



The key to happiness

The Women's Foundation Life Skills workshop introduces students to some basic theories on positive psychology, teaching them how to lead happy and fulfilled lives through creative activities and inspiring talks

REFLECTING on his experience in the workshop, one student wrote, "We were divided into four groups. Each group had to delegate some members to serve as observers and the rest were asked to make use of the materials inside an envelope to lift up a 500ml water bottle above the desk. While everyone was concentrating on building up a water bottle castle, our observers were sticking things on our backs. After the game, we were allowed to read the post-it notes on our backs and I was surprised by all the nice words our observers had

said about us. People always say I'm kind and caring but it was the first time I was told I'm creative and motivated. I was delighted to be told that I have these **characteristics**."

Positive thinking

THE reaction of this student is nothing out of the ordinary. Regardless of whether we are adults or teenagers we sometimes lose sight of who we are. Professor Samuel Ho teaches clinical psychology at City University of Hong Kong and examines how **positive cognition** (positive thoughts and ways of interpreting events) may have a role in facilitating resilience in the face of life's challenges. He and his team have identified three 'virtues' that lead to experiencing more positive emotion; 'vitality', which encourages motivation, curiosity and creativity; 'interpersonal' is to do with relationships and showing kindness towards others; and 'attitude' which encompasses persistence and determination.

Nurturing strengths

THE key to being a happier person, and Professor Ho stresses here that these virtues are not necessarily related to achievement, is figuring out which of the three virtues is strongest and being able to apply that strength in study or work. At the same time, we must seek opportunities to develop our weaker virtues. Once we are aware of our particular strengths we need to spend time cultivating them by utilising them in studies or work. People who are in their element experience more positive emotion and that in turn leads to an ability to have a broader view,

a wider range of experiences and build up a diverse set of skills and knowledge. And it is this broader and deeper repertoire of skills and knowledge that allows happier people to also achieve more.

According to Professor Ho, the best thing a parent or teacher can do for a child is to give them an opportunity to experience flow (to be engaged in an activity that they are passionate about) in a way that draws on and cultivates one of the three virtues. Obviously, students may experience flow while playing video games, but are they playing games that can also develop their vitality, interpersonal, and attitude virtues in a real-life context?

Go with the flow

HIS tip for parents is to "let your children find something they intrinsically love to do, and let them do it. If you let them develop their interest, they will experience more flow." On the other hand, Professor Ho advises against forcing students to learn lots of different things that they do not enjoy. Through the passionate pursuit of one activity that constantly offers new challenges to be overcome, the student learns to set goals and develop strategies to achieve those goals. Every goal achieved leads to a boost in confidence and a **virtuous** cycle is established.

"By the time a student is in secondary school if they grew up having no say in what they like or do not like to do because the parents have already arranged everything for them, it's very difficult for them to know what they like," Professor Ho explained. Not knowing what they like or do not like saps them of their motivation and desire to set and **pursue** goals. "That's why it's so important to allow children in the early years of primary school to explore and decide for themselves what they like doing," he added.

"Parents need to change their thinking that playing sports is a waste of time," Professor Ho exclaims. Doing so is **equivalent** to taking away an opportunity for the student to develop important cognitive skills that will pave the way to future happiness and success. ●

