

What S'pore can learn from emotional Philippines

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In Mercer's Quality of Living survey, Singapore takes first place in Asia and 25th place in the world. Manila, on the other hand, is ranked 128th.

These findings came two weeks after a Gallup poll for the World's Emotions Index made headlines with the news that Singapore is apparently the least emotional nation on the planet, while the Philippines rates as the most emotional. Meanwhile, The Economist released a survey last month on where respondents would have liked to be born. Singapore took sixth spot and the Philippines 63rd. Ask a Filipino and they might say they would have wanted to be born in Singapore.

Yes, Filipinos can learn from Singapore about integrity and curbing corruption, safety, discipline, investing in infrastructure and education and more. But Singaporeans could also benefit from the emotional Filipinos and their recipes for a happier life:

1. Experience emotions

Singaporeans tend to be hard on themselves, while Filipinos are at the other extreme. Research shows that the happiest people are those who also allow themselves to experience negative emotions. People who try to suppress painful emotions are those who struggle for longer to recover from bad events.

In her research on vulnerability, research professor Brene Brown found that trying to avoid shame, fear, grief and disappointment numbs our entire emotional system because we cannot numb emotions selectively. Folks with the courage to be imperfect have the

compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others. Vulnerability is the birth place of authentic joy, creativity, belonging, love and humour.

2. Tap social relationships

While Singaporeans tend to keep their emotions to themselves, Filipinos tap their social relationships for emotional support to express negative emotions and celebrate the positive. Singaporeans can benefit from enlarging their “emotional trust circle”.

When was the last time you sat and listened to the emotional needs of your sibling or a friend? A good start for Singaporeans can be to schedule a casual monthly lunch with a sibling or a soul mate and let them unburden.

3. Practise gratitude

While many young Singaporeans take prosperity for granted, Filipinos given the chance to earn a better living overseas are grateful for it. Research has shown that practicing gratitude on a regular basis contributes to positive emotions and our overall well-being.

The Three Blessings is a practical exercise from positive psychology, in which one records three things that went well during the day and why. In his book *Flourish*, American psychologist Martin Seligman says people who did that every night for a few weeks reported higher levels of happiness and lower levels of depression for the following three to six months.

4. Giving and receiving service attitude

Many Singaporeans look down on jobs in the service industry because of its unglamorous image, long hours and low pay. Filipinos find joy in serving others with genuine care. Research shows that people who are involved in giving feel happier.

5. Sing and dance

Filipinos love to dance and sing. In fact, you will find many of them singing while working, adding joy to mundane tasks. Both singing and dancing happen in the now — when we listen to a song, we do not just wait for the end. It is a way to enjoy life as a journey rather than as a destination.

6. Playfulness and humour

Over-seriousness is a great disease in this world. Playfulness is not just about being silly without reason. In the heat of adversity or a challenge, our emotional brain tends to hijack our reactions, upping the risk that we will jump to conclusions to later regret. But when we use appropriate playfulness and humour, we defuse negative emotions and can then focus on finding solutions and learning from mistakes. We also benefit our health by avoiding the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline which numb our immune system.

7. Rest more

One of the five questions in the Gallup survey was: “Did you feel well-rested yesterday?” Singaporeans tend to work excessively long hours, an average of 46.6 hours a week. Perhaps it is time for local employers to check the productivity and total cost of extra-long hours in terms of the burnouts and talent loss.


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Avi Liran is an economist who lived for 15 years in Singapore. He is the co-founder of the Joy-Care Leadership programme which employs the evidence-based tools of positive psychology.

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