The Secrets to a Happy Life, From a Harvard Study

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What does it take to live a good life?

Surveys show that most young adults believe that obtaining wealth and fame are keys to a happy life. But a long-running study out of Harvard suggests that one of the most important predictors of whether you age well and live a long and happy life is not the amount of money you amass or notoriety you receive. A much more important barometer of long term health and well-being is the strength of your relationships with family, friends and spouses.

These are some of the findings from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, a research project that since 1938 has closely tracked and examined the lives of more than 700 men and in some cases their spouses. The study has revealed some surprising – and some not so surprising – factors that determine whether people are likely to age happily and healthily, or descend into loneliness, sickness and mental decline.

The study's current director, Robert Waldinger, outlined some of the more striking findings from the long-running project in a recent TED Talk that has garnered more than seven million views.

"We publish our findings in academic journals that most people don't read," said Dr. Waldinger, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "And so we really wanted people to know that this study exists and that it has for 75 years. We've been funded by the government for so many years, and it's important that more people know about this besides academics."

The study began in Boston in the 1930s with two very different groups of young men.

In one case, a team of researchers decided to track Harvard college students through adulthood to see what factors played important roles in their growth and success. "They thought there was too much emphasis placed on pathology at the time and that it would be really useful to study people who were doing well in their young adult development," Dr. Waldinger said. The study recruited 268 Harvard sophomores and followed them closely, with frequent interviews and health examinations. In recent years the study has also incorporated brain scans, blood draws and interviews with the subjects' spouses and adult children.

At around the same time the study began, a Harvard Law School professor named Sheldon Glueck started to study young men from some of Boston's poorest neighborhoods, including 456 who managed to avoid delinquency despite coming from troubled homes. Eventually the two groups were merged into one study.

Over the decades, the men have gone into all walks of life. They've become lawyers, doctors, businessmen and — in the case of one Harvard student named John F. Kennedy — president of the United States. Others went down different paths. Some became alcoholics, had disappointing careers or descended into mental illness. Those who remain alive today are in their 90s.

Through the years, the study has produced many notable findings. It showed, for example, that to age well physically, the single most important thing you could do was to avoid smoking. It discovered that aging liberals had longer and more active sex lives than conservatives. It found that alcohol was the primary cause of divorce among men in the study, and that alcohol abuse often preceded depression (rather than the other way around).

The study has gone through several directors. Dr. Waldinger, who took over in 2003, is its fourth. He expanded the study so it focused not just on the men but also on their wives and children. The researchers began videotaping the couples in their homes, studying their interactions, and interviewing them separately about nearly every facet of their lives, even day-to-day spats.

As the researchers looked at the factors throughout the years that strongly influenced health and well-being, they found that relationships with friends, and especially spouses, were a major one. The people in the strongest relationships were protected against chronic disease, mental illness and memory decline – even if those relationships had many ups and downs.

“Those good relationships don’t have to be smooth all the time,” Dr. Waldinger said. “Some of our octogenarian couples could bicker day in and day out. But as long as they felt that they could really count on the other when the going got tough, those arguments didn’t take a toll on their memories.”

Dr. Waldinger found a similar pattern among relationships outside the home. The people who sought to replace old colleagues with new friends after retiring were happier and healthier than those who left work and placed less emphasis on maintaining strong social networks.

“Over and over in these 75 years,” Dr. Waldinger said, “our study has shown that the people who fared the best were the people who leaned into relationships with family, with friends and with community.”

Dr. Waldinger acknowledged that the research showed a correlation, not necessarily causation. Another possibility is that people who are healthier and happier to begin with are simply more likely to make and maintain relationships, whereas those who are sicker gradually become more socially isolated or end up in bad relationships.

But he said that by following the subjects for many decades and comparing the state of their health and their relationships early on, he was fairly confident that strong social bonds are a causal role in long-term health and well-being.

So what concrete actions does he recommend?

“The possibilities are endless,” he said. “Something as simple as replacing screen time with people time, or livening up a stale relationship by doing something new together, long walks or date nights. Reach out to that family member you haven’t spoken to in years — because those all-too-common family feuds take a terrible toll on the people who hold the grudges.”