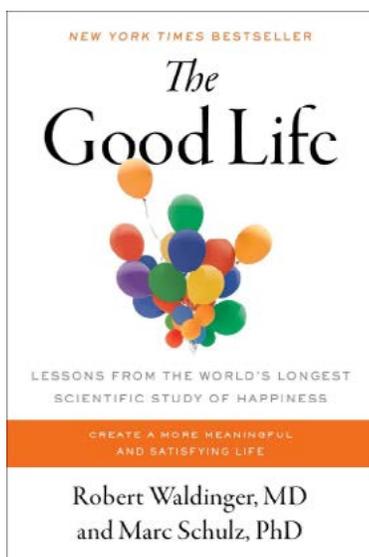


BOOK REVIEW

The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness

Robert Waldinger, MD, and Marc Schulz, PhD
Simon & Schuster, 2023

Reviewed by Johny Van Aerde, MD, PhD



In 1938, what would be the longest longitudinal study on adult development and happiness started at Harvard University. Eight decades and three generations later, 1300 descendants of the original 724 participants remain engaged in the ongoing study. Interviews, surveys, blood samples, even brain images make

up the enormous database used for *The Good Life* by Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz.

Both Harvard professors summarize the entire data set in one sentence at the beginning of their book: "Good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Period." That theme is explored deeply in ten chapters that cover relationships with family members, friends, co-workers, and even with people in general. Indeed, even casual positive interactions – like starting a conversation on a bus, being kind to a cashier or server, any interaction that affects our feeling of belonging – are energizing and can have immediate positive results. All contribute to happiness and, indirectly, to health.

The answer to what makes a good life is not as much external to us as we might think. It is not income or the size of our car or house that makes us happy. What does makes us happy is an internal experience gained through nurturing connections with others.

Where physicians often look at socioeconomic factors that favour disease, this study looks at what makes people thrive: quality relationships. Of course, life includes hard times, but challenges are opportunities for growth and lead to happiness in the long term if we are surrounded by people who care.

The authors offer a frame, WISER, which stands for watch, interpret, select, engage, reflect. The frame helps us look at both the internal and external experiences of relationships, using the skills of self-awareness, self-management, and communication. Once we start looking inward, we can shift from self-centred decision-making toward a more outward-looking, generous way of being. This shift toward a dynamic, amplifying, and two-way process will improve our relationships. Cultivating that outward focus is an essential part of creating and maintaining good relationships of belonging, supporting us throughout our lives. While changing the socioeconomic factors that cause disease takes time and money, adding the psychological and health benefits of kind and caring relationships is free and gives instant happiness.

Even though the 85 years of research can be summarized in one sentence, there are hundreds of analyses and examples in the book bringing that sentence alive: people with the most satisfying relationships at age 50 are the healthiest at age 80. Finding a sense of purpose and meaning in life is essential for happiness and well-being and results in better physical and mental health and less depression and anxiety. Practising forgiveness, gratitude, and generosity is needed to build and maintain strong relationships.

Although not invalidating the research findings, there is one limitation to this study: the homogeneity of the population. Because the study started almost a century ago in Boston, most original participants were white males. However, later generations were less homogeneous, and the findings remained consistent.

In summary, this is a great book. If you don't have time to read it in its entirety, remember this one sentence: "Good and kind relationships that create a feeling of belonging and caring keep us happier and healthier." It's a win-win for all, and it doesn't cost a thing.

Author

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