

Common Ground is a coalition of Bay Area schools created to enhance parent education.

The goal of the coalition is to provide opportunities for parents and educators to learn from experts in a variety of fields, to share ideas with others, and to support each other's efforts to enrich our local communities.

The Common Ground Speaker Series features dynamic speakers who are nationally recognized for their expertise in specific areas of parenting, education and/or health. Each year, we strive to present a balanced series that addresses a wide array of issues confronting parents and educators.

### Common Ground Member Schools

The Carey School  
Castilleja School  
Charles Armstrong School  
Crystal Springs Uplands School  
Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School  
The Harker School  
Hillbrook School  
Keys School  
Menlo School  
Mulberry School  
The Nueva School  
Phillips Brooks School  
Pinewood School  
Ronald C. Wornick Jewish Day School  
Sacred Heart Preparatory School (Atherton)  
Saint Andrew's School  
St. Joseph's School of the Sacred Heart  
St. Matthew's Episcopal Day School  
Stanbridge Academy  
Trinity School  
Woodside Elementary School  
Woodside Priory School  
Yavneh Jewish Day School

## LEARNING TO BE HAPPY: The Science of Happiness with Tal Ben Shahar, Ph.D.

Can we learn to be happy? Are there secrets to being a happier person? Tal Ben Shahar, former Harvard researcher and lecturer, would say YES. In a fascinating lecture filled with stories, entertaining video clips and conclusions from the latest scientific research, Tal shared what researchers have learned about the science of being happy. The results fall into four topics: **1. Giving Ourselves the Permission to be Human, 2. Learning to Deal with Stress, 3. Remembering the Mind-Body Connection, and 4. Focusing on the Positive.**

### Giving Ourselves the Permission to be Human

We are under a lot of pressure to be happy. We think that being happy means not having negative or painful feelings. The truth is that we all experience negative emotions; this is what it means to be human. As young children, we fully experience and express a full range of emotions, from great sadness to great joy, even switching back and forth within seconds! As we grow up, we learn to suppress these feelings. But, when we suppress the negative emotions, we also suppress our ability to feel the positive emotions, to feel happiness and joy. Paradoxically, the more you suppress painful or negative emotions, the stronger they become. Rather than suppressing them, the key is to accept these feelings; not with resignation, but with active acceptance. When we accept all our feelings – positive and negative – and choose our actions, we have more control and feel happier.

### Learning to Deal with Stress

We are experiencing a worldwide epidemic of stress. For the first time in recorded history, stress and stress-related issues are the primary reason for lost days of work. Often, we are stressed simply because we are trying to do too much. A recent survey of college students reported that 94% felt overwhelmed by everything they had to do and 45% felt so depressed that they had difficulty functioning.

### Too much to do → Stress (feeling overwhelmed) → Depression

Technology can make it worse. Email, cell phones, and Blackberries encourage multi-tasking for adults and children alike, which erodes our ability to fully engage in the task or situation at hand. Studies show that reading or writing email while doing work that requires concentration can take off the equivalent of 10 IQ points – the same impact as staying up all night!

To be happier, we need to change the way we deal with stress. Research shows that stress in and of itself is not bad. Weight-trainers know that you must stress a muscle to make it grow stronger. The key is recovery time, which is what we are missing. We need to take breaks and build recovery periods into our daily lives.

There are 3 kinds of breaks that we need:

- Micro breaks – mini breaks of a few minutes to a few hours throughout the day
- Mezzo breaks – Getting enough sleep at night (teens and college students are falling far short of the amount of sleep they need) and taking a day off here and there. Research shows that people who take at least one day off a week are healthier and more creative.
- Macro breaks – Weeks or months. While most of us don't have the opportunity to take months off, we should take that week-long vacation time.

*Stress and anxiety lead to shallow breathing, which in turn triggers the stress response. Conversely, deep, "full belly" breathing triggers a relaxation response, which leads to a sense of calm and well being, which results in deep, relaxed breathing.*

We need to simplify, do less, reduce the amount of multi-tasking in our lives and engage more fully with our experiences. Studies also show that people who take one to two hours a day to focus on a task improve the overall quality of their work. Adults and children alike need to build in what Tal calls "rubbish time"- time to do nothing, to just hang out, to play.

We also need to shift our mindset from one focused on achievement of tasks and financial affluence, to one based on "time affluence." More financial success – beyond what is required for food, shelter and education - does not impact our happiness. What has a greater impact is "time." The #1 predictor of well being is the amount of time spent with (being truly present and engaged with) family and friends.

# Mark Your Calendars

## **RAISING SELF-DISCIPLINED AND CONFIDENT KIDS with Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

One of the most important roles a parent plays is disciplinarian, yet few parents agree on what that entails. Join us as Dr. Brooks - one of the nation's leading authorities on the topics of resilience, motivation and family relationships - helps parents explore various disciplinary styles and outlines positive strategies that will encourage children and teens to become more responsible, respectful and confident. He will leave us with a clear plan for preparing our children to become independent adults.

**Tues., November 18,  
7:00pm**

Crystal Springs Uplands School  
400 Uplands Drive  
Hillsborough  
(650) 342-4175

**Wed., November 19,  
7:00pm**

Hillbrook School  
300 Marchmont Drive  
Los Gatos  
(408) 356-6116

**Thurs., November 20,  
9:00am**

**(Morning Session)**  
Foley Center at St. Joseph's School of the Sacred Heart  
50 Emilie Avenue  
Atherton  
(650) 322-9931

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## **Remembering the Mind-Body Connection**

While most psychology research focuses on the neck up (the mind), what we do with our bodies from the neck down has a significant impact on how happy we are. Tal focused on two aspects of the mind-body connection and its impact on happiness: Exercise and Meditation.

### Exercise is the Unsung Hero!

Numerous studies show that exercise can have a significant impact on treating depression. Regular exercise can deliver the same health benefits as popular anti-depressant medications and have longer lasting effects and lower relapse rates! Rather than seeing exercise as an anti-depressant, Tal sees that NOT exercising is the same as TAKING a depressant! Our bodies are made to exercise, not to be sedentary and sit at a computer all day. Declining rates of exercise are leading to rising rates of depression. Depression is 10 times more prevalent than it was in the 1960s and is appearing at younger ages. In 1960 the average age of the onset of depression was 29; today it is 14½.

An increasing body of research shows that the positive impacts of exercise on the brain can be a powerful. One study that tracked the effects of increased exercise levels in schools showed that more exercise led to a decline in obesity and violence and an increase in school performance and happiness. The good news is that we can all benefit from the positive effects of exercise in as little as three 30-minute aerobic sessions a week.

### Mindful Meditation

Meditation is the practice of maintaining focusing on one thing, bringing the mind back to focus when it wanders, while breathing deeply and regularly. Researchers have begun to study the physiological impact of meditation on the brain. Studies of "professional meditators," such as Buddhist monks, show they have higher activation levels in their right pre-frontal cortex, and are more resilient to negative experiences. As a group, they are happier, have less anxiety and stronger immune systems. While the experienced meditators were "off the charts" in their right pre-frontal cortex activation levels, researchers have shown that positive changes can occur in average people. One study tracked the impact of 45 minutes of meditation a day on a group of average adults. After just 8 weeks, not only did participants report improvements in their moods and reductions in anxiety levels, but their brain scans showed higher activation levels in the right pre-frontal cortex; other tests showed stronger immune system responses.

Not all of us have time to meditate 45 minutes a day (although positive results can occur in as little as 15-20 minutes per day). But, we can all learn to breathe more effectively! Deep breathing can deliver some of the benefits of meditation. As few as 3 deep breaths, performed every few hours throughout the day, we can make a significant difference in an individual's sense of well being. Tal advises choosing a common occurrence in our day - such as stopping at a red light - as an opportunity to take these 3 deep breaths.

### **Focusing on the Positive**

We all know that frequently we come to appreciate something only after we lose it. Tal posed the question, "Do we have to wait for something external and extraordinary to occur before we learn to appreciate the ordinary?" Of course, the answer is NO. Researchers have studied the impact of gratitude, the act of being grateful for ordinary things, big and small, in our lives. Their research shows that when we make gratitude a habit we are both happier and healthier. Simply writing down 5 things a day that we are grateful for can increase our sense of well being and improve our immune systems. Tal proposed the idea of keeping a "gratitude journal," and making 5 entries per day. Tal shared how he does this nightly with his children, telling them how grateful he is for them, and with his wife to foster their relationship. The key to making it work, he shared, is to do it in a mindful way, to keep it from becoming just a habit, by imagining what we are grateful for as we write it down.

Tal Ben Shahar closed by saying that all this is common sense, but in the words of Voltaire, "Common sense is not that common!" The key is to take steps today to apply these simple actions throughout our day and our lives. So how can we be happier?

- Give yourself permission to be human.
- Simplify your life.
- Exercise 3 times a week for 30 minutes.
- Take breaks to reduce stress.
- Take time during the day to focus on a task or project for one to two hours.
- Limit multitasking; turn off your email or Blackberry for an hour each day.
- Start a gratitude journal.
- Spend time with your greatest treasures, the people you love and who love you.

And the next time you stop at a red light ... breathe!

*One of the first things new college students stop doing is exercise, right when they need it most to deal with the stress of adapting to the college environment!*

*Exercise can make you smarter! New research in the fields of neuroplasticity and neurogenesis is also yielding exciting results. Scientists are learning that exercise promotes the formation of new neurons and improves both memory and creativity.*