Pursue absolute happiness, not relative happiness

By Monica Kotwani | Posted: 17 March 2012 1752 hrs

SINGAPORE: The next time when you are torn between splurging on an expensive bag and a getaway to a resort island, opt for the experience.

That's according to these speakers from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Technology, Entertainment, Design (TEDxNTU).

Pursuing absolute rather than relative forms of happiness was one of the many ideas discussed at the TEDxNTU forum.

TED is a US-based, non-profit organisation that holds conferences aimed at sharing ideas and inspiring people.

Dr Nick Powdthavee, Assistant Professor at NTU School of Humanities and Social Sciences, said: "No matter how well you do, it's a relative thing. It's not just good enough to be good enough anymore. You have to be better than other people. And that's really bad for our happiness.

"Humans tend to pursue the relative kind of happiness, because in relative, they're much scarcer. The friendships that we have at home, we take them for granted. But we know that we care about other people's status. If someone moves up the ladder, we become unhappy if we stay still or move down. What happens is we're stuck in a happiness treadmill - we will never become happier because we cannot stop other people to pursue their own dreams."

Dr Powdthavee said this culture is evident even in Singapore and in particular, the Asian education system.

"I used to teach in England, and when we were asked to grade students, everybody can get A's if they meet an absolute standard but not here, not in Asia in general. There's a bell curve."

Attaining that elusive state of being happy could also be as simple as responding in the right way.

Associate Professor Maureen Frances Neihart, Head of NIE Psychological Studies, said: "When people share good news with us, there's four ways in which we can respond. We can ignore them; change the subject; acknowledge them; or we can acknowledge, affirm, and invite them to say a little bit more about it. It turns out that the last kind of response is key to building strong relationships.

Relationships are one of the strongest predictors of how happy people are.

Measuring happiness has gained momentum in recent years, especially after Bhutan made headlines for its focus on its Gross Happiness Index. And while experts say determinants of happiness are similar throughout the world, there can be culture-specific ways of measuring it.

Dr Powdthavee said: "My personal belief is that you can't really make inter-country comparisons because culture has an impact. What we could do is within a given country, there is a distribution of happiness that varies from country to country and we can find the things that determine people's happiness in each country."

The TEDxNTU is an independently organised series of biannual talks organised by the TED community of NTU.

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