Pharmaceutical sciences professor Mahtab Jafari shares a laugh with some of her students while photographing fruit flies in the lab.

LIFE LESSONS

UCI pharmaceutical science professor Mahtab Jafari saw students using drugs to get through the stress of studying. So, she developed a course to help them find a balance outside of class.

Mahtab Jafari discovered that many of her students were using pharmaceuticals such as Ritalin to stay awake and Xanax to get to sleep.

One drug was counteracting the other, said Jafari, associate professor of pharmaceutical sciences at UC Irvine. “Then they go through this vicious cycle of no sleep or too much sleep,” she said. “It compromises the immune system.”

Students were under academic stress, worried about their GPA, she said.

They also came to class with energy drinks. If she could take a trash bag and empty the store shelves of things that are bad for you, she might start with energy drinks.

With teaching duties and a full slate of experiments going on in her lab, Jafari said she had enough to do, and putting too much on her plate is one of the things that cause her to be stressed.

But she decided she needed to do something to help her students better balance their lives.

She developed Life 101, a two-unit course that launched last winter semester. “I felt my students needed it,” she said.

The class is now required for pharmaceutical majors. It is open to all majors. One day she hopes to open the class to the public.

The course, which begins again in January, addresses 10 topics over 10 weeks.

“She wants to make students’ lives easier, open their eyes and plant the seed in their head that it’s not just all about getting that A.”

SEE JAFARI • PAGE 2
JAFARI

FROM PAGE 1

The topics deal with nutrition, exercise and informing students about drugs. They also delve into mental and spiritual well-being, which includes embracing people from different backgrounds, and emotional intelligence, which is the ability to perceive, understand and manage emotions.

“She wants to make students’ lives easier, open their eyes and plant the seed in their head that it’s not just all about getting that A,” said Beatrice Chiang, a pharmacy technician and one of the students who helped Jafari develop the course.

“Emotional intelligence is more important than IQ when you go out into the real world,” Chiang said.

The future of pharmaceutical science will be a holistic approach, taking into account a person’s mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health, Chiang said. “This is something that the public is going to demand.”

“When it comes to wellness and health, I’m a big believer in preventive medicine,” Jafari said.

“I teach pharmaceutical sciences and pharmacology, but if you come to one of my lectures you would be surprised at how anti-drug or anti-quick fixers I am.”

She doesn’t suggest anyone throw away their medications. Medications are necessary, she said. For example, pharmaceutical drugs are needed for pain management and to fight infections.

“Someone who is clinically depressed needs to take medications. They need to take antidepressants to balance the chemical imbalance,” she said.

“But before we get there, we need to focus on wellness and prevention.” Drugs should be saved as a last resort, she said. They come with side effects.

Jafari’s medicine of choice is nature: Bommer Canyon in Irvine, Crystal Cove beach and El Moro Canyon. She hikes two to three times a week and she walks on the beach at least twice a week.

Walking only a half hour a day can make a marked improvement in peoples’ lives, she said. Walking increases the amount of endorphins – “happy hormones” – in the brain, she said.

The class helped student Pia Dizon get perspective. “She put the science behind why we should be exercising,” said Dizon, who is in her fourth year at UCI studying pharmaceutical science.

“I realized I was taking my academics too seriously,” she said. “My life wasn’t super balanced. I realized it was important to also take my health into account.”

Dizon cut back on oily foods and started running once a week and then two times a week. “I try to balance my life more,” she said.

Another big theme in class is kindness.

“It’s not just about how you perform in class. It’s about how you treat yourself and how you treat others,” Dizon said.

The things she learned in Life 101 also ties into caring for patients, Dizon said. “This is really helpful to treat patients.”

Instead of treating people with drugs, changing lifestyle can be a better option, Dizon said.

Jafari weaves personal stories into her lecture. It makes the class more meaningful for her students.

She shares the story of her first C grade in grad school, and then her second and third.

She has shared one of the most stressful times in her life: sixth grade, living in Iran. She and her family would spend hours in the basement listening to the Iraqi planes drop bombs.

“We were sitting there waiting, hoping that our neighborhood is not the neighborhood that is going to be bombed tonight, and that we would be alive tomorrow to go to school,” she said.

Her family fled Iran in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War and moved to France, where she attended high school and had to learn French. Then they came to California.

Jafari has an upbeat demeanor, but she tells her students that she’s not always happy. Sometimes she’s melancholy.

“I fall too,” she’ll tell them. “Sometimes you fall and in a few days or a few weeks you get up. Sometimes you fall and you’re just comfortable sitting there because you’re miserable.”

It’s also good to be real. “We don’t always have to be happy,” she said. “The key is when you get up.”

Professor Mahtab Jafari: “When it comes to wellness and health, I’m a big believer in preventive medicine.”

CONTACT THE WRITER:
scruz@ocregister.com