

The
Good Life



LESSONS FROM THE WORLD'S LONGEST
SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF HAPPINESS

CREATE A MORE MEANINGFUL
AND SATISFYING LIFE

Robert Waldinger, MD
and Marc Schulz, PhD

Praise for

THE GOOD LIFE

“Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz lead us on an empowering quest toward our greatest need: meaningful human connection. Blending research from an ongoing eighty-year study of life satisfaction with emotional storytelling proves that ancient wisdom has been right all along—a good life is built with good relationships.”

—Jay Shetty, bestselling author of *Think Like a Monk* and host of the podcast *On Purpose*

“In a crowded field of life advice, and even life advice based on scientific research, Schulz and Waldinger stand apart. Capitalizing on the most intensive study of adult development in history, they tell us what makes a good life and why.”

—Angela Duckworth, bestselling author of *Grit*; Rosa Lee and Egbert Chang Professor, University of Pennsylvania; and cofounder, chief scientist, and board member of Character Lab

“Want the secret to the good life? Waldinger and Schulz give it to you in this magnificent new book. Based on the longest survey ever conducted over people’s lives, *The Good Life* reveals who winds up happy, who doesn’t, and why—and how you can use this information, starting today.”

—Arthur C. Brooks, professor, Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School, and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“Waldinger and Schulz are world experts on the counterintuitive things that make life meaningful. Their book will provide welcome advice for a world facing unprecedented levels of unhappiness and loneliness.”

—Laurie Santos, Chandrika and Ranjan Tandon Professor of Psychology, Yale University, and host of *The Happiness Lab* podcast

“*The Good Life* tells the story of a rare and fascinating study of lives over time. This insightful, interesting, and well-informed book reveals the secret of happiness and reminds us that it was never really a secret after all.”

—Daniel Gilbert, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Stumbling on Happiness* and host of the PBS television series *This Emotional Life*

“Waldinger and Schulz have written an essential—perhaps *the* essential—book on human flourishing. Backed by extraordinary research and packed with actionable advice, *The Good Life* will expand your brain and enrich your heart.”

—Daniel H. Pink, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Power of Regret*, *Drive*, and *A Whole New Mind*

“I’m beyond thrilled that Waldinger and Schulz are publishing the findings of the Harvard Study. Over the years, I’ve discussed their research and recommended Waldinger’s TED Talk around the world. I can hardly wait to recommend *The Good Life*. The book is accessible, interesting, and grounded in research—and is bound to make a difference in the lives of millions.”

—Tal Ben-Shahar, bestselling author of *Being Happy: You Don’t Have to Be Perfect to Lead a Richer, Happier Life* and *Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment*

“This book is simply extraordinary. It weaves ‘hard data’ and enlightening case studies and interviews together seamlessly in a way that stays true to the science

while humanizing it. And what an important lesson it teaches. It helps people to understand how they should live their lives and also provides a spectacular picture of what psychology can be at its best. It is data driven, of course, but data are just noise without wise interpretation.”

—Barry Schwartz, coauthor of *Practical Wisdom* and author of
Why We Work

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Lessons from the World's Longest
Scientific Study of Happiness

ROBERT WALDINGER, MD
and MARC SCHULZ, PhD

SIMON & SCHUSTER
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To the families we were born into and the families we helped create

AUTHORS' NOTE

The Harvard Study of Adult Development has followed the lives of two generations of individuals from the same families for more than eighty years. Shepherding a study like this requires tremendous trust. Part of that trust comes from a deep commitment to protecting the confidentiality of participants. We have changed names and identifying details to protect participants' confidentiality. All quotes in the book, however, are either verbatim or based on actual study interviews, audiotapes, observations, and other data.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD LIFE?

There isn't time, so brief is life, for bickerings, apologies, heartburnings, callings to account. There is only time for loving, and but an instant, so to speak, for that.

Mark Twain

Let's begin with a question:

If you had to make *one* life choice, right now, to set yourself on the path to future health and happiness, what would it be?

Would you choose to put more money into savings each month? To change careers? Would you decide to travel more? What single choice could best ensure that when you reach your final days and look back, you'll feel that you've lived a good life?

In a 2007 survey, millennials were asked about their most important life goals. Seventy-six percent said that becoming rich was their number one goal. Fifty percent said a major goal was to become famous. More than a decade later, after millennials had spent more time as adults, similar questions were asked again in a pair of surveys. Fame was now lower on the list, but the top goals again included things like making money, having a successful career, and becoming debt-free.

These are common and practical goals that extend across generations and borders. In many countries, from the time they are barely old enough to speak, children are asked what they want to be when they grow up—that is, what careers they intend to pursue. When adults meet new people, one of the first

questions asked is, “What do you do?” Success in life is often measured by title, salary, and recognition of achievement, even though most of us understand that these things do not necessarily make for a happy life on their own. Those who manage to check off some or even all of the desired boxes often find themselves on the other side feeling much the same as before.

Meanwhile, all day long we’re bombarded with messages about what will make us happy, about what we should want in our lives, about who is doing life “right.” Ads tell us that eating this brand of yogurt will make us healthy, buying that smartphone will bring new joy to our lives, and using a special face cream will keep us young forever.

Other messages are less explicit, woven into the fabric of daily living. If a friend buys a new car, we might wonder if a newer car would make our own life better. As we scroll social media feeds seeing only pictures of fantastic parties and sandy beaches, we might wonder if our own life is lacking in parties, lacking in beaches. In our casual friendships, at work, and especially on social media, we tend to show each other idealized versions of ourselves. We present our game faces, and the comparison between what we *see* of each other and how we *feel* about ourselves leaves us with the sense that we’re missing out. As an old saying goes, *We are always comparing our insides to other people’s outsides.*

Over time we develop the subtle but hard-to-shake feeling that our life is *here*, now, and the things we need for a good life are *over there*, or in the future. Always just out of reach.

Looking at life through this lens, it’s easy to believe that the good life doesn’t really exist, or else that it’s only possible for others. Our own life, after all, rarely matches the picture we’ve created in our heads of what a good life should look like. Our own life is always too messy, too complicated to be good.

Spoiler alert: The good life *is* a complicated life. For everybody.

The good life is joyful... and challenging. Full of love, but also pain. And it never strictly *happens*; instead, the good life *unfolds*, through time. It is a process. It includes turmoil, calm, lightness, burdens, struggles, achievements, setbacks, leaps forward, and terrible falls. And of course, the good life always ends in death.

A cheery sales pitch, we know.

But let's not mince words. Life, even when it's good, is not easy. There is simply no way to make life perfect, and if there were, then it wouldn't be good.

Why? *Because a rich life—a good life—is forged from precisely the things that make it hard.*

This book is built on a bedrock of scientific research. At its heart is the Harvard Study of Adult Development, an extraordinary scientific endeavor that began in 1938, and against all odds is still going strong today. Bob is the fourth director of the Study, and Marc its associate director. Radical for its time, the Study set out to understand human health by investigating not what made people sick, but what made them thrive. It has recorded the experience of its participants' lives more or less as they were happening, from childhood troubles, to first loves, to final days. Like the lives of its participants, the Harvard Study's road has itself been long and winding, evolving in its methods over the decades and expanding to now include three generations and more than 1,300 of the descendants of its original 724 participants. It continues to evolve and expand today, and is the longest in-depth longitudinal study of human life ever done.

But no single study, no matter how rich, is enough to permit broad claims about human life. So while this book stands directly on the foundation of the Harvard Study, it is supported on all sides by hundreds of other scientific studies involving many thousands of people from all over the world. The book is also threaded with wisdom from the recent and ancient past—enduring ideas that mirror and enrich modern scientific understandings of the human experience. It is a book primarily about the power of relationships, and it is deeply informed, appropriately, by the long and fruitful friendship of its authors.

But the book would not exist without the human beings who took part in the Harvard Study's research—whose honesty and generosity made this unlikely study possible in the first place.

People like Rosa and Henry Keane.

“What is your greatest fear?”

Rosa read the question out loud and then looked across the kitchen table at her husband, Henry. Now in their 70s, Rosa and Henry had lived in this house

and sat at this same table together on most mornings for more than fifty years. Between them sat a pot of tea, an open pack of Oreos (half eaten), and an audio recorder. In the corner of the room, a video camera. Next to the video camera sat a young Harvard researcher named Charlotte, quietly observing and taking notes.

“It’s quite the question,” Rosa said.

“*My* greatest fear?” Henry said to Charlotte. “Or *our* greatest fear?”

Rosa and Henry didn’t think of themselves as particularly interesting subjects for a study. They’d both grown up poor, married in their 20s, and raised five kids together. They’d lived through the Great Depression and plenty of hard times, sure, but that was no different from anyone else they knew. So they never understood why Harvard researchers were interested in the first place, let alone why they were still interested, still calling, still sending questionnaires, and occasionally still flying across the country to visit.

Henry was only 14 years old and living in Boston’s West End, in a tenement with no running water, when researchers from the Study first knocked on his family’s door and asked his perplexed parents if they could make a record of his life. The Study was in full swing when he married Rosa in August of 1954—the records show that when she said yes to his proposal, Henry couldn’t believe his luck—and now here they were in October of 2004, two months after their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Rosa had been asked to participate more directly in the Study in 2002. *It’s about time*, she said. Harvard had been tracking Henry year after year since 1941. Rosa often said she thought it was odd that he still agreed to be involved as an older man, because he was so private otherwise. But Henry said he felt a sense of duty to participate and had also developed an appreciation for the process because it gave him perspective on things. So, for sixty-three years he had opened his life to the research team. In fact, he’d told them so much about himself, and for so long, that he couldn’t even remember what they did and didn’t know. But he assumed they knew everything, including certain things he’d never told anyone but Rosa, because whenever they asked a question he did his best to tell them the truth.

And they asked a lot of questions.

“Mr. Keane was clearly flattered that I had come to Grand Rapids to interview them,” Charlotte would write in her field notes, “and this set a friendly atmosphere for the interview. I found him to be a cooperative and interested person. He was thoughtful about each answer, and often paused for a few moments before he responded. He was friendly though, and I felt that he was like the stereotype of the quiet man from Michigan.”

Charlotte was there for a two-day visit to interview the Keanes and administer a survey—a very long survey—of questions about their health, their individual lives, and their life together. Like most of our young researchers embarking on new careers, Charlotte had her own questions about what makes a good life and about how her current choices might affect her future. Was it possible that insights about her own life could be locked away in the lives of others? The only way to find out was to ask questions, and to be deeply attentive to every person she interviewed. What was important to this particular individual? What gave their days meaning? What had they learned from their experiences? What did they regret? Every interview presented Charlotte with new opportunities to connect with a person whose life was further along than her own, and who came from different circumstances and a different moment in history.

Today she would interview Henry and Rosa together, administer the survey, and then videotape them talking together about their greatest fears. She would also interview them separately in what we call “attachment interviews.” Back in Boston the videotapes and interview transcripts would be studied so that the way Henry and Rosa talked about each other, their nonverbal cues, and many other bits of information could be coded into data on the nature of their bond—data that would become part of their files and one small but important piece of a giant dataset on what a lived life is actually like.

What is your greatest fear? Charlotte had already recorded their individual answers to this question in separate interviews, but now it was time to discuss the question with each other.

The discussion went like this:

“I like the hard questions in a certain way,” Rosa said.

“Well good,” Henry said. “You go first.”

Rosa was quiet for a moment and then told Henry her greatest fear was that he might develop a serious health condition, or that she would have another stroke. Henry agreed that those were scary possibilities. But, he said, they were getting to a point now where something like that was probably inevitable. They spoke at length about how a serious illness might affect their adult children's lives, and each other. Eventually Rosa admitted that there was only so much a person could anticipate, and there was no use in getting upset before it happened.

"Is there another question?" Henry asked Charlotte.

"What's your greatest fear, Hank?" Rosa said.

"I was hoping you would forget to ask me," Henry said, and they laughed. Henry poured more tea for Rosa, took another Oreo for himself, and then was quiet for some time.

"It's not a hard one to answer," he said. "It's just not something I like to think about, to be honest."

"Well they sent this poor girl all the way from Boston, so you better answer."

"It's ugly, I guess," he said, his voice wavering.

"Go ahead."

"That I won't die first is my fear. That I'll be left here without you."

At the corner of Bulfinch Triangle in Boston's West End, not far from where Henry Keane lived as a child, the Lockhart Building overlooks the noisy convergence of Merrimac and Causeway Streets. In the early twentieth century this stubborn brick structure was a furniture factory, and employed men and women from Henry's neighborhood. Now it's home to medical offices, a local pizzeria, and a donut shop. It's also home to the researchers and the records of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the longest study of adult life ever conducted.

Nestled near the back of a file drawer labeled "KA-KE" are Henry's and Rosa's files. Inside we find the yellowed pages, crumbling at the edges, of Henry's 1941 intake interview. It is written in longhand, in the interviewer's flowing, practiced cursive. We see that his family was among the poorest in

Boston, that at age 14 Henry was seen as a “stable, well-controlled” adolescent, with “a logical regard for his future.” We can see that as a young adult he was very close to his mother, but resented his father, whose alcoholism forced Henry to be the primary breadwinner. In one particularly damaging incident when Henry was in his 20s, his father told Henry’s new fiancée that her \$300 engagement ring had deprived the family of needed money. Fearing she would never escape his family, his fiancée called off the engagement.

In 1953 Henry broke free of his father when he got a job with General Motors and moved to Willow Run, Michigan. There he met Rosa, a Danish immigrant and one of nine children. One year later they were married and would go on to have five children of their own. “Plenty, but not enough,” in Rosa’s opinion.

Over the next decade Henry and Rosa would experience some difficult times. In 1959 their five-year-old son, Robert, contracted polio, a challenge that tested their marriage and caused a great deal of pain and worry in the family. Henry began at GM on the factory floor as an assembler, but after missing work due to Robert’s illness he was demoted, then laid off, and at one point found himself unemployed with three children to care for. To make ends meet, Rosa began working for the city of Willow Run, in the payroll department. While the job was initially a stopgap for the family, Rosa became much loved by her coworkers, and she worked full-time there for the next thirty years, developing relationships with people she came to think of as her second family. After being laid off Henry changed careers three times, finally returning to GM in 1963, and working his way up to floor supervisor. Shortly after, he reconnected with his father (who had managed to overcome his addiction to alcohol) and forgave him.

Henry and Rosa’s daughter, Peggy, now in her 50s, is also a participant in the Study. Peggy does not know what her parents have shared with the Study because we do not want to bias her reports about her family life. Having multiple perspectives on the same family environment and the same events helps broaden and deepen the Study’s data. When we dig into Peggy’s file, we learn that when she was growing up, she felt her parents understood her problems, and that they helped cheer her up when she was upset. In general, she saw her parents as “very affectionate.” And consistent with Henry’s and Rosa’s own

reports about their marriage, Peggy said that her parents never considered separation or divorce.

In 1977, at age 50, Henry rated his life this way:

Enjoyment of marriage: EXCELLENT

Mood over the past year: EXCELLENT

Physical health over the past 2 years: EXCELLENT.

But we don't determine Henry's health and happiness, or anyone's in the Study, simply by asking them and their loved ones how they feel. Study participants allow us to look at their well-being through many different lenses, including everything from brain scans to blood tests to videotapes of them talking about their deepest concerns. We take samples of their hair to measure stress hormones, we ask them to describe their biggest worries and their critical goals in life, and we measure how quickly their heart rates calm down after we challenge them with brain teasers. This information gives us a deeper and fuller measurement of how someone is doing in their life.

Henry was a shy man, but he devoted himself to his closest relationships, in particular to his connection with Rosa and his children, and these connections provided him with a deep sense of security. He also employed certain powerful coping mechanisms that we will discuss in the coming pages. Building on this combination of emotional security and effective coping, Henry could report over and over again that he was "happy" or "very happy," even during his hardest times, and his health and longevity reflect that.

In 2009, five years after Charlotte's visit to Henry and Rosa's home, and seventy-one years after his first interview with the Study, Henry's greatest fear came true: Rosa passed away. Less than six weeks later, Henry followed.

But the family legacy continues in their daughter, Peggy. Just recently, she sat down for an interview at our offices in Boston. Since the age of 29 Peggy has been in a happy relationship with her partner, Susan, and now, at age 57, reports no loneliness and good health. She is a respected grade school teacher and an

active member of her community. But the path she took to arrive at this happy time in her life is harrowing and courageous, and we'll be returning to her later.

THE INVESTMENT OF A LIFETIME

What was it about Henry and Rosa's approach to life that allowed them to flourish in the face of difficulty? And what makes Henry and Rosa's story, or any of the life stories in the Harvard Study, worth your time and attention?

When it comes to understanding what happens to people as they go through life, pictures of entire lives—of the choices people make and the paths they follow, and how it all works out for them—are almost impossible to get. Most of what we know about human life we know from asking people to remember the past, and memories are full of holes. Just try to remember what you had for dinner last Tuesday, or who you spoke with on this date last year, and you'll get an idea how much of our lives is lost to memory. The more time that passes, the more details we forget, and research shows that the act of *recalling* an event can actually change our memory of it. In short, as a tool for studying past events, the human memory is at its best imprecise, and at its worst, inventive.

But what if we could watch entire lives as they unfold through time? What if we could study people from the time that they were teenagers all the way into old age to see what really matters to a person's health and happiness, and which investments really paid off?

We did that.

For eighty-four years (and counting), the Harvard Study has tracked the same individuals, asking thousands of questions and taking hundreds of measurements to find out what really keeps people healthy and happy. Through all the years of studying these lives, one crucial factor stands out for the consistency and power of its ties to physical health, mental health, and longevity. Contrary to what many people might think, it's not career achievement, or exercise, or a healthy diet. Don't get us wrong; these things matter (a lot). But one thing continuously demonstrates its broad and enduring importance:

Good relationships.

In fact, good relationships are significant enough that if we had to take all eighty-four years of the Harvard Study and boil it down to a single principle for living, one life investment that is supported by similar findings across a wide variety of other studies, it would be this:

Good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Period.

So if you're going to make that one choice, that single decision that could best ensure your own health and happiness, science tells us that your choice should be to cultivate warm relationships. Of all kinds. As we'll show you, it's not a choice that you make only once, but over and over again, second by second, week by week, and year by year. It's a choice that has been found in one study after another to contribute to enduring joy and flourishing lives. But it's not always an easy one to make. As human beings, even with the best intentions, we get in our own way, make mistakes, and get hurt by the people we love. The path to the good life, after all, isn't easy, but successfully navigating its twists and turns is entirely possible. The Harvard Study of Adult Development can point the way.

A TREASURE IN BOSTON'S WEST END

The Harvard Study of Adult Development began in Boston when the United States was fighting its way out of the Great Depression. As New Deal projects like Social Security and unemployment insurance gained momentum, there was a growing interest in understanding what factors made human beings thrive, as opposed to what factors made them fail. This new interest led two unrelated groups of researchers in Boston to initiate research projects closely following two very different groups of boys.

The first was a group of 268 sophomores at Harvard College, selected because they were deemed likely to grow into healthy and well-adjusted men. In the spirit of the time, but well ahead of his contemporaries in the medical community, Arlie Bock, Harvard's new professor of hygiene and chief of Student Health Services, wanted to move away from a research focus on what made people sick to a focus on what made people healthy. At least half of the

young men chosen for the study were able to attend Harvard only with the aid of scholarships and by holding down jobs to help pay tuition, and some came from well-to-do families. Some could trace their roots in America to the founding of the country, and 13 percent of them had parents who had immigrated to the U.S.

The second was a group of 456 inner-city Boston boys like Henry Keane, selected for a different reason: they were children who grew up in some of Boston's most troubled families and most disadvantaged neighborhoods, but who, at age 14, had mostly succeeded in avoiding the paths to juvenile delinquency that some of their peers were following. More than 60 percent of these adolescents had at least one parent who immigrated to the U.S., most from poor areas of Eastern and Western Europe and areas in or near the Middle East, such as Greater Syria and Turkey. Their modest roots and immigrant status made them doubly marginalized. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, a lawyer and a social worker, respectively, initiated this study in an attempt to understand which life factors prevented delinquency, and these boys had succeeded on that front.

These two studies began separately and with their own aims, but were later merged, and now operate under the same banner.

When they joined their respective studies, all of the inner-city and Harvard participants were interviewed. They were given medical exams. Researchers went to their homes and interviewed their parents. And then these teenagers grew up into adults who entered all walks of life. They became factory workers and lawyers and bricklayers and doctors. Some developed alcoholism. A few developed schizophrenia. Some climbed the social ladder from the bottom all the way to the very top, and some made that journey in the opposite direction.

The founders of the Harvard Study would be shocked and delighted to see that it still continues today, generating unique and important findings they couldn't have imagined. And as the current director (Bob) and associate director (Marc), we are incredibly proud to bring some of these findings to you.

A LENS THAT CAN SEE THROUGH TIME

Human beings are full of surprises and contradictions. We don't always make sense, even (or maybe especially) to ourselves. The Harvard Study gives us a unique and practical tool to see through some of this natural human mystery. Some quick scientific context will help explain why.

Studies of human health and behavior generally come in two flavors: "cross-sectional" and "longitudinal." Cross-sectional studies take a slice out of the world at a given moment and look inside, much the way you might cut into a layer cake to see what it's made of. Most psychological and health studies fall into this category because they are cost efficient to conduct. They take a finite amount of time and have predictable costs. But they have a fundamental limitation, which Bob likes to illustrate with the old joke that if you relied only on cross-sectional surveys, you'd have to conclude that there are people in Miami who are born Cuban and die Jewish. In other words, cross-sectional studies are "snapshots" of life, and can prompt us to see connections between two unconnected things because they omit one crucial variable: time.

Longitudinal studies, on the other hand, are what they sound like. Long. They examine lives *through* time. There are two ways to do this. The first we've already mentioned, and it's the most common: you ask people to remember the past. This is known as a retrospective study.

But as we mentioned, these studies rely on memory. Take Henry and Rosa. During their individual interviews in 2004, Charlotte asked each of them, separately, to describe the first time they met. Rosa recounted how she'd slipped on the ice in front of Henry's truck, how Henry helped her up, and how she later saw him in a restaurant when she was out with some of her friends.

"It was funny, and we had a laugh about it," Rosa said, "because he was wearing two different colors of socks, and I thought, 'Boy he's in bad shape, he needs somebody like me!'"

Henry also remembered Rosa slipping on the ice.

"Then I saw her sitting in a café sometime later," he said, "and she caught me staring at her legs. But I was only looking because she was wearing two different colors of stockings, red and black."

This kind of disagreement among couples is common, and probably familiar to anyone who's been in a long-term relationship. Well, anytime you and your