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Warning: Happiness can be contagious
By Christina Hennessy, Staff Writer

It is a right our forefathers called "inalienable" 234 years ago -- part of a powerful triad that also included life and liberty. The pursuit of happiness was worth fighting for, they wrote in the Declaration of Independence, urging that the time had come to usher in new leadership to ensure such rights were maintained.

In the current movement of positive psychology, and other disciplines and efforts focused on creating healthier and happier people, the adherents are no less adamant. Happiness is a choice, they say, that requires practice and work. And, their work is focused on giving people the tools and resources needed to help them make such choices.

"Happiness is a decision," said [Lionel Ketchian](#), who decided 19 years ago to lead a truly happy life. That meant making certain choices so as to create "an inner state of well-being that enables you to profit from your highest thoughts, intelligence, wisdom, awareness, common sense, emotions, health, and spiritual values."

Too often, he said, people cede control of their happiness to others or to situations, such as allowing someone else's anger to make them angry or slipping into a state of helplessness and hopelessness when presented with a problem.

The 64-year-old said one of the most common obstacles to enduring happiness is an inability to deal with the frustrations, challenges and problems of daily life. When a person is unable to effectively deal with a problem, he said, it often causes anxiety and unhappiness. So, one still has the original problem, which hasn't been solved, and now there is the subsequent problem of unhappiness.

"It is like slapping yourself in the face because someone hit you," he said.

Ketchian, whose professional background is in printing and sales, said he has read thousands of books on psychology, self-help and personal growth and has attended many lectures on positive thinking for more than 20 years. He used that background to conduct a class on happiness at [Sacred Heart University](#) in 1999, which eventually became the first [Happiness Club](#).

During any given month, there could be quite a few such clubs meeting in towns across Fairfield County. And, in the 10 years since Ketchian launched his first one in Fairfield, the movement has grown to include 70 clubs across the world, including those in Dubai, Australia, France and Israel.

The groups are linked primarily through the Web site happinessclub.com, which includes information about the meetings, as well as tips and resources, reading lists and in some cases free downloads and tests.

The meetings, which take place in Greenwich, Norwalk, Stamford, Bridgeport Wallingford, Milford and other sites, are varied. A speaker might be slated to talk about a recent book or study of positive thinking. A film could be shown. A discussion could take place. Or, as in the case of a recent Sunday meeting in Westport at the [United Methodist Church](#), about thirty people gathered to watch a filmed talk by one of the leading scholars of positive psychology, [Tal Ben-Shahar](#), who gained media attention several years ago when the "Positive Psychology" course he taught at his alma mater, [Harvard University](#), attracted 900 students, making it the most popular at the school.

One of the leading centers of this study is based at the [University of Pennsylvania](#). Called the [Positive Psychology Center](#) it is led by psychologist [Martin Seligman](#), one of the leaders in the field.

Positive psychology is defined as "the scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals

and communities to thrive," according to the center's Web site.

In practice, [Jerry Eyster](#), the facilitator of the Westport Happiness group that meets on Sunday evenings, said that means looking into "what it means to have a good life; what are the components of a good life and how do you achieve that."

Eyster, who is a Fairfield resident and has had a career in consulting and marketing, said he strives to put together an interesting and informative program for the meetings, but the camaraderie and chance to meet and talk with others is often an equally important part of the draw.

"Happiness is contagious," he said at the start of Sunday's meeting, pointing to previous studies on the subject. "If you are around happy people, you may become happy yourself. That's the danger of coming here and spending time with us."

Ketchian said the membership varies based on the time and place of the meeting, as well as the mission of the group -- some are just for teens or single seniors, for instance.

In Jon Barb's case, his first Westport meeting was an excellent example of relying on that inner peace, rather than letting frustration and angst rule his emotions.

A Danbury resident, the 61-year-old had arrived thinking he might actually get to meet Ben-Shahar in person. (He'd misread the meeting announcement.) And, he had given himself a window of 15 minutes to arrive early, but a few wrong turns had him barely arriving on time.

"Yet, I've been happy the whole night, even with the experience I had coming down here," he said. "I experienced frustration, fear and anger, yet I had this inner sense of well-being. And when you have this inner sense of well-being, I think you bounce back much sooner than someone else."

[Dr. John Tamerin](#), a Greenwich resident who has practiced psychiatry for the past 40 years, has been working with Ketchian on a "happiness" project, which may lead to a book.

Tamerin said the decision to become happy is a "substantial" one and one that takes hard work. At its simplest, it is giving people the tools to approach life's challenges in a sensible, pragmatic and thoughtful approach, he said, rather than responding by feeling badly, becoming bitter or blaming others.

That said, he noted that "it is hard to get there. It takes a lot of practice and you must be determined to stay there when things go wrong."

In practical terms, it means preparing for any situation by thinking ahead, determining one's goals and envisioning other's reactions. And, taking that deep breath or counting to 10, the commonsense advice your parents and teachers told you to do when faced with a difficult situation helps, too.

That extra pause eventually is repeated so often that it becomes a new habit, giving your brain time to catch up to the immediacy of your emotions. "Instead of your emotions riding you, you have to learn how to control your emotions," Tamerin said.

Bridgeport resident Saul Estreicher said not only has he gained invaluable knowledge by attending the Westport and Fairfield groups, but he has made some close friends.

What is empowering, he said, is to be surrounded by people who have made the decision to find that inner sense of centeredness.

"They have the same interest in turning a situation around," he said.

As for the naysayers who say the movement may be "too Pollyanna," or overly optimistic, Estreicher said, if anything, the effort is one of the toughest tasks a person can do -- stay positive in the face of life's hardest challenges and yet remain fully in the moment.

After his son died three years ago, Estreicher said it was something with which he had to come to terms. He cited the work of [Rabbi Zelig Pliskin](#), who wrote "Gateway To Happiness," as being particularly helpful. A free condensed version of that book is available at happinessclub.com.

"True happiness can only come from within," Estreicher said.

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