



March 2023 News and Notes

Lessons of Happiness and Wellbeing

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

In the description of their book, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, authors Waldinger and Schultz summarize their key finding.

“Since 1938, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has been investigating what makes people flourish. . . . 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.”¹

What Is Happiness?

According to *Psychology Today*, “More than simply positive mood, happiness is a state of wellbeing that encompasses living a good life, one with a sense of meaning and deep contentment.”

Since the advent of Positive Psychology, multiple studies have determined that an individuals’ happiness is, to a large extent, under their control: “In fact research has suggested that 40% of people’s happiness comes from the choices they make.”²

Given that, it’s easy to see that a focus on building and maintaining positive relationships would lead to happiness and wellness. After all,



“Personal connection creates mental and emotional stimulation, which are automatic mood boosters,” states Waldinger.³

It’s noteworthy that the opposite, loneliness, leaves individuals at higher risk for multiple physical and mental ailments. According the Center for Disease Control website, these ailments include heart disease and stroke, as well as depression, anxiety, and suicide. “Loneliness,” it says, “is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact.”⁴

Greater Good Magazine applauded *The Good Life*: “It suggests a practical way to improve our lives—by nurturing our relationships If we don’t understand what makes us happy, [the authors] argue, we may end up choosing unwisely—for example, pursuing high-salaried jobs that take us away from our communities.”

Among the suggestions for maintaining relationships the article cites:

“Prioritize your relationships and be present. . . . Listen carefully when people talk, expressing interest and showing affection. . . . Let people know how much they matter to you.” And to “consider how your needs may differ at different stages of life.”⁵

Working with the lead author of the study, Robert Waldinger, the *New York Times* put together a seven-day “Happiness Challenge,” with a different relationship related activity each day. These included: Taking stock of your relationships (the type and quality as well as the number); reaching out to a friend you haven’t been in recent contact with; chatting up strangers or casual acquaintances; expressing gratitude in writing to an important person in your life; reaching out to a co-worker you’d like to know better; and putting a social date on the calendar. The challenge



concludes with suggestions to “keep happiness going all year long.” The key, the article stresses, is consistency, quoting Waldinger again:

"Our social life is a living system, and it needs exercise. It's a choice you make to invest in, week by week, year by year - one that has huge benefits." ⁶

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/harvard-happiness-study-relationships/672753>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/happiness>

³ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/the-secret-to-happiness-heres-some-advice-from-the-longest-running-study-on-happiness-2017100512543>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html>

⁵ [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what the longest happiness study reveals about finding fulfillment](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_the_longest_happiness_study_reveals_about_finding_fulfillment)

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com › explain › 2023 › 01 › 01 › well › happiness-challenge>