

How to be happy

Polls show Singaporeans are a dissatisfied lot. So here are 10 rules to help them lead happier lives

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The results of the recent Gallup poll, as well as other surveys, seem to indicate that Singaporeans are an unhappy people. This surprises me because, objectively, we should be a happy people. I consider myself a happy person. I would therefore like to share with my fellow Singaporeans 10 rules which may help to make them a more happy people.

Rule No. 1

Be a positive, optimistic and kind person. Whether you are a happy or unhappy person depends largely on yourself. Negative and pessimistic people are generally unhappy people. Be kind to others. Kindness begets kindness. Try to do a good deed every day. You will find that by brightening the lives of others, you will brighten your own life.

Rule No. 2

Have a happy family. Be good to your parents. If they are elderly and living by themselves, try to visit them at least once a week and share a weekly meal with them. One of the problems encountered by our older folks is loneliness.

Be on excellent terms with your spouse. Whenever I am asked to speak at wedding dinners, I always advise the groom to do three things: Be faithful to his wife, treat her as if they were still courting and give her all his money. The last advice does not apply in cases where the wife is a spender and not a saver.

As for how to behave towards one's children, I have always liked the advice given by Kahlil Gibran: "And though they are with you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts."

If you are lucky enough to have grandchildren, love them with all your heart.

Rule No. 3

Find a job you enjoy doing. I think one of the reasons so many Singaporeans are unhappy is that they do not like their jobs. Since we spend so much of our lives at work, it is important to find a job which is not a chore to endure but a pleasure to do. In recent years, I have noticed a trend of many Singaporeans leaving their jobs for other jobs which pay them less but give them greater satisfaction. This is a good thing.

Rule No. 4

Treasure your friends. In your life journey, you will make many friends - at school, at university, in sports or other activities and at work. I hope you will develop a small circle of very good friends, friends who will stand by you in good times and bad times.

Rule No. 5

Exercise regularly. My wife and I try to swim every day. Exercise not only makes you healthier, it also makes you feel better. Therefore, make regular exercise a part of your lifestyle. You can't be a happy person if you are not in good health.

Rule No. 6

Enjoy eating but eat healthily and avoid the sin of gluttony. Singapore is a culinary paradise. Food is abundant, diverse and affordable.

You can eat well on any budget. Let us enjoy our food but let us also exercise some discipline when choosing what to eat. I have always tried to follow the ancient Asian wisdom of stopping when I feel 80 per cent full.

Rule No. 7

Be a volunteer and support philanthropy. I once heard a speech by Mrs Barbara Bush, the wife of the 41st President of the United States. She said there was a period in her life when she suffered from depression. Instead of seeing a psychiatrist or taking medication to overcome her depression, she decided to be a volunteer. She found that by helping others less fortunate than herself, her depression gradually disappeared.

Whether we are rich or poor, we should contribute to a cause or causes close to our hearts. In spite of our favourable tax regime and the presence of many wealthy people in our society, I was very disappointed to see how lowly Singapore ranked in the table of countries for philanthropy. A wise man once said that no man could be truly happy if he lives only for himself.

Rule No. 8

Read books and listen to music. Reading is an excellent habit. Books keep me company when I am alone. Books transport me to another country, another culture, another time and into the lives of other people. Reading is an endless source of happiness. So is music. I listen to music every day. I thank 92.4 FM for bringing me so much joy every day.

Rule No. 9

Take pleasure in the little things in life. My wife and I love our regular walks in the Botanic Gardens. I love to watch the sunset. I find joy in meeting an old friend, attending a concert at the Esplanade and visiting a wonderful exhibition at one of our museums. Most of all, I enjoy being with my grandson.

Rule No. 10

Don't envy others. I received this good advice from a wise man, Dr Wee Kim Wee, our sixth President. Dr Wee once told me that one of the reasons which caused people to be unhappy was that they were envious of others. Dr Wee said he never envied his friends who had a better education or earned more money or lived in bigger houses or owned more expensive cars. His rule was to be contented with what he had. I think this is a good rule. Philosophically, it would be even better if you could feel vicariously happy when you see your friends and former students doing well in life

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