Why is this course a good fit for summer during the pandemic? 
Van Cappellen: To maintain and improve our own well-being, it is important to reflect on our personal strengths and on small but consequential everyday decisions we can make. In addition, these times have been particularly challenging for everyone, and although sometimes it feels selfish to think about our own well-being, research shows that being in a good place is important to be able to help others. Whether it is for oneself or to be a resource for others, I find that learning about the science of how to lead a full and meaningful life is always important and even more so now. The pandemic may have disrupted our good habits and our usual sources of happiness, but as we will learn, flexibility and creativity are key to long-lasting commitments.

Why did you want to teach this course? 
Van Cappellen: This course is related to my own interdisciplinary research program, which focuses on the psychology of positive emotions, religion and spirituality. As a postdoc, I trained under the supervision of Professor Barbara Fredrickson who is a pioneer in this movement of positive psychology. I’m looking forward to sharing the knowledge that has accumulated very rapidly in this new fascinating field and help students discern strategies that have been rigorously tested from others. It will be fun to welcome guest speakers during the class who are dear colleagues and experts in their domains.

Can you give us an overview of what you’ll be teaching? 
Van Cappellen: The course provides an overview of the theories and research on what makes humans flourish and thrive (positive psychology). We often try to minimize the negative aspects of our lives while we forget about promoting the good aspects. For example, we will critically evaluate the science of gratitude, meditation, relationships, and questions such as: can money buy happiness? Why do we focus on the one negative comment and not the positive ones? Students will also be invited to try out activities and apply practically this new science. Finally, to make a change in their community, students are asked to create a public-outreach video as their final project and present specific tips to increase positivity in people’s lives.

Why is social science research important? 
Van Cappellen: There is a significant part of our happiness that is not simply determined by our biology. Social science research sheds light on the social, contextual, and psychological factors that influence our happiness. This kind of research also highlights the tricks that our human mind plays on us to see the world differently and how to rig the system for our own advantage.

I hope this knowledge can be helpful in student’s own lives as well as the ones of people around them. However, knowledge alone cannot build happiness, we need experiences. I hope students can learn, experience, and share with others, practical activities that have been shown to promote well-being.

Why is social science research important? 
Van Cappellen: There is a significant part of our happiness that is not simply determined by our biology. Social science research sheds light on the social, contextual, and psychological factors that influence our happiness. This kind of research also highlights the tricks that our human mind plays on us to see the world differently and how to rig the system for our own advantage.

The deadly COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on U.S. citizens, residents, society, and economy are among the greatest crises the U.S. has ever faced. Duke’s Social Science Research Institute is responding to this crisis in real time by taking steps to initiate and coordinate research and reach out to students to help us navigate through this extraordinarily difficult period.