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As Student Mental Health Worsens, Colleges Embrace Happiness Courses

Centenary University's new master's degree program in happiness studies emerges as courses related to well-being proliferate on college campuses.

By Sara Weissman

Tal Ben-Shahar was thriving academically as a second-year computer science major at Harvard University. He had good grades and a robust social life, and he thought he should feel happy. But he wasn't, and he wanted to understand why.



Centenary University psychology professor Tal Ben-Shahar believes happiness can, and should, be taught.

The desire for answers ultimately led him down an academic career path focused on researching and teaching about happiness. Ben-Shahar, now a psychology professor at Centenary University, a private liberal arts institution in New Jersey, launched what he believes is the first accredited master's degree program in happiness studies last fall.

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A little over 90 students enrolled in the first year of the two-year online program. He hopes a similar size cohort will start the program this upcoming fall.

Ben-Shahar previously taught positive psychology at Harvard, a discipline that's a couple of decades old and focused on the scientific study of what makes people thrive, but happiness studies is a nascent field, he said. He's long believed academia needs an "interdisciplinary field of study that looks at what philosophers have to say about happiness, and theologians, and literature, and neuroscience, and psychology."

"We all want to become happier," he said. "Happiness is an end in itself, but happiness is also a means towards an end. Meaning, if you increase levels of well-being, relationships improve, teamwork improves, performance ... improves, whether we're talking about kids in school or employees in a company. We see that engagement and motivation all go up. There are so many by-products of happiness, positive side effects of happiness."

Ashley Michael, an adjunct professor hired to help facilitate the program, said what differentiates a program like this from "a yoga retreat" or other such wellness programs is the scientific backing.

"The underlying base of it is it's really a program about building people's resilience and their grit to some extent ... but doing so through science-based and evidence-based research," she said.

She added that students are from a variety of countries, including Vietnam, South Africa and countries in Europe and South America, which adds a "richness" to class discussions.

Happiness, or a growing lack thereof, has become a matter of global concern. The United Kingdom appointed a minister for loneliness in 2018 to address what then prime minister Theresa May called a "sad reality of modern life." U.S. surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory earlier this year calling attention to a national "epidemic of loneliness and isolation," which he labeled a "public health crisis."

Meanwhile, mental health challenges have skyrocketed on college campuses. A recent annual survey of 96,000 students in the U.S. from 133 campuses showed the highest rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation in the survey's 15-year history during the 2021–22 academic year. Among survey respondents, 44 percent experienced depression, 37 percent had anxiety symptoms and 15 percent reported having seriously considered suicide.

"Right now, we are experiencing a mental health crisis," Ben-Shahar said. "We experienced it pre-COVID, and of course things got a lot worse as a result of COVID ... While the field of happiness studies is not a panacea—it's not the ultimate and sufficient antidote to the mental health crisis—it can certainly help a great deal."

He noted that most students in the class are working adults who hope to bring the lessons they learn to other areas of their lives, including their jobs.

Jim Schatzle, a longtime paramedic and the CEO of a safety training company in New Jersey, said he was motivated to join the program after watching his colleagues burn out under the stress and emotional intensity of their jobs during the pandemic. He said he wanted to learn strategies that would help others in emergency medicine, going "all the way back to the ancient philosophers" and "all the way through the latest research and studies done last month."

He said his children and co-workers have commented on his more upbeat mood since starting the program.

It's affected "every aspect of my life, from parenting—which is my biggest and most important job, of course—to CEO of a company ... to just an interaction when I'm pulling into a parking lot and somebody cuts me off and takes the parking spot that I was going into," he said. "A year or so ago, I would've gotten angry about that, actually

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maybe even verbalized my anger or did a gesture with my arms that wasn't very flattering. But now, I was just going to drive to the next parking spot."

That act might seem "so simple," but he believes if all of his classmates also experience those small changes and teach others, then that's a "revolution."

Alla Klymenko, a student in the program who works as a psychologist, said the program not only supplies her with new research and techniques to use with her clients but gave her tools to cope after she and her family fled to the U.S. from Ukraine last year because of the war. She partnered with Ben-Shahar and other colleagues to create a free online resiliency course for Ukrainians that began a couple months ago, hoping to help others facing similar levels of fear and uncertainty.

She said people are sometimes skeptical when she tells them she studies happiness, and some even dismiss it as an "unnecessary" field of study. But she reminds them that most pursuits in life, such as having a career or family, are about seeking fulfillment, but people don't necessarily feel happy when they attain those goals. To her, that's worthy of "serious" academic inquiry.

"People know what success is," she said. "But they don't know what happiness is."

The Happiness 'Revolution'

Students have flocked to classes on happiness and well-being in recent years.

A course called Psychology and the Good Life at Yale University, nicknamed the "happiness" course, enrolled nearly 1,200 students, a quarter of the undergraduate student body, the first time it was offered in 2018. The course later attracted at least four million learners on Coursera, an online learning platform, and a newer version of the Coursera course for teens, introduced earlier this year, had almost 100,000 participants.

"I think students are voting with their feet— they don't like this culture of feeling so stressed and anxious, and they're seeking out empirically based strategies they can use to feel better," Laurie Santos, the psychology professor at Yale who teaches the course, said in an email.

Santos was inspired to offer the class after becoming the head of Silliman College, a residential hall on campus. She lived alongside students and said she saw the high levels of stress, anxiety and depression they were experiencing firsthand. She believes more and more colleges and universities are offering these kinds of courses and programs as other academics come to the same realization that students need strategies to navigate college's many stressors.

She highlighted several studies that suggest learning happiness techniques improves students' well-being. For example, one 2021 study found significantly better mental health among students who took a psychoeducational happiness course during the pandemic.

Grant Martzolf, professor and UPMC Health Systems Chair in nursing science at the University of Pittsburgh School of Nursing, is working on a paper about the proliferation of these kinds of courses and finding different versions of them cropping up constantly at higher ed institutions across the country. Some classes are focused on teaching de-stressing strategies such as mindfulness and yoga, while others are housed in philosophy or psychology departments.

Martzolf and two colleagues, an engineering professor and an English professor, taught an interdisciplinary course called Happiness and Human Flourishing for the first time this spring. He favors a multidisciplinary approach because, while the disciplines in academia are "very siloed," "we know that the human person is integrated," such

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that health, economics, psychology and other disciplines are all relevant to what it takes for people to thrive, he said.

David Sanchez, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering at the University of Pittsburgh, said his field might seem like an odd fit for a course on “flourishing,” but engineering at its heart is about the “human element,” designing and creating solutions that serve people’s needs.

“Your engineering design is only as good as your anthropology is deep,” said Sanchez, who is also associate director of the Mascaro Center for Sustainable Innovation at the university.

He added that he sees his engineering students struggling with the transition to college and regularly questioning their own intelligence and worth and whether they’ll succeed academically.

“How well can someone learn in an existential crisis?” he said. “When I think about student outcomes, and their learning, it’s completely hampered by this existential angst and this crisis.”

Sanchez noted, however, that as happiness-related classes proliferate, it’s going to be important to “look into the details” to ensure they’re high-quality and evidence-based, not just offering students “a few life hacks.”

Martsof believes the rapid expansion of these courses, and how popular they are, raises larger questions about the purpose of higher education—if the goal is to prepare students for the workforce or, more broadly, “to live well,” especially as jobs become more automated and people may have more leisure time. He said the status quo isn’t meeting students’ “deep-seated needs.”

“I think that the model that we thought would work—and I think this is the model that we think works for kids generally—is that we can give them a career ... and give them material resources, and then they’ll be fine,” he said. “I just wonder, what’s going on in higher ed that’s making these [happiness] classes necessary?”

Ben-Shahar has plans to start happiness studies bachelor’s and doctoral degree programs at Centenary in the future, and he hopes other colleges and universities follow suit.

“My hope is that there will be hundreds of thousands of happiness studies departments, just as there are thousands of psychology departments and history departments,” he said.

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