

Young Singaporeans' recipe for happiness Well-being of both self and family is central ingredient

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HAPPINESS seems to be on the minds of many people in Singapore lately. More recently, it was the theme of Senior Minister of State for Education Lawrence Wong's speech at the National Day Rally in August.

This increased awareness among the populace could also be attributed to the growing number of happiness-related reports in the news media with the headliner being the Earth Institute's World Happiness Report commissioned by the United Nations.

The report ranked Singapore among the happiest countries in Asia. While this seems all well and good at the country level, it leads one to ask: Are young Singaporeans happy?

This question was put forth to participants at the recently concluded Young Singaporeans Conference that was held on Sept 26.

A flagship programme of the Institute of Policy Studies since 1993, the conference invites young Singaporeans between the ages of 25 and 35 across different sectors of Singapore society to discuss their views on issues of national interest. This year, the conference theme was on happiness, given the ever-expanding interest in the subject.

During the course of the conference, participants were encouraged to complete a personal mind-map on their views pertaining to the question: What is happiness to you?

These individual mind-maps were enlightening and several threads were observed. It might surprise many that money did not feature as prominently as one would initially expect.

This observation is not surprising; in fact, in the area of happiness research, it is in line with what academics like economist Richard Easterlin have been arguing for many years.

Simply put, once a person's basic financial needs are satisfied, more money does not necessarily equate to an increase in one's sense of happiness.

Among the many different branches observed in the mind-maps, the two most interesting and commonly reported by participants were self (the individual) and family.

Again, this seems in line with more recent research reported in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. In its issue last month, an article reported the centrality of social relationships cited by research participants as being a key element for long-term happiness. For the study's purpose, the construct "social relationships" was defined as "family, friends and partners".

At a more analytical level and with the support of existing research literature, the authors observed that people are inherently social, and the relationships that people create or are part of and the social capital that results from these relationships are pertinent to one's happiness.

At the Young Singaporeans Conference, relationships with family members featured prominently in the mind-maps produced. Within the family, depending on availability, it meant being surrounded by one's immediate family, for example, one's parents and children if married. It also included the extended family.

Further, the participants' recipe for happiness also included having familial relationships that promote communication, were caring, supportive and understanding. Friendships were observed to be an important ingredient for individual happiness as well.

One may argue that the demands from self and family should create tension with regard to happiness. However, as the article cited earlier has argued, they actually work in tandem and I would go a step further to say that one needs both to be happy. The mind-maps suggest this too.

In view of this observation, it does make one ponder, since it did not feature as a main thread in any of the personal mind-maps: Where is government in the scheme of things in relation to the issue of happiness? What can government do? Should it take a more proactive approach with regard to its citizens' happiness? Or is there a better alternative to this?

According to another publication, *Happiness And Public Policy: Theory, Case Studies And Implications*, there is an alternative. It points out that "governments do not have to, and indeed should not, pursue happiness for their citizens, they can facilitate that pursuit by creating an environment that (favours) such pursuits".

The key role for government is, therefore, to act in the capacity of a facilitator. This is an important point; oftentimes, governments go all out in the pursuit of happiness for their citizens when they should not.

Happiness is subjective and, more importantly, different individuals or groups may take different paths towards their happiness. There is ultimately no one-size-fits-all policy on happiness.

The two areas raised in this article provide a starting point for the Government to take on a facilitating role towards helping its citizens achieve happiness.

The Government's role in this case could take the form of providing an enabling environment to allow each individual the space to decide and embark on their own paths towards their happiness, be it in the form of more alternatives to encourage lifelong learning or fostering work environments that are inclusive as well as allow for greater flexibility.

The family is an important institution here not only to provide support at different stages of the individual's life course, but also as an important contributor to happiness. Family policies that seek to strengthen familial bonds may pay dividends in the long term as opposed to more economic incentives for individuals, which are often temporal.

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To see the "Happiness" mind map, please click [here](#)