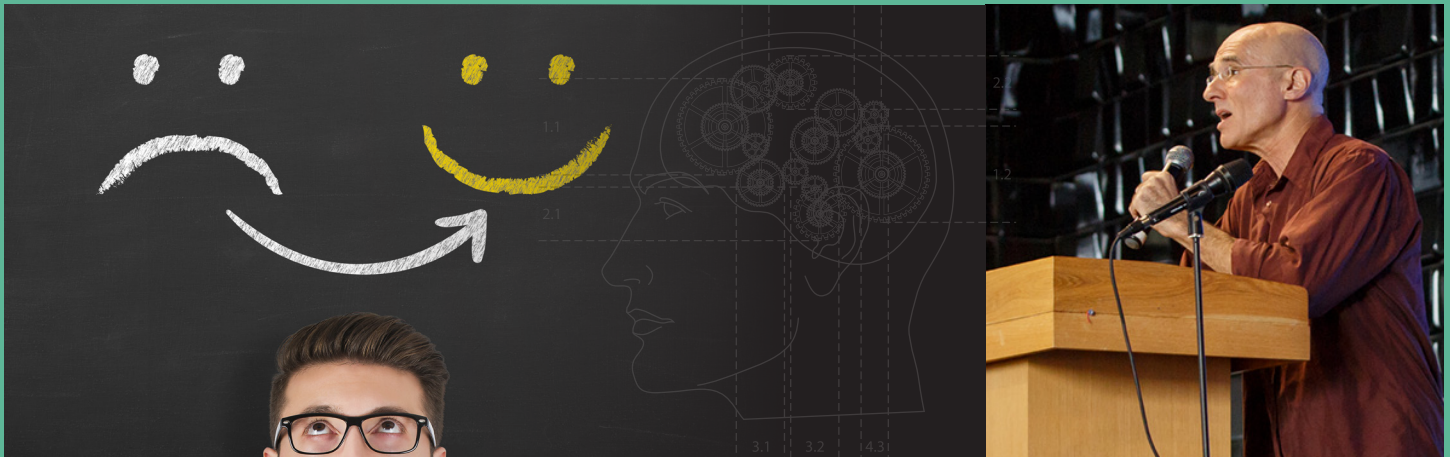




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A GURU OF HAPPINESS APPLIES KNOWLEDGE TO PREVENT SUICIDE

With all the challenges that Israelis and their country face, studies and public opinion surveys indicate that Israelis are among the happiest people in the world.

Why?

Answering the question – what makes people happy? – is the life’s work of Hebrew University Professor Yoram Yovell. A mega-star in the “science of happiness,” Yovell is a psychiatrist, brain researcher and psychoanalyst with a PhD in neurobiology and several bestselling books to his credit. He is also a familiar face on Israeli television. He will be doing a Western Canadian tour in 2019, hosted by Canadian Friends of the Hebrew University.

On a societal level, Yovell says, the countries that rank highest on the United Nations’ happiness scale

are the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, then Israel. What these places all have in common – and what Yovell identifies as prerequisites to national happiness – is a Developed World economy with social stability, fundamental freedoms, basic infrastructure like clean water, and a good social welfare and health system.

People in these countries also tend to feel a sense of social cohesion and purpose. In Israel, for example, that cohesion and purpose are reinforced by the near-universality of military service and the decision to live in the Jewish state.

These intangible values can even trump economic well-being. Once basic economic needs are met, additional average incomes do not impact much on happiness, he adds.

“For example, Israel is higher up [on the happiness scale] than countries where the mean average national income is higher, like Germany, like France, like England, like the United States. All these places have higher incomes than Israel, but their happiness scores are lower,” says Yovell. “It has to do with the extraordinary social cohesiveness here. Even though Israeli society is more fragmented than it used to be, it’s still a very, very cohesive society and there’s a sense of mutual responsibility.” While Israeli Arabs report being less happy than Jewish Israelis, they are happier than their Arab cousins in neighbouring states.

“That has to do with the fact that Israel is a democracy, that it has freedom of speech, that there’s a judiciary system that works, that you can still get a fair trial,” he says. “If they come to the

hospital, they know that they would get equal care, and the care is good.”

Measuring happiness at the macro – national – level is easier than predicting whether an individual will be happy in their life, adds Yovell, whose work has centred on this core concern. While being part of a socially cohesive community and having a sense of purpose plays into individual happiness, Yovell and PhD student Michal Horesh are now applying Yovell’s research to the flip side of happiness – unhappiness at its worst, which leads to suicidality.



Prerequisites to national happiness include a Developed World economy and a sense of social cohesion and purpose.

DR. YORAM YOVELL



“There is a lot of effort being put into an attempt to predict suicide and we’re not terribly good at it, unfortunately,” says Yovell. “What we did learn is that what pushes most suicide victims over the edge is unbearable mental suffering. In that sense, most people who kill themselves do so not because they don’t want to live anymore, but rather because they can’t stand to suffer anymore.”

A pivotal discovery in recent decades is that the neurobiology of mental pain and physical pain partially overlap within the brain circuits that mediate the experience of pain. Knowing this, Yovell’s research has indicated that treating mental pain similarly

to physical pain might reduce suffering enough to alleviate the immediate danger of suicide.

“There’s good treatment for depression,” he says. “There is no treatment for suicidal ideation.”

Treatment of depression can include psychotherapy, medications or a variety of responses. But these take time. The urgency of alleviating the immediate danger of suicide is what Horesh’s research will address. Opioids, which are used in high doses to treat chronic pain, will be applied in tiny doses and for a limited time to people suffering from suicide ideation. While most opioids are dangerous in high doses, which makes them unsuitable for suicidal individuals, Horesh and Yovell will be using tiny doses of buprenorphine, which is much safer and less addictive than all other currently used opioids.

Yovell’s research was published in the American Journal of Psychiatry and concluded that the “time-limited, short-term use of very low dosages of sublingual buprenorphine was associated with decreased suicidal ideation in severely suicidal patients without substance abuse. Further research is needed to establish the efficacy, safety, dosing, and appropriate patient populations for this experimental treatment.” This further research is what Horesh will undertake, under Yovell’s supervision.

Suicidality in adolescents can present in ways that differ from that of adults. Because of the

impulsiveness typical of that age, suicidality can sometimes present even in the absence of depression. An event – like a romantic breakup – can lead to sudden suicidal ideation in erstwhile stable individuals. It is also not uncommon, Yovell says, for a young person to arrive at a hospital suicidal in the evening and feel fine in the morning. These are some of the reasons that finding very short-term treatments for the issue is so critical.

For more information, or to support this groundbreaking research, please contact vanc@cfhu.org.



Dr. Yoram Yovell coming to Canada – 2019

Dr. Yoram Yovell will tour Western Canada in 2019, delivering a series of presentations made possible by the Dr. Robert Rogow & Dr. Sally Rogow Memorial Endowment Fund.

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