

The Written Word

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“The Good Life”

An interview with Robert Waldinger

Dutchen: Hello and welcome to “The Written Word,” a product of *Harvard Medicine* magazine. I’m Stephanie Dutchen from the communications office at Harvard Medical School and we’re here today with professor and alumnus Robert Waldinger, co-author of the new book *The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*.

The book describes what Bob and colleagues have learned from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which is an effort to identify the psychosocial predictors of healthy aging. The researchers began by checking in with two groups of men for more than 80 years and have now begun following these men’s children.

Bob, thank you for joining us.

Waldinger: It’s a pleasure to be here.

Dutchen: So our first question for you is: What prompted you to write this book?

Waldinger: What we found was that we’ve been publishing in journals, academic journals, for many years. These findings about the importance of relationships, not just for our happiness but for our health. But they are journals that are only read by academics. And what we realized was that people wanted to know what science has to say about our relationships and how they affect our lives. And so we wrote the book as a way to take a deep dive, both into the stories that are in the study, the participants’ stories, and then the science that we glean from all those stories.

Dutchen: What are some of those stories?

Waldinger: I think the stories that impress me are the stories that remind us that there are so many ways to live a good life, right. That there’s so many different life paths; there are also paths that don’t go so well. But the other takeaway that I’ve had from these stories is that it is never too late. That we never know what’s going to happen next in our lives.

Some people have said, Oh, I’m not very good at relationships; it’s never worked for me; it’s too late for me. I’ve heard this from people in their 20s and people in their 60s. And what we find in our study is that it is never too late. That some people who thought they were never going to have close relationships found them in their 60s or 70s. And I don’t just mean intimate partners, I mean groups of good, close friends. So I think that that message, based on following thousands of people through their lives, is a very hopeful message about the possibilities for growth and change, even in the later periods of our lives.

Dutchen: That does sound inspirational.

Dutchen: What lasting lesson did you learn from the research and interviews that you did to produce the book?

Waldinger: Well, the first lesson we learned will not surprise anybody in this audience, which is that if we take care of our physical health, it matters a lot for how long we stay healthy and how long we live. And that means regular exercise, preventive health care, not smoking, not abusing alcohol or drugs. All of those things that, you know, our grandmothers could have told us, and those were very powerful effects when we followed these lives over eight decades.

But the thing that surprised us was how powerful the warmth of our connections with other people are in predicting how long we stay healthy, how long we live, and how happy we are. At first we didn't believe our own data when we began to get these findings that relationships keep us healthier and happier. I mean, we knew that mind and body are connected, yes, but could they really get into your body and prevent coronary artery disease? Could they prevent arthritis? And so we wondered, well, is this possible, but other research groups began to find the same things, and when that happens, when multiple research studies point to the same findings, then we can have more and more confidence in what our data are showing us. And so we've begun to see that this is a very powerful, repeatable finding and that it matters a huge amount how connected we are to other people.

Dutchen: That sounds pretty amazing.

Waldinger: It was to us. And that's why we wrote the book, to kind of take a deep dive into all of this to really lay it out as much as we could with all the science that's out there about this.

Dutchen: How does the content of the book intersect with the work that you do?

Waldinger: Well, the content of the book has pointed us to the importance of interpersonal functioning, relationship functioning. And so we have focused more and more on the nuances of that on the biology as well as the psychology of our relationships. As we have gone on with this study, so the last 10 years, we have spent much of our energy in our research projects trying to understand how exactly relationships do affect our health, how they actually get into our bodies, and so we're looking at the mechanisms by which this happens.

Dutchen: What are some of those mechanisms?

Waldinger: Probably the best hypothesis we have and some of the best data is about stress and relationships as being stress relievers. So you know, we know that the human organism has a fight or flight response. So when we're faced with a challenge or a threat the body literally goes into fight or flight mode, you know, heart rate increases, blood pressure increases, lots of things happen in our bodies to enable us to meet a challenge, a physical or a psychological challenge. And that's a good thing. And then once that challenge is removed, our bodies are meant to go back to a baseline equilibrium.

But what we think happens with chronic stress is that our bodies never quite go back to baseline, and that then what happens is we get into a state of chronic stress, which includes chronic

inflammation, elevated levels of circulating stress hormones, and that these changes happening over time. Breakdown multiple systems in the body, coronary arteries, joints, variety of systems.

On the other hand, what we know is that when we have a connection with somebody that's warm, often what happens is it allows our bodies to calm down.

So let me give you an example. Something happens in my day that's upsetting and I'm worried about it and I think about it all day. If I go home at night and I have somebody at home or someone I can call on the phone and I can talk to them about my upsetting day, I can literally feel my body calm down, and that's the process that we think happens when relationships have this kind of stress-relieving function. And what we know is that social isolation and loneliness leave us without that resource, and that means they leave us potentially in a state of chronic stress. And so that's how we think that good, warm connections with other people get into the body and help relieve chronic stress.

Dutchen: That's fascinating. And that leads into another question that we have for you, which is how does the book inform medicine or care delivery?

Waldinger: It definitely informs medicine and all kinds of care delivery in terms of alerting providers about the importance of paying attention to someone, social connections, and their relational world. Literally asking patients if they're lonely. Asking patients, Are you as connected to others as you want to be? Do you have assistance from others? The relationship with others that you would like to have? And if not, can we help you think about ways to change that to improve that?

Our surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, has made emotional wellbeing a priority of his tenure now as surgeon general and he has called out this loneliness epidemic that is throughout the world and certainly in the United States. And I think what our book is trying to add to this conversation is about how vital it is that we as physicians, as caregivers in all disciplines, that we pay attention to whether people are more isolated than they want to be.

Dutchen: Yeah, especially in these particular times.

Waldinger: Yes, yes. I mean that's — you know, what we know is that social isolation is on the increase, certainly because of the pandemic. But even as the pandemic wanes and we return to more normal patterns of interaction, we know that loneliness was on the rise. The steady rise, particularly in the western for decades prior to the pandemic. And so this is a process that keeps increasing with time and we're trying to figure out ways to change that, to reverse that process of increasing isolation.

Dutchen: Well, I hope that this book makes a difference. Is there anything that we didn't cover in those questions that you want readers to know?

Waldinger: I think just that — our main takeaway is that if you were going to make one investment in your wellbeing, probably the best investment you could make long term is to take care of your relationships, to be more active and making sure you stay connected with the people

you care about. Close friends, relatives, anybody who you want to make sure stays in your life. Don't just leave it to chance. Be proactive.

Dutchen: Thank you so much. We have been talking with Robert Waldinger about his book *The Good Life*. Bob, it's been a pleasure.

Waldinger: It's been a pleasure for me too. Thank you for doing this with me.

Dutchen: Learn more on our website at hms.harvard.edu/magazine.