



August 5, 2023

## For \$17,700 you can get your master's degree in happiness: 'This is too important a field to be at the mercy of self help'

By Alexa Mikhail

Tal Ben-Shahar was a gold-star student. He studied computer science at Harvard in the early 90s and played on the squash team, excelling both in the classroom and on the field. He checked off all the boxes, he says, but it didn't change his state of mind.

"It really didn't make sense to me why I wasn't happy," he tells *Fortune*.

During his sophomore year, Ben-Shahar visited his academic advisor and requested to switch studies, despite his success. He began studying philosophy and psychology, which he decided based on a gut instinct—partly, because of his personal experience with mental health challenges.

"The reason why I became interested in happiness was because of my own unhappiness," he says. Ben-Shahar studied positive psychology for the next few decades, lectured in the field, and earned his Ph.D. in organizational behavior. It wasn't until he was on a plane, traveling from the U.K. to the U.S. in 2015, that he questioned the absence of a more expanded academic field beyond positive psychology.

"How is it that there is a field of study for psychology, for history, for journalism, for biology, for medicine, geography, you name it, but there is no field of study for happiness?" he asked himself. "Why isn't there a field or rather an interdisciplinary field of study that looks at one of the most important questions known to humans?"

The degree is indisputably timely as collective emotional and mental distress laid bare a decline in overall well-being—not to mention alarming burnout rates exacerbated by the loneliness epidemic. Ben-Shahar, who has authored a plethora of happiness books including *Happiness Studies: An Introduction* highlights a gap in academic study that can help not only individuals but systems feel happier.

Enter, the Master of Arts in happiness studies—the science of well-being.

### Why a master's degree

"This is too important a field to be at the mercy of self-help and the New Age movement," he says. To his knowledge, his program is the first of its kind. "We know that if you increase the levels of happiness, innovation

# MEDIA Coverage



and creativity go up significantly. So for these reasons, and many others, happiness or focusing on the well-being of employees is no longer a luxury. It's a necessity."

Since launching the happiness certificate program five years ago with the Happiness Studies Academy, Ben-Shahar has helped thousands of students from over 85 countries ranging from ages 16 to 90 learn about the science of happiness.

He took the program a step further, launching the happiness master's degree in conjunction with Centenary University in Hackettstown, New Jersey in October. About 90 students from across 15 countries ranging from age 24 to 70 are currently in the 20-month program set to graduate in 2024. They come to the program from a wide range of disciplines and interests—doctors, therapists, managers, and lawyers, to name a few.

One student says the program "holistically changed my life," in a testimonial. He serves as the vice president and general manager for a Fortune 50 company. "It represents the most profound learning experience I have ever engaged." Others share the same sentiment, seeing the courses as life lessons versus resume boosters.

The program is entirely online, although Ben-Shahar spearheads retreats around the world for people to come together and learn alongside each other (the 3-day World Happiness Summit took place in Italy this year).

"It is a good investment regardless of the profession you're in," he says, noting people who graduate can excel in the field they are already in, or become a coach, consultant, or even a chief happiness officer. The tuition for the degree is \$17,700.

## The happiness curriculum

The University of Pennsylvania created the first positive psychology degree in 1998, which has since been emulated around the globe. However, the master's program goes beyond psychology, looking at happiness from a historical, biological, anthropological, and economic perspective, and even a popular culture lens through film and music. The curriculum combines psychology with readings from Aristotle, Diane Foyle, Helen Keller, and Will and Ariel Durant, Ben-Shahar says. Classes include "Philosophy & Happiness," "Happiness in Literature & Film," and "Integrative Leaders on Happiness." To be eligible for the Masters, you need a bachelor's degree.

"Just like you have microeconomics and macroeconomics, we have micro happiness and macro happiness," Ben-Shahar says.

The degree will inform people how to live happier lives individually and within the systems and communities they lead.

"It was literally starting from scratch because we didn't have precedents to rely on," Ben-Shahar tells Fortune, who created academic standards for the field, outlining a syllabus, curriculum, and assessment plan for approval. He admits the curriculum will evolve as it takes off.

Ben-Shahar's goal with the degree "is to help people learn about evidence-based interventions, evidence-based tools and techniques that can help them become happier, and that can help them help others do the same."

## The 5 pillars of well-being

For starters, Ben-Shahar says the science of well-being boils down to SPIRE: spiritual, physical, intellectual, relational, and emotional well-being.

# MEDIA Coverage



## **Spiritual well-being**

For many, spiritual well-being may be religious. For others, it's about finding ways to feel awe and be in the present moment.

"Spiritual well-being is about finding a sense of meaning and purpose," he says.

## **Physical well-being**

Physical well-being is about getting exercise, eating healthy, feeling well-rested, and limiting screen time. All of these factors play into bolstering both our mental and physical health.

## **Intellectual well-being**

People who are curious are more successful and happy, Ben-Shahar says.

Intellectual well-being is about "deep learning," he says. "Whereas curiosity kills the cat, it actually helps people live longer."

## **Relational well-being**

Ben-Shahar argues relational well-being is the most important pillar of happiness. After all, the strength of our support systems is the key to living a healthy life, according to the longest longitudinal study on happiness conducted by Harvard researchers.

"Relational well being is also about generosity and giving and kindness, that of course, don't just make the world a better place, they also make our lives better," Ben-Shahar says.

## **Emotional well-being**

Emotional well-being is about having the tools to manage life's inevitable but not-so-great emotions.

This pillar is essential because a master's in happiness "will not exempt you from painful emotions."

"Painful emotions are natural. They're part and parcel of every life, including a happy life," Ben-Shahar says. "The question is, how do we deal with painful emotions when they arise, not whether or not they arise."

Ben-Shahar hopes to launch a Ph.D. in happiness in 2024.

"I'm hoping to see more happiness studies programs around the world," he says.

—\*—