There was a cry from the field, “ begins Anat Shoshani, academic co-director of the Maytiv Center at IDC Herzliya. Framed by a mass of wavy brown hair, her friendly face lights up as she thinks back on the program’s beginnings.

“Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, the director of Positive Psychology studies at IDC, was at Harvard a few years back, teaching a course on Positive Psychology, which became their most popular course ever,” says Shoshani. “Soon after returning to Israel and taking up his position at IDC, Dr. Ben-Shahar found himself inundated with requests from organizations seeking intervention in the field of Positive Psychology – educational institutions, hospitals and the army. The Maytiv Center was born in response to that cry.”

Now in its second year, the Maytiv Center, headed by Ben-Shahar and run by Shoshani, along with fellow co-director Dr. Sarit Guttmann-Steinmetz, was established at the School of Psychology at IDC to promote community programs that advance resilience and well-being. “My hope is that Maytiv brings about a significant change in the organizational culture in Israel - in schools, businesses and government organizations,” says Ben-Shahar, adding that the aims and goals of the center are in direct correlation with those of IDC: “IDC was founded with the purpose of bringing about positive change in Israel and beyond. This is precisely the purpose of Maytiv.”

Adds Shoshani, “A center like Maytiv is crucial, because even if, by using traditional psychology, we can heal symptoms and help people to feel less depressed or anxious, studies have revealed that these people are not necessarily feeling happy or fulfilling their goals in life. Positive Psychology focuses on helping them to improve their lives in any number of ways.” According to Shoshani, one of the benefits of the Maytiv Center is its ability to reach a large number of people using limited resources: “Today, clinical psychologists study for many years to become skilled in their profession, and then ultimately go into practice, where they meet very few clients and get to affect very few people. At Maytiv, by creating intervention programs that can go out into the community, we can reach so many children, parents and people in need.”

The center’s intervention programs are built around six core principles of Positive Psychology: 1) to enhance happiness, positive emotions and optimism; 2) to enhance gratitude; 3) to achieve goals and significance in life; 4) to create a body/mind connection; 5) to enhance one’s interpersonal relationships; and 6) to create a positive environment around oneself.

“Basically,” says Shoshani, “we are dealing with things at the core of our existence, which everyone knows are important, but that we were never taught to achieve. As just one small example: someone wants to lose weight and promises themselves they will start a diet this year, but they never follow through or succeed in their intention. Now think of all the promises that we make to ourselves – during the day, the month, the year – how many do we actually achieve? The reason for this is that no one taught us how to make change in our lives, not at school, not in the army and not during our academic degree.”

“IDC was founded with the purpose of bringing about positive change in Israel and beyond. This is precisely the purpose of Maytiv.” - Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, the director of Positive Psychology studies at IDC Herzliya
One integral feature of the Maytiv Center is the combination of research and practical work. Any pilot study introduced is based on in-depth research of the work involved; and all interventions are followed by research to see how effective it was in helping its target sector. During its first year, the center ran several pilots, including a program designed for training commanders of elite military units, one for students at middle and high schools, and another for an afterschool program targeting at-risk children and their parents.

Adi Feld, who received her bachelor’s degree at IDC before going on to a master’s in organizational psychology at Baruch College in NY, and who is now doing her PhD in Positive Psychology, ran the pilot at a middle school where a high percentage of students drop out of the educational system following ninth grade. Feld built a year-long program based on Ben-Shahar’s renowned Positive Psychology course at Harvard, and then passed the course following ninth grade. Feld built a year-long program based on Ben-Shahar’s renowned Positive Psychology course at Harvard, and then passed the course to the school's teachers, meeting them every two weeks for the entire year. Between classes, the teachers would return to their students and transfer to them what they had experienced in Feld’s class. The knowledge went way beyond the theoretical, even for Feld herself, who soon discovered that there was no way to escape the personal impact of the lessons on her own life.

"Throughout the year," Feld tells me, "I was studying Positive Psychology and creating the lessons for the course, with every class about a different subject, such as belief, goals or the permission to be human. I found that the subject of the current class would resonate with what was happening in my personal life at that time, and I would go through the lesson in a very powerful and real way.”

Teaching Positive Psychology to a group of teachers, who represented a vast range of ages and levels of experience, was challenging to say the least.

"At the beginning, there was a lot of cynicism, but when I explained to them that while the material may look like ‘self help,’ every notion or concept has research behind it, it became very real for them – and for the kids they were teaching. I believe we had success with at least 70% of the teachers in the course, and of those who remained skeptical, when and if they will become open to the ideas of Positive Psychology, they will have the tools to work with. And for the teachers who went through the course and really experienced it and were then able to pass it on to their students, we could see the change in those kids.”

This change included students incorporating what they had learned in class into their perspective on life – such as the knowledge that they, and no one else, are responsible for their own lives and that if they invest in themselves they will succeed. It was also evident in the end-of-year yearbook produced by the graduating ninth graders, who chose for their yearbook's cover to have the image of six kids, each wearing a different saying from the Positive Psychology course, on their shirts.

At the end of each class, homework was given, which the teachers themselves had to do, before passing the lesson on to their students. One exercise sent participants on two separate missions: one, to find a way to help a stranger, and two, to go for a nice afternoon or evening with their friends. They then had to write about each of the experiences – what they thought and which they enjoyed more. “Most of them realized that helping out someone else, even with the smallest thing, brought them more happiness than a good time out with their friends. And later, their students came with inspired stories about the people they helped. So it wasn’t just them getting a lesson - each time they had to do something with what they had learned. The teachers took it even further – there was one who organized an evening for the girls in her class and their mothers, and then one for the boys, during which they played games and the mothers wrote letters to their children, and everyone was laughing and crying. It was extraordinary.”

Another program at the center is for children at risk. Run by Ran Pelled, a graduate of IDC’s School of Psychology who is now working on his master’s degree in psychology, the program involved undergraduate students at IDC, who met with these children once a week for a series of fun and educational activities that would also teach them to believe in themselves.

“Children who are taking part in the program are saying: ‘We have learned to listen to one another, believe in ourselves, appreciate the half-full cup in life’.”

“Yael Elhadil, junior high-school teacher, Rosh Ha’ayin: ‘I feel that I received a gift for life - as a teacher and as a person.’”

“Michal Ram, junior high-school teacher, Rosh Ha’ayin.

4-5. Children participating in after school positive psychology programs for children and adolescents in community centers.

"Basically, we are dealing with things at the core of our existence, which everyone knows are important, but that we were never taught to achieve. Think of all the promises that we make to ourselves – during the day, the month, the year – how many do we actually achieve?" - Anat Shoshani, academic co-director of the Maytiv Center at IDC

Based on the successes from last year, each of the programs will expand in the coming year, bringing their beneficial aspects to even more children in need, and fulfilling Shoshani’s vision that the benefits of psychology and its understandings will reach the maximum number of people. “That is the important message here,” says Shoshani. “This is the time to bring psychology to the community – and that’s what we are doing here, at Maytiv.”

- Joy Pincus