

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

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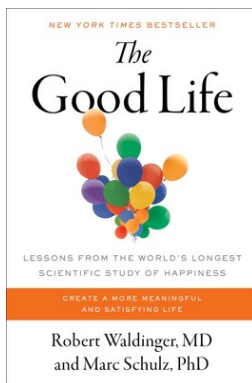
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Book Title: The Good Life: Lessons From the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness

Authors: Robert Waldinger, MD; Marc Schulz, PhD

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Who better than a psychiatrist and a psychologist to give us an aerial view of what makes a good life? These authors—Bob Waldinger, a psychiatrist at Harvard, and Marc Shultz, a clinical psychologist at Bryn Mawr—are the directors of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, a longitudinal research endeavor that started in 1938. In this study, participants are contacted at 2, 5, and 15 years and have shared everything from BMIs to political beliefs and everything in between. Both authors are scientists and practitioners, and they bring a wealth of clinical and scientific insight to interpreting mounds of data on human development.

This book is part scientific data, part short stories, and part self-help workbook, designed to answer the question, *What makes a good life?* The answer: “Good relationships keep us healthier and happier” (p. 10). Period. The book is filled with vignettes, data from the study, and reflection tasks to support the sweeping claim. The authors cover the evolving nature of our relationships through the course of a lifetime and give examples of how early childhood experiences are not always predictors of future relationships. Wes, for example, was a shy, reserved homebody in his youth, who joined the military and then blossomed in his mid-40's, getting married and discovering his parenting skills and social life.

The chapter on social fitness outlines a key theme of this book. Like physical health, social health and relationships take nurturing. The epidemic of loneliness aligns with the impact of relationships on health. Leo, who had everything going for him—Ivy league trained professional and financially secure, yet all alone—was one of the least happy, detached from his wife, children, and acquaintances (p. 217). The authors propose that we take an inventory of who is in our life and characterize the quality of these relationships (eg, depleting vs energizing). They offer a workbook, sold separately, for readers to reflect on these relationships.

One avenue for cultivating our relationships is through our focused attention. Without this curiosity of others, we miss the opportunity to understand and be empathetic. The authors warn the reader about the negative impact of social media and smartphones on our ability to be mindful in our relationships. They also address how relationships create the challenges, stressors, losses, and hardships throughout life, but can be the catalysts for healing and weathering life's storms. These authors provide a self-help process to manage emotional experiences using the WISER model—watch, interpret, select, engage, reflect. They highlight how lifelong relationships sustain a level of emotional intimacy. Close relationships provide the context to process emotional challenges. Even our work and casual friendships make us feel connected and healthier. The last chapter is a call to never give up on nurturing your relationships. The research project was an intervention for all involved to build their social fitness. In all, “good relationships keep us happier, healthier, and help us live longer” (p. 278).

While this book is not an academic review, it is grounded in the Harvard study and other longitudinal human development studies that have found connectedness to be

front and center to human health and happiness. One limitation of these longitudinal studies has been the initial homogeneity of the participants. While the first cohorts were predominantly White males, the recent 1,700+ participants now represent a more diverse racial, ethnic, gender, and economic group. The authors present a healthy interplay between findings from scientific studies and narratives from the participants. They interject self-help homework tasks to bolster their mission of social fitness. Mostly, the take-home messages are not surprising, but reinforcing. Unfortunately, the book has no mention of long-standing relationships with health care clinicians who can have an intense impact both positively and negatively on an individual's health status.

The tenets of this book should come as no surprise to family physicians. Relationships align with positive health outcomes. This book gives more evidence for physicians and health care teams to focus on assessing the quantity and quality of our patients' social relationships. In addition, the movement toward the medical home can be another opportunity for our health care sites to become a social sphere for modeling long-standing doctor-patient relationships where we can face life's challenges, maintain empathy, and give intentional person-focused attention to the care of our patients. These findings should compel us to support social fitness at each stage of the life cycle, to identify risk factors of loneliness and social disconnection, and to provide interventions and the support our patients need to connect with a social network.