Get schooled in ways of happiness?

S’poreans don’t need coaching more than anybody else, says psychologist

By HOE PEI SHAN

While one can go for lessons to learn how to feel more positive and be happy, experts said the advice is likely to be universal — not just applicable to Singaporeans — and there are no quick fixes.

The country has been in the news recently, with Singaporeans being described as the world’s least emotional and least positive people, according to findings from a Gallup poll.

In a nation where self-help books sell well, should Singaporeans enrol for classes to address those perceptions?

Psychologist William Tov, whose studies have focused on well-being and emotions, does not think Singaporeans “need happiness coaching more than anybody else” who lives in a modern society.

“It’s helpful to people in general — not just Singaporeans — to know the kinds of things that contribute to well-being,” said Dr Tov, 32, an American who teaches at the Singapore Management University (SMU). “I see it as just being informed.”

SMU’s Associate Professor in Psychology Christie Scollon said while the science of happiness does show that people can take steps to boost happiness that can last, she cautions against looking for “quick fixes”.

“A life coach might be able to help you identify your priorities, but once you figure out what your priorities in life are, it might still be hard to stick to them.”

But for those eyeing classes to learn tips, self-styled “happiness coach” Sean Lim can help.

The graduate from the School of Positive Psychology, a private institution in Orchard Road, will be running courses in community centres at $15 a head.

“Singaporeans are very stressed and lack work-life balance,” said Mr Lim, 36, who also has a day job in financial advising. “A lot of people here are focused on material goals in life and not really leading life to their fullest.”

The graduate diploma holder in applied positive psychology, and author of Happiness Within Your Reach, said: “It is all about building someone’s potential, reviewing goals and priorities in life, focusing more on the positive side of life and on relationship building. The more effort you put in, the happier you will get.”

Mr Lim currently prides himself on being Singapore’s first such “happiness coach”, but if the enrolment numbers at his alma mater are any indication, positive psychology appears to be a growing area of interest here, and more such educators in happiness could surface in the next few years.

The School of Positive Psychology was founded in 2007 by trained clinical psychotherapist Stephen Lew, a 34-year-old Singaporean, with an initial class of 20 students and four staff members.

Six years on, the class intake has jumped to 100, overseen by 18 teaching and non-teaching staff.

Diploma courses take between six months and a year to complete and costs range from $6,900 to $8,000.

Mr Sean Xie, 27, a software developer, is ambivalent about such courses: “It might help some people, but I just don’t feel that’s the right way to approach happiness. Can you coach happiness out of someone? I don’t know.”

hteshan@sph.com.sg