Twain: “There is little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. That little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative.”

How long did it take you to write it? What will be your next one?

It took me two years to work on this one. Yes, I wish to write another book and I am currently considering

the topic.

You got to the finals earlier this year for Singapore’s happiest person award (conducted by local management consultancy Global Leadership Academy in conjunction with the New Science of Happiness and Well-being Conference). What did you learn about the whole experience?

My colleagues from the Human Resource Office and the Corporate Communications Office nominated me. I am still embarrassed about it all and much humbled.

Were you happy when you were younger?
In many ways, yes but I am much happier now.

What are three things that you are grateful for yesterday?

My spouse, my talents and skills, and the opportunities I had.

What was your most recent thank-you letter you have written?

I have just returned from a holiday in England. My husband and I drove from Newcastle to London and we stopped en route visiting friends and family members. I have just sent off a number of cards thanking them for their kind hospitality and the fun that we had together.

I have also just written to some friends in Singapore to thank them for being good and kind to me and for their invaluable friendship.

You talk about the importance of learning new things in life. What new things are you learning? What activities are you involved in?

I keep reading and watching DVDs to learn from others about a variety of topics. I also attend workshops and talks often. I am currently attending a series of workshops by T Harv Eker (founder and president of Peak Potentials Training, a personal development company in the US). (EDITOR’S NOTE: He became a millionaire in two and a half years.)

Just on a side note, are you still planning to colour your hair?

I will continue to colour my hair but I’m not sure of the colour. It will probably be purple again but my hairstylist has suggested blue! When I go shopping, I often get noticed and people just become happier.

Anything to add?

I live life to the fullest and I love people. We have many friends all over the world and I make it a point to keep up with them. I love entertaining people at my home. Most important of all I love speaking and training. People who come for my training sessions have fun as they learn and they go away happy. 📌