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# How to be cool in school? A dating expert offers SMU students a five-step approach

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Having coached hundreds of men and women through the ups and downs of their love lives, dating expert [David Tian](#) is used to dispensing advice on how people ought to better their odds at love and romance.

Speaking to a group of students at Singapore Management University's (SMU) [School of Social Sciences](#), the former assistant professor of philosophy at National University of Singapore turned executive director at [Aura Dating Academy](#) chose to focus, instead, on interpersonal attraction and how one might come across as "cool" to others.

Why do people date? Tian asked. "We're looking for someone to love us for our wounded, vulnerable, pathetic selves. And if we can't get that, then we think we need plastic surgery, or we need to act like somebody that we're not," he joked.

It may be tempting to think of "attraction" as a phenomenon guided by rationality – and this seems to be how people like to make sense of why people do or do not get along. "But attraction is not a choice. It is intuitive and driven by feelings," explained the "Date Doctor" (Tian's moniker on *Class 95*, a Singapore radio station).

Taking the class through what other researchers have uncovered in the fields of sub-communications, micro-expressions and the mirror neurons wired within our brains, Tian presented several anecdotes to illustrate the common misconceptions around how attraction works.

"I'm often asked: There's this girl I've been pursuing... I've done so many things; I've driven her around town, taken her to concerts, bought her dinners, complimented her, and bought her flowers... I try to be there whenever she needs me, and I repeatedly tell her that... Why is it that after I've sacrificed so much for her, she still doesn't like me?"

Then there are the "What should I say so that the other person will fall in love?" types of questions, he said.

In a just world, we would expect qualities like diligence, persistence and persuasiveness to pay off, but things are a lot more complicated when it comes to attraction, said Tian. In fact, most of us would have encountered people whom we find offensive, annoying or irritating – yet, strangely, attractive.

"Ninety per cent of what we consider as attractive does not come from conscious calculation, but from rapid, unconscious cognitions and split second judgments of sub-communications," Tian explained. People may think they know why they arrived at certain opinions or decisions, but there are intuitions and feelings at work that are often not acknowledged.

Also, what people say about themselves is perhaps less about the words, more about the "sub-communication" cues like body language, tonality, and facial expressions.

Can people control or manipulate these cues to achieve desired outcomes; to make others like us better, or to appear more attractive?

Tian believes that sub-communications (e.g. tone, eye-contact) can be controlled to a limited extent – because if it does not come naturally, it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to micro-manage thoughts, feelings and actions over a prolonged period of time.

Academic research on lie-detection has also shown that humans are not skilled at hiding true intents and feelings. Tian pointed to a study on micro-expressions that show how emotional experiences are involuntarily manifested through facial and body muscles.

So what can people do, realistically, to become generally attractive, or to seem "cool" to others?

Tian suggested that people should start by first understanding what they find attractive: "Think about who you most like to be around, and try to be more like that person." This, however, is not to say that one should be pretentious or inauthentic.

"Studies on mirror neurons show that when someone sees an emotion, they experience it for themselves," Tian explained. The idea is thus to project those emotions that one desires – and in so doing, "infect" others to feel the same way.

We all desire to be happy and to have fun, he said, and so, a person who feels bright and cheerful will likely influence others around him or her to also experience these feelings. Similarly, "if you feel the wrong mix of emotions, you will transfer these wrong emotions".

But what if the "right" emotions do not come naturally? "Having fun is the most difficult," Tian admitted. However, once that hurdle is crossed, the rest will follow more naturally, he assured the students.

For starters, Tian recommends following these five steps.

1. **Be present:** In school or at work, we meet the same groups of people day-in and day-out. One should make an effort to see, and to be seen by other people.
2. **Make eye contact and smile** – particularly with those people that one might chance upon regularly in the classroom, workspace, or along the corridor.
3. **Interact** with these familiar people. Say hello, make light conversation and exchange names.
4. **Initiate and make plans** at subsequent meetings to have a casual drink or meal to continue chatting.
5. **Repeat this with multiple people**, and introduce your new friends to one another.

Ultimately, if the goal is to make friends and enlarge social circles, these strategies, tactics and logistics are but just 10 per cent of the work, suggested Tian.

The rest is up to our illogical, irrational and unreasonable mindsets.