

# Teaching Happiness: Bringing Positive Psychology into the Classroom

Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, founder of the Maytiv Center at IDC Herzliya, is incorporating the science of happiness into education systems around the world.



**D**r. Tal Ben-Shahar, renowned lecturer and best-selling author, recounts the way in which Dr. Martin Seligman, the founder of the field of Positive Psychology, would begin his lectures to groups of parents: “He would ask two questions. The first was, ‘What do you want most for your children?’ to which the parents would respond, ‘Happiness, a fulfilling life, resilience,’ and so on. The second question he would ask was, ‘What do your children learn in school?’ to which the answer was, ‘Math, science, spelling,’ and the like. There was almost no overlap between the two lists. The second list is important, of course, but why do schools tend to neglect the first list?”



Feeling happy: Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar.



the world. He is the author of four books on Positive Psychology, all international bestsellers. “Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment” (2007) has been translated into more than 25 languages.

Ben Shahar has been at IDC Herzliya for seven years. “I chose IDC because it’s a place with a vision,” he says. “There is a high level of scholarship, but it is also agile and flexible, and things get done without the bureaucracy of other institutions of higher learning. I love the entrepreneurial spirit and can-do attitude of IDC students. Their energy levels are high, and they are not afraid to fail.”

The Maytiv Center develops and conducts intervention programs in schools and kindergartens according to the core principles of Positive Psychology. To reach young children, fun, experiential methods are applied, such as art and stories. The program has been implemented in 50 schools in Israel to date, as well in schools in Mexico, Costa Rica, and the United States. Maytiv trains the teachers, who in turn train the students, with the goal of bringing about positive change in their personal lives, classrooms and communities. Training seminars take place over 10 to 15 sessions for a total of 30 hours.

Maytiv has conducted wide-ranging assessments of the center’s program in schools for research purposes. The findings demonstrated a clear connection between participation in the intervention program and lower levels of emotional distress. A causal relationship was also found between participation in the program and a rise in positive emotions, optimism, improved self-image, improved sense of capability, a decrease in the level of violence in the schools, and improvements in academic achievement.

“The results we’ve seen have been amazing,” says Ben-Shahar. And that is something to be happy about. ★

- Ariel Rodal-Spieler

Ben-Shahar explains that the Maytiv Center, established in 2010 at the Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, seeks to fill this void by instilling the ideas of Positive Psychology as an integral part of school culture. “Our vision is to teach Positive Psychology as a pillar, like math or science,” he says. Positive Psychology focuses on how to improve quality of life and optimal individual functioning. Whereas traditional psychology typically focuses on people’s social-emotional difficulties (what’s “wrong”), Positive Psychology concentrates instead on what is going “right,” promoting self-realization, happiness, fulfillment and a sense of meaning.

“One of the central ideas of Positive Psychology is to concentrate on what works in your life,” says Ben-Shahar. “By focusing on love, strength, and happiness, you’re teaching yourself to be resilient and better able to deal with crises.” Other tenets are practicing gratitude, physical exercise, and mindfulness. Journaling has also been proved to increase happiness levels, says Ben-Shahar. “Writing about either difficult or positive experiences creates a sense of coherence and helps make sense of your experiences.” However, he says, it is unreasonable, and guilt-inducing, to expect to feel happy all the time.

“You have to give yourself permission to be human,” he says.

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According to Ben-Shahar, the number one predictor of happiness is quality time spent with people we care about and who care about us. In a global survey, the element shared by the five countries that were rated the happiest was a strong support network of family and friends.

“I am worried that that these relationships are taking a back seat today because of long working hours and the overuse of technology,” says Ben-Shahar. “Levels of depression and anxiety are higher today than in the past, when people spent more quality time with their loved ones.”

Ben-Shahar, who taught the most popular course at Harvard University before joining IDC Herzliya, consults and lectures around