

## Tal Ben-shahar's The Science of Happiness

Speaker: Tal Ben-shahar

"It's not always being happy," said Tal Ben-shahar at the beginning of his talk on "The Science of Happiness" given on October 22, 2015, at the World Knowledge Forum. In his discussion, Dr. Ben-shahar, former Harvard University lecturer and Chief Learning Officer at Happier TV, encouraged people to sharpen their focus on positive aspects in their lives.

Emphasizing negative aspects of life is not the way to achieve positive results, said Dr. Ben-shahar. Instead of asking, "What's wrong? What's the problem? What is my weakness?" we instead should ask ourselves, "What's going well in your life? What's working in your business unit? What are your strengths as a leader, as a manager?"

This is the field of positive psychology, which, while seeking to fix problems, also tries to enhance what is working.

"The science of happiness is all about focusing on what works," said Dr. Ben-shahar. "That's it."

Positive psychology is not an area of self-help, Dr. Ben-shahar clarified, but is based on actual scientific research. He seeks to approach the issue of happiness from an academic perspective and cites real-life case studies to support ideas about happiness he presents.

One case study he referred to was research in at-risk populations. Traditional psychologists seeking to understand and improve lives in at-risk populations in the years after World War II tended to ask questions like, "Why do individuals and organizations in these places fail? Why is there so much crime? Why do so many teenagers become pregnant?" These questions focused on negative aspects within those populations, and as a result programs implemented in response to these questions yielded no positive results. "The net impact of these programs in 32 countries was zero," said Dr. Ben-shahar. They simply didn't work.

In the 1980s, people started phrasing their questions differently. Instead of focusing on negative qualities of life for people in at-risk, they began phrasing their questions in a positive manner: "Why do some people succeed despite facing such difficult circumstances?"

As a result, programs created in response to these questions began to yield positive effects. This was because they phrased their questions in a manner enabling them to learn from the success stories. "With our questions, we define reality," Dr. Ben-shahar said. If we ask questions that focus on positive areas of life, we thus can create a reality in which success, and thus happiness, becomes more possible.

So what exactly should people do when approaching life with a positive attitude? Dr. Ben-shahar offered a few specific suggestions:

(1) Give and volunteer. "There's a lot of research today showing that when we give, resilience levels, happiness levels go up significantly," said Dr. Ben-shahar.

(2) Have an optimistic outlook. "We do not fulfill our potential for love, for happiness, if we do not also—not only but also—focus on what is working," he said.

(3) Focus on strengths rather than weaknesses. Dr. Ben-shahar suggested asking yourself, "What are my strengths?" and "What energizes me?" to help enhance your strong elements and help achieve a zone of peak performance.

(4) Identify strong role models. For this, he recommended reading biographies. "The best self-help books are biographies," he said. Why? "Biographies give us reality. The ups and the downs, the wins and the losses." They illustrate resilience, an important trait of happy, successful people.

(5) Engage in physical exercise. Doing thirty minutes of physical exercise three times a week makes a person happier and more productive. "In psychology, then, it turns out that physical toughness was translated into mental toughness," Dr. Ben-shahar said.

(6) Be grateful. Research in psychology shows that people who visualize what they are grateful for prior to going to sleep are “happier, more optimistic, more successful, more generous, and they are physically healthier,” said Dr. Ben-shahar. Recognizing what you are grateful for and what you appreciate around you will make you more successful, productive, creative, and satisfied with their work.

“A lot of these things are common sense,” said Dr. Ben-shahar, “but unfortunately not so common.”

by Joseph Rogers