

# Finding what makes people happy

**David Thien**

KOTA KINABALU: Malaysians, according to a pre-GE14 report in March 2018, were a happy lot. Malaysia climbed up the rankings to be the 35th happiest country in the world, according to World Happiness Report 2018.

Malaysia jumped seven spots to 35th place from 42nd in 2017. Happiness is a sense of wellbeing, joy, or contentment. When people are supposedly successful, or safe, or lucky, or contented, they feel happiness.

The latest ranking puts Malaysia as the second happiest country in East Asia, just one spot behind Singapore (34).

In spite of that, Malaysians voted out the Federal Government on May 9, 2018. The Sabah Government also changed, and so did the leadership of the Sabah think tank.

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Sabah post-GE14, with a new chairman and CEO, organised a talk recently, entitled "How to be Happy?"

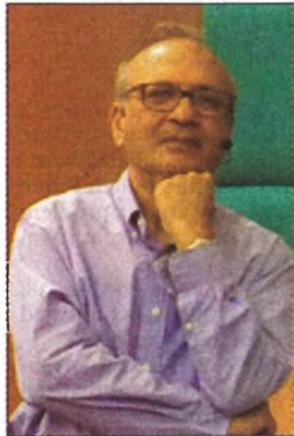
Its Chairman Tan Sri Simon Sipaun and CEO Dr Johan Arriffin Samad invited a happiness expert, 65-year-old Dr Mohsen Mirza, to speak on the subject.

Different people feel happiness for different reasons and all, mostly upper-middle class attendees, of the Sabah Talk were given a copy of Dr Johan Arriffin's opinion piece published on the Internet and print media on "Malaysians Should Learn How To Be Happy."

He elaborated on his visit to Europe last October during which he liaised with many Scandinavians and compared with more negative-minded Malaysians who are too engrossed with negative news on the Internet.

Dr Johan found that the happiest people appear to live in Nordic countries. Finland is top in the world when it comes to happiness, according to the 2018 report, followed closely by Norway and Denmark. The report cites six significant factors which contribute to happiness - GDP per capita, social support, life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity and corruption levels.

The IDS CEO wrote when he asked some Danish people why they were regarded as the happiest people in the world even though they lived in a country with one of the highest tax regimes. Their general answer was: we know where our money was used, and it's given back to the people in terms of free



Dr Mohsen



Dr Mohsen (fourth from left) with Sipaun, Dr Johan and others.

education, free medical services and better infrastructure. Every cent goes back to the people.

Dr Johan wrote that if you are tired of bad or negative news, Denmark has a news portal on the "World's Best News". It is a journalistic awareness campaign that publishes news about the progress in developing countries and global goals, with localised editions in Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands.

He opined that Malaysians should celebrate the next International Day of Happiness in a big way. We should go out on the streets, hug each other and do community work to strengthen our bonds.

"With a new government in place, we should be happier than we have ever been since independence, especially when Malaysians now can speak freely," he said.

The IDS CEO wants the Sabah Talk function to be an avenue for the exchanges of ideas and the think tank has lined up more interesting speakers with Senator Adrian Lasimbang next to encourage discussion in a free manner, besides other security conferences.

The invited speaker shared his knowledge on happy Scandinavian societies like their welfare system that provides for unemployed workers to receive 60 per cent of the last drawn salary.

"What is happiness? Wellbeing, mental, physical, social spiritual, etc., appreciate the present and optimistic about the future."

"Why? For better health, live longer. Have better relationships, more successful at work as productive community members, and able to recover quickly from mishaps."

With traits of active listening, practising mindfulness and meditation regularly, Dr Mohsen Mirza spoke on the bottom-up approach of creating a happy and grateful community with positivity goals that should be SMART - specific, measurable, appropriate, relevant and time specific.

He went through the choices of how to be happy.

"Psychology does not focus on illness and what's wrong with the people but their better aspects."

Dr Mohsen Mirza knows people who are addicted to exercising for the feel good happy hormone endorphins that the brain secretes, but he cautioned against overdoing it, leading to bone joint disorders.

"Great life goals provide meaning and context for existence."

He suggested, among others, that intelligence is not about problem solving but also appreciating music, for example, appreciating people, be able to think, feel and react positively to circumstances in a multi-facets, multi-dimensional approaches, not single dimension appreciation of living in the present with hopes for the future.

"Appreciate today, living in the present, rather than without hope for a better future."

"Happy people live longer, sleep better. Stressed people with mental illness give up on others but themselves, and happier people recover better from illness."

Bhutan is one unique country that measures the happiness of its citizens by its Gross Happiness Index, not by GDP like UK where increasingly higher yearly

GDP rates, the happiness of its people remains constant since WWII.

"Getting richer but not happier. 10 per cent depend on money, environment. 5 per cent is genetic, while 40 per cent depends on choices and actions."

The happiness rate in the US, the richest country in the world, is dropping as the years went by, according to Dr Mohsen Mirza, as he spoke briefly on epigenetics, how our forebears being hunter gatherers in hostile environment predisposed us to focus on the negative as part of our nature or culture for survival since the era of the cavemen environment.

"Positive attitude leads to better health, better relations and success. The action required is to practise gratitude."

He said being happy improves our immune system, improves relationships and with better relationships, we can better make up our own luck.

"It's important to practise gratitude, focusing on the small things in our own control, and such positivity can impact our brains as some got bigger and better from degenerative ailments, as Neuroplasticity shows, which is the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life."

"Do good to feel good which will activates the brain reward system with recurring gratifications."

There's no better way to happiness than helping out others and every time you think back about having helped others, about the good you have done in the past, the memories will bring happiness to you, Dr Mohsen Mirza said.