

# WHAT THE LONGEST STUDY ON HUMAN HAPPINESS FOUND IS THE KEY TO A GOOD LIFE

The Harvard Study of Adult Development has established a strong correlation between deep relationships and well-being. The question is, how does a person nurture those deep relationships?

By Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz

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TURN YOUR MIND for a moment to a friend or family member you cherish but don't spend as much time with as you would like. This needn't be your most significant relationship, just someone who makes you feel energized when you're with them, and whom you'd like to see more regularly.

How often do you see that person? Every day? Once a month? Once a year? Do the math and project how many hours annually you spend with them. Write this number down and hang on to it.

# *The* Good Life



LESSONS FROM THE WORLD'S LONGEST  
SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF HAPPINESS

CREATE A MORE MEANINGFUL  
AND SATISFYING LIFE

Robert Waldinger, MD  
and Marc Schulz, PhD

This article is adapted from Waldinger and Schulz's new book.

For us, Bob and Marc, though we work closely together and meet every week by phone or video call, we see each other in person for only a total of about two days (48 hours) every year.

How does this add up for the coming years? Bob is 71 years old. Marc is 60. Let's be (very) generous and say we will both be around to celebrate Bob's 100th birthday. At two days a year for 29 years, that's 58 days that we have left to spend together in our lifetimes.

Fifty-eight out of 10,585 days.

Of course, this is assuming a lot of good fortune, and the real number is almost certainly going to be lower.

Since 1938, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has been investigating what makes people flourish. After starting with 724 participants—boys from disadvantaged and troubled families in Boston, and Harvard undergraduates—the study incorporated the spouses of the original men and, more recently, more than 1,300 descendants of the initial group. Researchers periodically interview participants, ask them to fill out questionnaires, and collect information about their physical health. As the study's director (Bob) and associate director (Marc), we've been able to watch participants fall in and out of relationships, find success and failure at their jobs, become mothers and fathers. It's the longest in-depth longitudinal study on human life ever done, and it's brought us to a simple and profound conclusion: Good relationships lead to health and happiness. The trick is that those relationships must be nurtured.

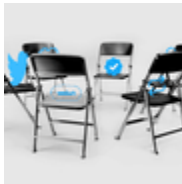
From the June 2009 issue: What makes us happy?

We don't always put our relationships first. Consider the fact that the average American in 2018 spent 11 hours every day on solitary activities such as watching television and listening to the radio. Spending 58 days over 29 years with a friend is infinitesimal compared with the 4,851 days that Americans will spend interacting with media during that same time period. Distractions are hard to avoid.

Thinking about these numbers can help us put our own relationships in perspective. Try figuring out how much time you spend with a good friend or family member. We don't have to spend every hour with our friends, and some relationships work because they're exercised sparingly. But nearly all of us have people in our lives whom we'd like to see more. Are you spending time with the people you most care about? Is there a relationship in your life that would benefit both of you if you could spend more time together? Many of these are untapped resources, waiting for us to put them to use. And, enriching these relationships can in turn nourish our minds and bodies.

YOU DON'T HAVE to examine scientific findings to recognize that relationships affect you physically. All you have to do is notice the invigoration you feel when you believe that someone has really understood you during a good conversation, or the tension and distress you feel after an argument, or how little sleep you get during a period of romantic strife.

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MELVIN KONNER

In this sense, having healthy, fulfilling relationships is its own kind of fitness—social fitness—and like physical fitness, it takes work to maintain. Unlike stepping on the scale, taking a quick look in the mirror, or getting readouts for blood pressure and cholesterol, assessing our social fitness requires a bit more sustained self-reflection. It requires

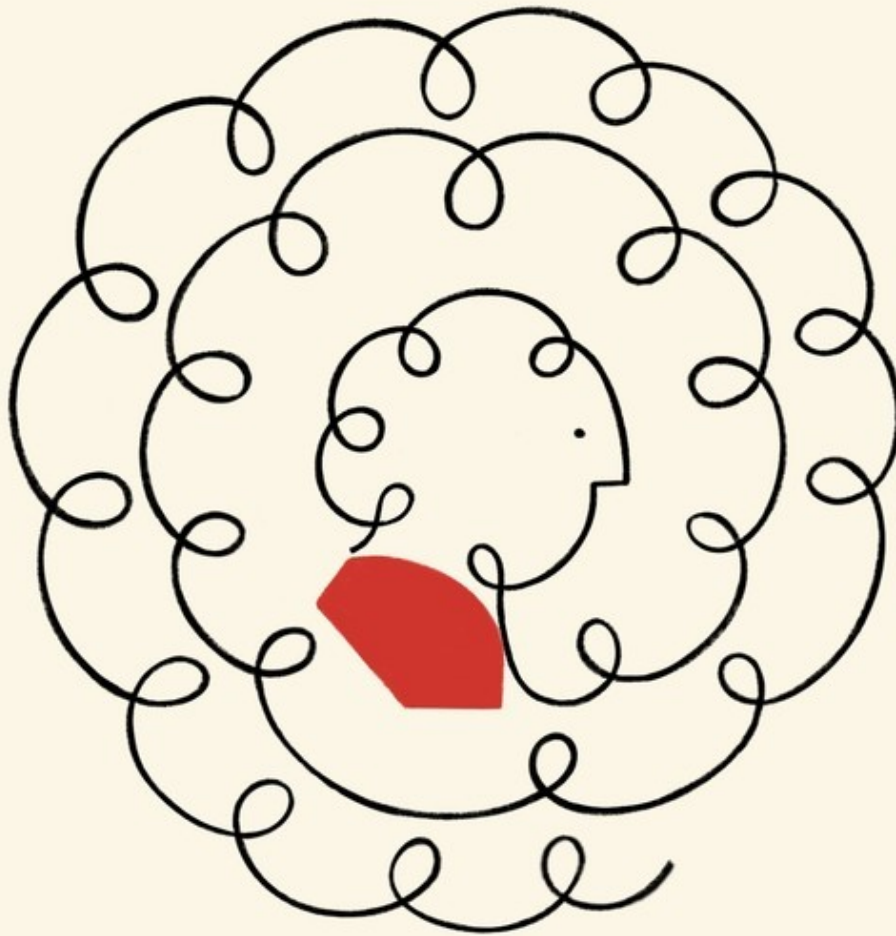
stepping back from the crush of modern life, taking stock of our relationships, and being honest with ourselves about where we're devoting our time and whether we are tending to the connections that help us thrive. Finding the time for this type of reflection can be hard, and sometimes it's uncomfortable. But it can yield enormous benefits.

Many of our Harvard Study participants have told us that filling out questionnaires every two years and being interviewed regularly have given them a welcome perspective on their life and relationships. We ask them to really think about themselves and the people they love, and that process of self-reflection helps some of them.

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This is a practice that could help anyone. Looking in the mirror and thinking honestly about where your life stands is a first step in trying to live a good life. Noticing where you are can help put into relief where you would like to be. Having some reservations about this kind of self-reflection is understandable. Our study participants were not always keen on filling out our questionnaires, or eager to consider the larger picture of their life. Some would skip difficult questions or leave entire pages blank, and some would just not return certain surveys. Some even wrote comments in the margins of their questionnaires about what they thought of our requests. “What kinds of questions are these!?” is a response we received occasionally, often from participants who preferred not to think about difficulties in their life. The experiences of the people who skipped questions or entire questionnaires were also important, though—they were just as crucial in understanding adult development as the experiences of people eager to share. A lot of useful data and gems of experience were buried in the shadowed corners of their lives. We just had to go through a little extra effort to excavate them.

One of these people was a man we'll call Sterling Ainsley. (We are using a pseudonym to protect his confidentiality as a study participant.)



Pierre Buttin

STERLING AINSLEY WAS a hopeful guy. He graduated from Harvard in the 1940s and then served in World War II. After he left the service, he got a job as a scientist and retired in his 60s. When asked to describe his philosophy for getting through hard times, he said, “You try not to let

life get to you. You remember your victories and take a positive attitude.”

The year was 1986. George Vaillant, the then-director of the study, was on a long interview trek, driving through the Rocky Mountains to visit the study’s participants who lived in Colorado, Utah, Idaho, and Montana. Sterling had not returned the most recent survey, and there was some catching up to do. He met Vaillant at a hotel to give him a ride to the diner where Sterling wanted to do his scheduled interview. When Vaillant buckled himself into the passenger seat of Sterling’s car, the seat belt left a stripe of dust across his chest. “I was left to wonder,” he wrote, “the last time somebody had used it.”

Sterling was technically married, but his wife lived far away, and they hadn’t slept in the same room in years. They spoke only every few months.

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When asked why they had not gotten a divorce, he said, “I wouldn’t want to do that to the children,” even though his kids were grown and had children of their own. Sterling was proud of his kids and beamed when he spoke of them, saying they were the most important thing in his life. But he rarely saw them and seemed to prefer to keep his relationships with them thriving mostly in his imagination. Vaillant noted that Sterling seemed to be using optimism to push away some of his fears and avoid challenges in his life. Putting a positive spin on every matter and then pushing it out of his mind made it possible for him to believe that nothing was wrong, he was fine, he was happy, his kids didn’t need him.

He didn’t travel to see his son’s new home abroad, because he didn’t “want to be a burden”—even though he’d been learning a new language

to prepare for the trip. He had another child who lived closer, but he hadn't visited in more than a year. He didn't have a relationship with his grandchildren, and he wasn't in contact with any friends.

When asked about his older sister, Sterling seemed startled. "My sister?" he said.

Yes, the sister he had told the study so much about when he was younger.

Sterling thought about it for a long time, and then told Vaillant that it must have been decades since he last spoke with her. A frightened expression came over his face. "Would she still be living?" he said.

Sterling tried not to think about his relationships, and he was even less inclined to talk about them. This is a common experience. We don't always know why we do things or why we don't do things, and we may not understand what is holding us at a distance from the people in our life. Taking some time to look in the mirror can help. Sometimes there are needs inside of us that are looking for a voice, a way to get out. They might be things that we have never seen or articulated to ourselves.

This seemed to be the case with Sterling. Asked how he spent his evenings, he said he spent time with an elderly woman who lived in a nearby trailer. Each night he would walk over, and they'd watch TV and talk. Eventually she would fall asleep, and he would help her into bed and wash her dishes and close the shades before walking home. She was the closest thing he had to a confidant.

"I don't know what I'll do if she dies," he said.

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LONELINESS HAS A physical effect on the body. It can render people more sensitive to pain, suppress their immune system, diminish brain function, and disrupt sleep, which in turn can make an already lonely person even more tired and irritable. Research has found that, for older adults, loneliness is far more dangerous than obesity. Ongoing loneliness raises a person's odds of death by 26 percent in any given year. A study in the U.K., the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, recently reported on the connections between loneliness and poorer health and self-care in young adults. This ongoing study includes more than 2,200 people born in England and Wales in 1994 and 1995. When they were 18, the researchers asked them how lonely they were. Those who reported being lonelier had a greater chance of facing mental-health issues, partaking in unsafe physical-health behaviors, and coping with stress in negative ways. Add to this the fact that a tide of loneliness is flooding through modern societies, and we have a serious problem. Recent stats should make us take notice.

In a study conducted online that sampled 55,000 respondents from across the world, one out of every three people of all ages reported that they often feel lonely. Among these, the loneliest group were 16-to-24-year-olds, 40 percent of whom reported feeling lonely "often or very often." In the U.K., the economic cost of this loneliness—because lonely people are less productive and more prone to employment turnover—is estimated at more than £2.5 billion (about \$3.1 billion) annually and helped lead to the establishment of a U.K. Ministry of Loneliness.

In Japan, 32 percent of adults expected to feel lonely most of the time during 2020. In the United States, a 2019 study suggested that three out of four adults felt moderate to high levels of loneliness. As of this writing, the long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic, which separated us from one another on a massive scale and left many feeling more isolated than ever, are still being studied.

Alleviating this epidemic of loneliness is difficult because what makes one person feel lonely might have no effect on someone else. We can't rely entirely on easily observed indicators such as whether or not one lives alone, because loneliness is a subjective experience. One person might have a significant other and too many friends to count and yet feel lonely, while another person might live alone and have a few close contacts and yet feel very connected. The objective facts of a person's life are not enough to explain why someone is lonely. Regardless of your race or class or gender, the feeling resides in the difference between the kind of social contact you want and the social contact you actually have.



Pierre Buttin

IT NEVER HURTS—especially if you’ve been feeling low—to take a minute to reflect on how your relationships are faring and what you wish could be different about them. If you’re the scheduling type, you could make it a regular thing; perhaps every year on New Year’s Day or the morning of your birthday, take a few moments to draw up your current social universe, and consider what you’re receiving, what you’re giving, and where you would like to be in another year. You could keep your chart or relationships assessment in a special place, so you know where

to look the next time you want to peek at it to see how things have changed.

If nothing else, doing this reminds us of what's most important. Repeatedly, when the participants in our study reached old age, they would make a point to say that what they treasured most were their relationships. Sterling Ainsley himself made that point. He loved his older sister deeply—but he lost touch with her. Some of his fondest memories were of his friends—whom he never contacted. There was nothing he cared more about than his children—whom he rarely saw. From the outside it might look like he didn't care. That was not the case. Sterling was quite emotional in his recounting of his most cherished relationships, and his reluctance to answer certain study questions was clearly connected to the pain that keeping his distance had caused him over the years. Sterling never sat down to really think about how he might conduct his relationships or what he might do to properly care for the people he loved most.

Sterling's life reminds us of the fragility of our connections, and it echoes the lessons of science: Relationships keep us happier and healthier throughout our life spans. We neglect our connections with others at our peril. Investing in our social fitness is possible each day, each week of our lives. Even small investments today in our relationships with others can create long-term ripples of well-being.

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