

Published February 7, 2023. Editor's headline: "The Secret to a Long Life—Keeping Relationships"

https://www.thecheyennepost.com/opinion/columnists/the-secret-to-long-life---keeping-relationships/article_a8a3644a-a723-11ed-8b1d-2f2e782b88fd.html

At Harvard, the Study of Adult Development has been in the news lately, with a book and a number of videos on what makes people thrive adroitly produced and promoted by its current researchers. The study was begun four decades ago and initially recruited 724 participants, a group of Harvard students and a cohort of kids growing up in Boston's most troubled families and disadvantaged neighborhoods. If I'd wanted to be part of it, I would have hoped for inclusion of the second group. Not that I'd have been selected—the study used exclusively male subjects; its current researchers cum directors are still only male. Participants were given regular medical exams, and they and their parents were interviewed as researchers tracked their lives from childhood to their final days. Would my family of origin have benefitted from the attention? No doubt.

What makes for a fulfilling and meaningful life? The stronger our relationships, the more likely we are to lead happy, satisfying, and overall healthier lives. Indeed, the strength of our connections with other humans can predict the health of both our bodies and our brains. Such is the conclusion of Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, the study's current researchers. By now, the study has covered three generations and 1,300 descendants of the original subjects.

The study's current directors, Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, in early 2023 published, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*. Through all the years of studying these lives, say the authors, one factor stands out: the broad and enduring importance of good relationships and their influence on physical health, mental health, and longevity.

"The number one thing to do if you want to ensure your own health and happiness," said Dr. Waldinger in a recent TED talk, "invest time and energy in cultivating warm relationships of all kinds."

He pointed out, the study found that chronic loneliness is the number one indicator of a person's odds of dying prematurely; indeed, the condition increases a person's odds of death in any given year by 26 percent.

"Loneliness is associated with greater sensitivity to pain, suppression of the immune system, diminished brain function, even less effective sleep," said Waldinger. In other words, besides leading to depression, loneliness is physically harmful.

The Harvard study emphasizes, when individuals function well in high age, they do so because of satisfying relations with a long-term partner. Solo living that maintained good connections with co-workers and friends also fared well.

“Once we had followed the people in the Harvard Study all the way into their eighties, we looked back at them in midlife to see if we could predict who was going to grow into a happy, healthy octogenarian and who wasn’t,” said Waldinger. “We gathered together everything we knew about them at fifty and found that it wasn’t their cholesterol level that predicted how they were going to grow old; it was how satisfied they were in their relationships.”

Waldinger explained that the people who were the most satisfied in their relationships as fifty “were the healthiest, mentally and physically, at age eighty.” The simple measure of time spent with others is quite important: On a day-to-day basis, this measure is clearly linked with happiness, he adds.

Other long-term studies have arrived at similar findings about the role of relationships. People who reported receiving social support also reported less depression, concluded a study that tracked 3,720 adults in Baltimore since 2004. A New Zealand study found that social connections in adolescence were better than academic achievement at predicting well-being in adulthood.

Life is many times more hectic now than it was in 1938. Already in 1987, artist Gretchen Bender constructed a critique of the digital age: Her “Total Recall” consists of a wall of televisions and projection screens emitting a barrage of nonstop flashing images and sound. Since then, the line between entertainment and reality has gotten blurrier still.

In 2018, write the authors of *The Good Life*, “the average American spent an astonishing 11 hours per day interacting with social media, from television to radio to smartphones.” From age 40 to 80, that adds up to 18 years of waking life. “For someone who is 18, that’s 28 years before they turn eighty”—a whole lot of years absent of relationships that keep us healthy.

The Study of Adult Development postulates, strong relationships make for a happy life. More than wealth, I.Q., or social class, it’s the robustness of our bonds that most determines whether we feel energized and fulfilled. Time to take stock. Am I attentive to the people who matter to me? What is the quality of my relationships? How can I do better? How, anyway, does one develop and maintain robust bonds?

Next week’s column will provide answers culled from self-disclosing authors and/or self-help books currently in the news.