

## [Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / Happiness in America, Part 1: The Secret to a 'Good Life,' According to an 80-Year Study

Did your favorite NFL team win the Super Bowl?  
No, then the NFL Draft is your Super Bowl.  
I'm Danny Heifetz, and for now until the draft,  
we are turning our fantasy football show  
feed into the Ringer NFL Draft Show.  
Every Tuesday and Thursday, we talk about  
the top players and most important  
storylines for the NFL Draft.  
So join us on the Ringer NFL Draft Show.  
Today's episode is about the longest study  
on happiness in U.S. history and  
its lessons for America today.  
This is the first in a two-episode arc  
about happiness that we're doing on the show this week.  
On Friday, I'll be speaking with a psychiatrist  
about the incredible and mysterious rise  
in teenage anxiety in the last decade.  
But first, a broader look at happiness in America.  
Let's wind back the clock to 2009.  
I had just started working as an online writer  
for The Atlantic Magazine, and I remember  
in one of my first months on the job,  
I saw that the new cover story of the magazine  
was about this amazing research project  
I had never heard of in my life.  
It was called The Harvard Study of Adult Development.  
And what the study did was for 80 years,  
going back to the 1930s, researchers had followed  
hundreds of young men from their teenage years.  
They'd watch them grow up, meet their wives,  
have children, succeed, fail, divorce,  
develop addictions, overcome addictions,  
find happiness, die old or die young.  
And the first class of the study  
incredibly included a bunch of Harvard undergraduates,  
including the president, John F. Kennedy.  
I remember thinking, this is one of the coolest projects  
I had ever heard of.  
Well, today's guests are that study's  
director and associate director,  
Robert Waldinger and Mark Schultz.  
They are the authors of a new book called The Good Life  
about what this study should teach all of us

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about the secret to a long and fulfilling life.

So what is it?

What's the secret?

Well, I'll let Bob and Mark answer that question directly in just a few minutes, but let me first give you a clue as to what the secret of happiness is not.

I do not think you're going to find a period in American life in which Americans had more access to social technology.

It is easier to talk to friends and families hundreds of miles away than it's ever been.

Easier to literally see their faces on a screen.

Easier to find single people to date.

Easier to gossip.

Easier to gossip at work.

Easier to watch other people gossip on social media.

Easier to fill up your life with things worth talking about and watch movies, TV shows, read books.

It's easier to listen to music.

But if you ask, Americans today will say they are as lonely or lonelier than any time on record.

We do not have evidence of any other period of this country's history where people said they had fewer friends and family.

The share of Americans saying they have close friends has plummeted.

One in five millennials, that's my generation, say they have no friends.

Teenagers say they spend less time with their friends that they do have.

The amount of time all Americans spend alone has increased every year for about a decade.

And this is an extension of something people were pointing out decades ago.

Robert Putnam most famously pointed to it in his famous book, *Bowling Alone*.

He said, you know, pick your favorite metric of togetherness, marriage rates, church attendance, membership, and chapter-based associations.

It doesn't matter.

It's all going in the same direction.

It's all going down.

What is this?

What's going on?

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What is the name we ought to give to this phenomenon, this berserk juxtaposition where you have an abundance of social technology but a terrible shortage of actual social connection?

It's the illusion of togetherness.

We have dazzled ourselves into solitude.

Locked ourselves in a virtual cage of solitary confinement to watch media for hours and hours a day

at the same time that we spend less and less time

with actual, physical, corporeal human beings.

We've built a prison for our own dazzlement.

And it doesn't have to be this way.

I'm Derek Thompson.

This is Plain English.

MUSIC

Dr. Robert Waldinger, welcome to the show.

Thank you.

Good to be here.

Mark Schultz, welcome to the show.

Thank you, Derek. Pleasure to be with you.

Bob, let's start with you.

And let's start with this famous Harvard study.

Can you give us the basics?

Well, started in 1938.

Two studies that didn't know about each other's existence.

One study of Harvard College undergraduates,

19-year-old young men who were chosen

as a study of the best and the brightest

as they moved from adolescence into young adulthood.

So of course, if you wanted to study normal young adult development, you study all white men from Harvard.

It's absolutely the most politically incorrect sample you could ever have.

But in addition, at Harvard Law School,

they started a study of juvenile delinquency,

looking at children from Boston's poorest neighborhoods in 1938.

And not just the poorest neighborhoods,

but families that were known to social service agencies for family problems, for domestic violence, familial, mental illness, physical illness, extreme poverty.

And the question in that study was,

how do some children, born with so many strikes against them,

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manage to stay on good developmental paths,  
manage to stay out of trouble?

And so both were studies of thriving,  
of normal adolescent to young adult development,  
at a time when almost all the research that had been done  
was studying what goes wrong in development,  
so that we could figure out how to help.  
And this is now, correct me if I'm wrong,  
the largest or longest longitudinal study  
in American history.

What is so special about a study that goes on and on  
and on like this, Mike?

So there are a few things that make it special.

Part of it is the closeness with which we've  
followed people across time.

So from the very beginning, both studies  
were really interested in getting up close and personal  
and trying to understand the lived experience of participants.  
So they started with visits to the homes of the participants,  
interviews with the parents, observations of how they  
interacted with the children.

And then we followed them very closely across 85 years now,  
interviews, lots and lots of questionnaires,  
physical exams, lots of poking and prodding  
of physical proportions.

Early in the study, more recently,  
lots of modern scientific techniques like brain scans  
and blood draws to learn a little bit about their immunological  
functioning and their inflammatory pattern.

So it's a study that's followed people really closely.

And the longitudinal part is important because we often  
have an idea.

We imagine we can predict how things might unfold  
in the future, but it turns out our predictions are often wrong.  
So following people across time, across their entire adult life  
is very rare.

We think we're one of the only studies  
that have done this intensive study of adult life  
across entire lives.

So really a remarkable study.

It started long before Bob and I were involved.

And we're just the lucky recipients  
of some of the hard work that came before us.

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Bob, the big question people are going to have is what's the takeaway?

What did we learn that is most important to live a happy, good, long life?

I see no reason to bury the lead here.

You found that social fitness is the key to mental health, physical health, longevity.

What is social fitness and why is it so important?

Well, social fitness is just a phrase we coined to reflect what we think is the truth, which is that it should be analogous to physical fitness.

It's a lifelong practice.

The idea being that the people in our study who had the warmest connections with other people stayed the healthiest and were the happiest as they went through their lives.

And the surprise was not so much that they were happier because if you have good relationships, sure, you're going to be happier.

The surprise was that they actually stayed healthier.

And that was what initially we didn't believe until many other studies began to find the same thing. And now it's quite a robust finding, well-accepted, in the scientific literature.

What would be the causal explanation, Mark, for why social fitness would redound to physical fitness?

Like having lots of friends is good for your blood pressure?

Connect the dots for me in a sophisticated way.

So it's such an important question, and it's really kind of a frontier question on science right now.

We're figuring out all of what we would call those mechanisms that help explain how those social connections get into our bodies and shape our well-being.

There are a few ways of thinking about it.

One is that relationships turn out to be really good stress busters.

They help us navigate through stressful challenges.

We rely on a friend or a partner to figure out the right path to help us deal with all the emotions that we might have to tell us that we're not thinking about something in the right way, or we've lost a piece of it that's really important.

So relationships serve that important function

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of helping us navigate stress.  
But they serve so many functions that they're likely to literally get under our skin.  
So we experience a sense of vitality and human connection when we're with people.  
We experience less pain if we're holding the hand of others.  
There are lots of behavioral indicators that show us that relationships matter in that way.  
And we're just beginning to understand the mechanism.  
So these relationships that we're talking about, close connections, can affect your immune functioning.  
They can affect how quickly wounds heal.  
So literally, if you have a wound, your wound will heal quicker if you're in a connected and warm relationship with a partner.  
It affects our immunological functioning, our inflammatory patterns.  
So we're learning more and more about the why of why those connections exist.  
And it's very exciting times as that unfolds.  
And is there any way, I'm just thinking through this, and I'm not a researcher, but is there any way that we have the causality backward that it's possible that people who are more physically healthy feel more eager to hang out?  
After all, they feel great.  
They want to get dinner with friends at a restaurant.  
They want to have a party with lots of people because they can stay up pain-free until 11 PM, and they're not worried about having an attack of chronic pain at 8 PM.  
Is it possible that the causality is going the other way?  
Bob?  
Not only possible, it's happening.  
So especially when we think about something as complicated as human development, it's rarely just a one-way causal pathway.  
That in fact, it's bi-directional.  
It works both ways.  
That the healthier people have more energy to hang out, to reach out, to make stronger connections with other people.  
We know that it goes both ways.

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One of the ways that longitudinal work helps us is we can look at chicken and egg problems.

So which came first?

And when we follow people over time, we do find that people with warmer connections at time one will have these health benefits at time two.

And that doesn't prove causation, but it goes some distance to showing us that it at least works in that direction to some extent.

And what did you find that people could do for their physical health that might improve their social fitness, that then might redouble their physical health?

I wonder, for example, when you're talking to these people from the 1940s, 1950s, and up through today, you must be asking them something like, do you exercise?

Do you eat well?

Do you avoid smoking?

What are some of the ways, Mark, that those physical behaviors affect later life outcomes?

Well, there's no question in our data, like all other studies that we look at, that smoking is not a good thing for your health.

Exercising is good.

Going to the doctor is good.

So those kinds of health behaviors are associated with physical health outcomes.

But I thought I heard you, Derek, asking a kind of intriguing question, and one that I don't think occurred to researchers back in the 30s and 40s and 50s, which is, are there certain kinds of exercise doing things for our health that also provide multiplying benefits that may have a benefit for our happiness as well?

And I think the answer to that, yes, is absolutely yes.

That we know, for example, that friendships are made with repeated encounters across time, particularly when we're engaged in activities with others.

So people who are learning a sport, playing pickleball for the first time, or walking with their neighbors, those are ways that we build relationships.

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And we also take care of our physical health at the same time.

So there are lots of things that we can do that benefit us on both tracks, which is a great bonus, a really great bonus.

And I think people are figuring that out, right?

People are trying to engage in activities with others.

It doesn't have to be sports.

It can also be mental activities or volunteer activities.

But things that keep you engaged throughout your lifespan that also have the benefits of connecting with other people.

You get multiple benefits from.

I know that in an early version of this study, it was found that regular exercise in college predicted late life mental health even better than it predicted late life physical health, which I think is such an interesting observation.

Because to be honest, I naturally place physical health and mental health in two lanes in my mind.

I think when I'm meditating, I am doing that for my mental health.

And when I'm at the gym, I'm doing that for my physical health.

But one of my key takeaways from this research is that the cars in those lanes are switching all the time.

They're not even two lanes.

They're just like one big open lane that all the cars are chaotically driving through.

Bob.

Well, the research shows that if you want the best antidepressant available on the market, it's exercise.

It's free.

And that regular exercise has stronger mood elevating effects than anything that the drug companies manufacture and put out there.

But I also think that the idea, Derek, which I really love, that there's something mentally challenging about engaging in physical activity or the way in which you engage in physical activity can have a mental boost.

Absolutely true, this idea about driving in both lanes.

So when I was younger, I used to play soccer.

And one of the things that's great about soccer



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is that there are 11 people on your team, 11 people on the other team, trying to figure out your position in comparison to these moving 20 other moving parts on the field is incredibly challenging to do cognitively.

So we think that similar things happen in relationships with others.

We have some evidence that the closeness and the quality of your connection with a loved one, for example, at age 80, is connected, at least for women, with their brain health three years later.

And again, one of those surprising findings are other people finding this and other kinds of research.

And the answer is yes.

And part of the answer may be that to engage in a close relationship with other people requires exercising your brain in novel and complicated ways that keeps our brains in shape, if you will, over time.

So sports can do that.

Physical fitness can do that, depending on the way that you engage with it.

And relationships definitely do as well.

They're mentally challenging in ways that can keep us literally young across time.

I think it's really important to put everything that we've just said in the last 10, 15 minutes about social fitness in juxtaposition

to what's happening with American social fitness right now.

Since 2013, according to the American Time Use Survey, time spent alone has increased by eight hours a week.

That's just in the last nine years.

In the last 30 years, the share of Americans reporting five or more close friends has declined from 63% to 38%.

Almost having one more statistic.

On an average day, 20 years ago, according to the Time Use Survey, 38% of Americans socialized or communicated with friends by 2021, that number was down to 28%.

Now, maybe that figure is particularly influenced by the pandemic.

But something is happening here.

Americans aren't hanging out the way they used to.

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This is something Robert Putnam pointed out and bowling alone. And it seems like the aloneness with which we are bowling is just increasing.

Bob, starting with you, what do you think is going on here?

Why are all of these social fitness numbers going down at the same time that we're learning more and more how important social fitness actually is?

Well, the learning about how important social fitness is relatively recent.

I mean, if you think about Vivek Murthy making emotional well-being a core part of his platform as Surgeon General, that's radical.

Nobody's ever done that before in the Surgeon General's office.

So I think that the attention now to the importance of social fitness is relatively recent, unfortunately.

And it's because of all the things you've just been describing.

All of the increases in social isolation, in disconnection, in the breakdown of traditional social structures of engagement.

You're asking why?

And I think there are so many explanations for that.

Why?

It's very difficult.

There are workplace phenomena that are changing in terms of more remote work.

And everybody's worried about what that means for our lack of engagement with other people.

My son got his first job out of business school with a company that has no physical location.

He's never met his colleagues in person.

And he's not unusual.

So certainly changes in the workplace, changes in social media where these wonderful devices grab and hold our attention.

And many kids spend most of their waking hours online.

And it's seamless.

They do their homework online and, therefore, chatting online, being on social media online is indistinguishable from the rest of life.

So all these trends seem to be coming together to be pushing us toward disconnection.

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And then the question is, how do we be more intentional?  
Because the path of least resistance  
is greater and greater disconnection.  
And I think, Derek, if I could just add one thing,  
that it's really interesting.  
I love the stats that you cited.  
There's an interesting phenomena where  
if we look at the folks that are the most lonely in that report,  
not having anyone in their life that cares about them  
or knows who they are, some of the loneliest folks  
are people who are college age or at college.  
So they're surrounded in close proximity  
with many, many people who are doing similar things  
may have similar priorities.  
So there's something about these times  
that in addition to the structural challenges  
that we're facing and being further away from families  
that we grew up in, being in a very mobile society,  
maybe working more, there's something  
about the way that we're engaging in connections  
with others that is broken in a certain way,  
that people aren't connecting in the way that they did.  
I think Bob was alluding to one of those ideas  
that we think is an important area to look at.  
If we're spending so much time on screens,  
what does that do to the quality of our connections  
with others, even if part of that time  
is engaging in connections on those screens?  
Somehow there's a disconnect between the opportunity  
for connection that technology provides  
and the increasing amount of loneliness  
that people are reporting, it's quite extraordinary.  
Yeah, I have a thought in my head  
that might be a little bit confusing to get out,  
but you seem like the right audience for it.  
There's an important distinction between loneliness  
and aloneness.  
Someone can be alone watching a movie  
that they're entirely absorbed in, thrillingly happy,  
and feel not a shred of loneliness.  
They're like, I'm gonna see my friend tomorrow.  
There's no concept of loneliness inherent  
to watching a movie alone, necessarily.

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At the same time, Mark, you pointed out that many of the people who feel the most alone are not, in fact, existing in solitude. They feel alone on a college campus, which is maybe the most busy, socially busy social experiment we conduct in American society today. We throw a bunch of people that are the same age onto the same plot of land, and we say, go edit. And so there's nothing inherently alone or in solitude about a college campus. So this seems like an important point, and I wonder the degree to which it showed up in your surveys, because you have such an extraordinary x-ray into people's lives. It seems like many people who were alone didn't feel lonely, and then many people who might have been surrounded by people felt disconnected from those that were closest to them. Well, solitude is different from loneliness. Solitude is that experience of being by yourself in a contented way, right? And that's very different from feeling less connected than you wanna be, and that's the thumbnail definition of loneliness. And so they are completely different. You can be happily alone on a mountaintop or watching a movie on Netflix, or you can be desperately alone in a marriage or in a crowd or on a college campus. So, and loneliness is a subjective experience, as actually as is solitude. I mean, I practice Zen a lot of time alone on a meditation cushion. It's not all comfortable by any means, but it's chosen and it's solitude that's for a purpose. And a lot of my most blissful experiences have been alone on a cushion. So I think what you're naming, Derek, is something that we wanna point out, which is that being alone is not the same as being disconnected from others, as feeling disconnected from others. I'd be interested in your take on the role

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that work plays in our life,  
especially since your project began  
with a bunch of elite Harvard guys  
who I assume put professional success  
very much at the center of their life.  
I know that in that original cohort,  
there were people who ran for Senate,  
John F. Kennedy, Ben Bradley,  
who ran The Washington Post for a while.  
These are extraordinarily professionally successful people.  
A few years ago, I wrote an essay in the Atlantic  
about an idea that I called workism,  
that is in an age of declining religiosity.  
Ironically, many more educated people,  
precisely the ones you cover in this study,  
have turned to work or career to do the jobs  
that religion, organized religion has historically done.  
Organized religion, one's provided  
for the majority of people, community, ritual,  
transcendence, meaning, self-actualization.  
And now for many people,  
it is work that seems to do these jobs  
for better, but very often for worse.  
Mark, is this concept of workism,  
this centrality and sometimes this pernicious centrality  
of work in people's lives,  
is this something that you saw in the study  
or see in the study?  
For sure, for sure.  
I wanna say one thing first and then come back to it,  
which is important to recognize that two thirds  
of the original sample were these poor kids growing up  
in Boston in very challenging circumstances.  
Now they worked really hard as well in their lifetimes  
and work was an important part of their experience.  
But when we're talking about the study  
and the lessons that we've learned,  
it comes from both ends of the social spectrum.  
I think this is an important idea  
that we spend a lot of our waking time at work.  
The things we do at work are easier in some ways  
to quantify than the things that might be more important  
like relationships.

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So we can count the number of hours we work.  
And my favorite kind of recent trend is people  
are talking less about salary and achievements at work  
and they're talking about how many hours they work at work  
as a symbol of how important they are.  
So I think what you're describing, Derek,  
a really important idea that we all need a sense  
of meaning and purpose in life.  
And when we spend so much time engaged in one activity,  
work is that activity for many of us,  
of course it has to be or should be a source of meaning  
and purpose in our lives.  
But there are many other places to get meaning and purpose.  
The communities that we're a part of,  
the families that we help build,  
the connections that we have more generally to friends,  
those are all places.  
Religion is also another important place.  
And I think work has become a kind of secular substitute  
for a lot of those traditional places  
where we did derive meaning and a sense of connection.  
So I wanna talk about my university teacher.  
I've been teaching for over 30 years  
and students today will talk about,  
I can't get off the computer  
because success is important to me.  
I need to get the grades, I need to get that job.  
If I go out, I'll lose that time, right?  
So they're beginning to make that calculus  
at a very early age.  
These are highly competitive, ambitious students  
that we're seeing up in Mark College.  
But there's a kind of cult of achievement  
that young people have certainly bought into  
that that's gonna be the source of meaning  
and purpose in their life.  
The source of happiness.  
And I think they're maybe missing  
other important things in their life  
that are more critical for that happiness.  
Derek, one of the things that we did when we,  
when our guys got to be in their 80s,  
we asked them to look back on their lives

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and ask them what their biggest regrets were.  
And the most common regret was,  
I wish I hadn't spent so much time at work  
and I wish I had spent more time with the people I care about.  
So that cliché, nobody on their deathbed  
ever wished they'd spent more time at the office.  
It's a cliché for a reason.  
One thing that makes me think  
is I'm reflecting on your answers to the workism question  
and also your answers to the question  
about increased loneliness and increased time alone  
is that it's almost as if even in this age  
that is so much richer than the decade  
that this project began  
and has so many more options for activities  
than the decade in which this project began.  
We're also in an age of inferior goods.  
If there's a way in which people spend more time  
being social than ever.  
I mean, when you're on your phone,  
in a social media app,  
there's a way in which you are being social inherently.  
You're seeing the postings of your friends.  
But that sociality is an inferior good  
compared to actually hanging out with your friends.  
And you could say, or at least apply the same inferior good  
label to something like career  
displacing the work that religion might have done.  
In religion, the God of an organized religion  
is not providing sort of quarterly performance reviews.  
Theoretically, if you're a faithful person,  
that performance review comes at the end.  
There's one performance review.  
And there might be ways in which  
placing your identity, hanging it on your career  
rather than hanging it on something like organized religion  
or hanging it on something like family identity  
is itself a kind of inferior good.  
It's just a thought bubble that popped.  
And if you wanna respond to that,  
we can respond or I can move on to the next subject.  
Well, there's one connection I can think of  
that I think is a kind of parallel track

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that one of the other things that modern life has brought us for folks who are getting married or in a marriage-like relationship is greater dependence on that person for more things.

So in the 20th century, we grew more and more dependent on our partners for everything.

Advice about careers, fun in our life, a certain kind of economic collaboration that maybe was absent before.

Eli Finkle talks about this as the all or nothing marriage that we put a lot of energy into this one relationship.

So I think work may be on a similar path.

It's grown in its importance about how it defines us because there are other influences that have waned.

I think religion is an important one.

Our ties to our community have waned.

So it's an interesting idea to think about these parallel tracks about how much more important work has become and how much more dependent we are in our social lives about that one person in our lives that we may be intimately connected to.

Also to circle back to your point about life being so much richer now.

I would take issue with that for just what you started to talk about, right?

Which is the idea that, well, we're on our phones, we're on social media, but there's something that feels like saccharine to us.

It's impoverished.

There's not enough content there.

There's not enough that's nourishing, right?

And one of the things that research has begun to show is that how we use social media makes a big difference in our wellbeing.

That if we use social media in this passive way to scroll through other people's Instagram feeds, our self-esteem lowers, levels of depression and anxiety increase, right?

So passive consumption lowers our wellbeing.

On the other hand, when we actively connect with other people on social media, that can enhance our wellbeing



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because it enhances human connection.  
So social media isn't going away  
and if the predictions about the metaverse are true,  
we're gonna be spending more and more time  
out of the real world.  
And so the question is, how are we gonna use?  
How are we gonna engage with that technology?  
And it seems to make a big difference.  
I am very interested in the question,  
how do people change over time?  
Like sometimes when me and my high school friends  
will get together, we'll talk about like,  
has our group of friends changed more over time  
or have people just sort of become more  
of the person they always were?  
Like sort of filling out a kind,  
like a Jungian archetype kind of thing.  
And I wonder how do you feel about the question,  
do people change from this study?  
You have such an extraordinary God's eye view  
on people's lives.  
Bob, we'll start with you.  
Do people change?  
Oh my God, yes.  
I mean, the whole point of this study  
and particularly continuing this study  
was to give the lie to the idea that once we get  
to be about 20 years old, we're done, we're cooked, right?  
The, you know, most of the dollars invested  
in human developmental research goes from zero  
to about 18 years old, right?  
Because change is so visible and so dramatic.  
But when you watch lives from 18 to 85, 90,  
you see phenomenal change, right?  
And actually our predecessor, George Valiant,  
who was the third director of the study,  
got very interested in this.  
And he particularly was interested  
in whether our coping mechanisms changed.  
The ways that we relied on to relieve stress,  
to meet challenge, to deal with anxiety.  
And what he found was that in fact,  
our coping mechanisms get more mature.

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They get more adaptive over time.  
And that also used to be thought not to be true.  
The thinking was once you got to young adulthood,  
your coping mechanisms were pretty much  
what they were gonna be.  
And that was it.  
So this move toward maturation  
of our personal styles of meeting challenge,  
that's an interesting and useful empirical finding.  
And so I guess the question is,  
what do you think about you and your friends?  
Are you getting better at coping  
as you go through life?  
That's a great question.  
I didn't realize that I was gonna be on the hot seat.  
And I think some of them might be listening.  
Well, I would say this.  
I think it's very difficult to evaluate  
one's really close friends through this lens  
because you always want to see  
the eight year old inside of them,  
even when you're 36 years old, at 37 years old.  
Like you can't, my best friend,  
I met the day before kindergarten.  
So my best friends, I met in kindergarten.  
And so when I'm with them,  
I'm with an almost kind of temporal  
Russian nesting doll set of them, right?  
Like I'm hanging out with them at 37,  
but I'm also hanging out with them at 30,  
and I'm also hanging out with them at 25.  
And that's one of the beautiful things  
about rich relationships is that  
you can play that game of echoing nostalgia  
where you can say, remember when our roommate  
did that crazy thing in 2014?  
And remember when our teacher in 1995 said that?  
And that's part of the richness of it.  
So there's so many ways in which  
knowing how things have turned out so far,  
I can go back and say,  
I totally could have predicted that when we were  
zipping zippers and playing blocks in kindergarten,

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but I've also seen many people change in extraordinary ways.  
So I think my answer would be in line with what you said.  
Bob, Mark, what do you say about the question of do people change?  
Well, I think there are two kinds of changes. And we see both of these in the study. So there's the kind of normative change. Everyone moves in a certain direction. So like the research that Bob was talking about, that we found that people's coping strategies become more mature.  
If you look at from mid-life, mid-adulthood until late life, people actually grow happier across time, which is a kind of remarkable thing.  
If you think about the challenges of aging, physical decline, maybe losing a sense of purpose from losing work, people dying in your social network, all the age has challenges that other ages don't have to cope with, and yet people grow happier. And part of the reason we think is a kind of emotional wisdom that people acquire as they go through life. Older people have figured out that leaning into connections that give them pleasure and joy is important, and they literally kind of double down on that. So that's a kind of normative change.  
And then there's another kind of change that we see, which is people who have led relatively difficult lives, maybe been miserable for parts of their adult life, who move in a different direction. Oftentimes it's because of serendipity, sometimes it's because of intentional change. But what we find is that people pursue different paths and their level of happiness, their satisfaction with life changes in important ways. So that's non-normative change, and that happens as well. The people that you went to school with from nursery school on or from college, they have the capacity to go down a different path. Even if we look at them through that lens that reminds us of what they were like when they were younger, that nesting doll analogy,

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people do change and they pursue different paths.  
So we talk a lot in our book about it's never too late.  
The idea being that if you've been in a position  
where you feel quite isolated and lonely,  
or you've been miserable for good periods of your life,  
there are things that you can do right now  
to change that direction in your life.  
And we're going to get to some of those things in a second,  
but I want to ask about this lifetime trajectory  
that you mentioned, the idea that people  
tend to have a dip in happiness in middle age,  
and then it's sort of an escalator going up  
into one's 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s,  
or maybe plateauing at some point,  
I don't know, people who are 110  
or the happiest people on the planet.  
There's two ways to take this,  
sort of glass half empty and glass half full.  
Glass half full is the take that you just gave,  
which is that as we gain emotional intelligence  
into our 60s, 70s, 80s, we tend to,  
or overall across the population,  
there tends to be escalating self-reports  
of self-satisfaction and well-being.  
The other end of the question is,  
why are middle-aged people so miserable?  
Mark, why are middle-aged people so miserable?  
So first of all, it's relative,  
like really important to talk about this research  
is that relative change is modest,  
that people do grow happier from middle age into late life,  
but it's not that middle-aged people report  
being miserable, they report being less happy  
than younger people and less happy than older people.  
And I think the common explanation,  
which I think is on the right track,  
is that there are certain challenges  
that still exist in middle age  
for folks, namely around career and family.  
That is stressful, that it adds a burden to life.  
And many people often experience  
a kind of existential crisis  
about where their life is headed.

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They might feel stuck in a certain way.  
So those kinds of issues come up in midlife.  
These are things that we find often enough,  
we think that it's a developmental pattern,  
but things can shift as culture changes,  
as people are engaging in intimate relationships  
and families in different ways,  
that pattern isn't necessarily fixed,  
but there is this modest change in happiness  
that we see across the lifespan.  
And we saw similar patterns in our own data as well.  
Bob, can I ask you about the concept of trauma?  
There's a lot of research now around ACEs,  
adverse childhood experiences,  
a lot of research around post-traumatic stress  
and also post-traumatic growth.  
And what kind of people respond to trauma  
with stress disorders versus growth?  
What kind of light does this study  
shine on the question of whether trauma echoes  
or whether positive experiences echo throughout life?  
Well, it's not either or, right?  
That trauma does echo.  
We can see that, I would say,  
we could probably see that in every life.  
And it can echo in some ways  
that make people take paths toward more dysfunction.  
It can echo in ways that make people take paths  
toward correcting what happened to them early on,  
having more positive experiences,  
finding better relationships than the traumatizing ones.  
So people take divergent paths.  
People also sometimes respond adaptively to trauma  
in one domain, maybe in their work lives,  
where they become super competent and efficient  
and become very dysfunctional in their personal lives.  
So one of the things you know  
when you follow thousands of lives over time  
is that one size never fits all.  
That one experience of trauma does not generalize.  
That doesn't give you much to go on.  
I know, Derek, because you're trying to look at,  
okay, how do we understand the effects of trauma

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as people go through life?

What we know is that they are usually quite important and that we know that there are also genetic and temperamental factors that predispose some people to being more devastated by traumatic events than others.

You know, there's a theory that I'm not sure how well it's substantiated of child development that talks about dandelions and orchids.

Dandelions being those kids temperamentally who will just grow in any soil.

They'll just grow pretty much whatever happens to them.

And then there are orchids, these delicate flowers who need just the right conditions and they become something magnificent.

I don't think the aftermath of childhood experience does not reduce to those two prototypes, but there is something to be said for those and the incredible variability that exists in each child's development during and after traumatic events.

I was just gonna add one thing, which is,

I mean, it's to that many of the college participants so from the original sample, 91% of them served in World War II.

So they had incredibly challenging experiences.

Many of them are exposed to combat.

And what they reported is interesting and consistent with this literature on trauma.

Most difficult experience in their lives, they worried about losing their lives.

They depended on people to a degree that they never imagined they could for literally their bodily integrity.

They put their hands in other people's lives.

So the kind of experience that most of us can't even imagine being in, they went through.

They also talked about it as oddly enough in many ways that this is 30, 40 years later, reflecting back on it as one of the best experiences of their lives.

And what they talked about was that close connection with others in their units.

So one of the ways that we navigate all challenges, including traumatic experiences,

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is leaning into the connections that we have with others.  
And these young men learned at an early age  
under very difficult and unfortunate circumstances  
that depending on others can help them get through  
even the most harrowing experiences.  
And we see that in the second generation,  
so we're now studying more than 1,300 of the children  
of the original participants.  
We asked them a question, we asked them to tell us  
about the most upsetting or difficult event in their life.  
And the narratives that we got were incredible.  
They were often about loss,  
sometimes about traumatic experiences.  
The folks that tended to be able to learn  
from those experiences,  
you asked a little bit about post-traumatic growth.  
So learning from the experience, developing new skills,  
often talked about either finding meaning  
that was important to them, a new sense of meaning,  
or about leaning into their connections.  
So horrible losses, the loss of a child,  
leaning into their partners for sources of support  
and understanding and developing a connection  
that maybe they would never have had  
if they didn't have to experience this kind of mutual trauma.  
So we see the role of relationships in particular,  
and I think that's what the literature points to,  
and helping us navigate challenges of all kind,  
including traumatic ones.  
Bob, I don't know if this question  
takes us a little bit off-road,  
but you mentioned that you're deep into Zen practice.  
And I wonder, we're talking about trauma,  
we're talking about coping mechanisms.  
To what degree does your practice in Zen  
bear on these questions of what does successful coping  
look like in the face of the fact that it's inevitable  
that distress is gonna happen,  
that sadness is going to happen, sorrow, loss,  
these things are a part of a long-lived life.  
What is some of the wisdom that your Zen practice  
can give us in the question of  
how to cope with these more tragic inevitabilities?

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Well, the myth of meditation practice in Zen and Buddhism is that you can detach from all that.

You can detach from traumatic history, you can detach from difficult emotions that come up, and then you will achieve some kind of equanimity and you'll be good for life, right?

That is simply not the truth.

It's, to my understanding, it's a misconception of what practice does, that what it really does is offers us a way to be with whatever comes up, moment after moment, right?

Including some very intense negative emotions, as well as very intense positive emotions.

And the idea is to be with whatever comes up, not to suppress it, not to push it away, but then not to have to act on it, to be able to sit with absolutely whatever happens.

So my practice, Zen practice actually, is to sit absolutely still for 25 minutes at a time.

And the reason for absolute stillness is that so, is that when your nose begins to itch and you think, I absolutely have to scratch it, I absolutely have to, and then your experience is you don't scratch it and you get to see what happens.

Or your knee starts to hurt, right?

And there's something that sounds ridiculously simple about that, but there's something absolutely profound and empowering about knowing that you can be with whatever arises and not have to react and act on it until you've discerned how you wanna react, how you want to go forward, right?

So that's the sort of short answer to what does practice actually do for you.

That's a lovely answer.

We've talked a lot about generalities.

I'm interested in hearing about individuals.

Maybe each of you have, maybe this is like picking among children, but a favorite individual to cover.

I don't know if we can wanna talk about them by their first names or from their case numbers, but are there individual stories

that you find particularly powerful, particularly memorable?

Or even just that hook back to a point



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that you want to reiterate from this conversation.

Mark, we'll start with you.

So I think we may have talked a little bit about this person, but one of the characters in our study that I find just very compelling and inspiring is Andrew Deering.

And Andrew Deering lived a very lonely existence. Through most of his adulthood, he reported no friends. He was in a marriage that was not fulfilling for him. The only thing that really gave him satisfaction was his work.

He did some intricate work with his hands that became difficult to do as he entered into his 60s and had to retire. He decided to end that less satisfying marriage. And he was on his own and lonely, had no friends. He started to go to a gym, partly to pass the time. And in that gym, he encountered people on a daily level, began to recognize faces, figured out that the time he came in the morning, the same people were there every day and started to have conversations about things that they were mutually interested in. And over time, he realized that some of those people were interested in movies and old movies in particular. And he started to invite people over to his house to watch movies and he shared his expertise with them. And this was in his late 60s now for a man who for five decades have been quite unhappy. In his 70s, when the study checked back in with him and asked him the same question we ask always, do you have friends, do you have people who support and know who you are and have your back? He said very proudly, he said, yes, several. And that was quite a contrast from saying zero or he had no friends. So inspiring story about how all of us can change. It takes some practice and opportunity to make that connection. And this was a man who in his 70s was able to have that turn in his life. So very inspiring. That's a really beautiful story. And it's now making me question my decision

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to wear noise-canceling headphones at the gym.  
All of the relationships that I'm foregoing  
and the potential friends that are being blocked  
into silence.

Bob, what about you?

I think mine is the man we call Leo DiMarco in the book  
because previous researchers in our study  
thought he was the most boring man in our study.

His story is that he served in World War II.

He was a Harvard undergrad.

When he came back from World War II,  
he wanted to be a writer, but he had to come home  
and take care of an aging, ailing mother.

So he came home, he needed a job.

He got a job as a teacher and ended up spending his life  
as a high school history teacher, totally undistinguished.

He wasn't rich, he wasn't famous.

He didn't make any kind of name for himself.

And initially, the researchers in our study thought,  
this guy really doesn't have much to offer.

Gradually, as we watched his life unfold,  
we decided he was the best adapted man  
and the happiest man in our study.

And all of it centered around his relationships.

He happened to love teaching kids, teaching teenagers.

He was a history teacher.

He loved his colleagues.

He really enjoyed mentoring.

He had a good marriage.

His wife, he said, was his closest confidant and friend.

He had three kids, good relationships with them,  
loved to teach his grandchildren to sail.

It sounds idyllic, but it was totally unremarkable.

And I think it's the unremarkable quality  
that stands out for us as we think about a culture  
that valorizes all of the things we just talked about  
that this man never was.

And so I just want to name that  
and call that out as something for our listeners,  
because many of us feel like,  
well, if we haven't done these extraordinary things,  
we're not having the good life.

Yeah, the beauty and the mundane,

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that's a really lovely point.

Last question I have for you,

it's a cliché to ask, what is the purpose of life?

I don't think the question can be answered

in any reasonable singular way,

but it does have that word in it

that is, it is interesting to think through,

which is purpose.

And I wonder whether what role you think purpose serves

in life, whether the people who were happiest

in this longitudinal study

were those who found something

that they could tell themselves was a purpose,

whether it was their wife or their child, their career,

their friend group watching 1940s film,

The War on Tuesday nights after going to the gym.

Mark, what role do you think purpose serves

in a good life?

I think purpose is important for all of us.

Having a sense of purpose gets us up in the morning,

it reminds us that we have something important to do,

and that's critical for us throughout our lifespan.

But it's interesting, even the examples,

I was listening carefully, Derek,

with your examples, that purpose can be described

at many different levels.

So for some people, they might talk about their work

as being their critical purpose.

They wanna find a cure for cancer,

but the reason we wanna find a cure for cancer

for many people isn't just because of the fame

that may come with it,

it's because we're gonna help people,

that it's because of those connections with others.

Almost all of the examples you gave, Derek,

my sense of purpose is around my family,

doing well for my family,

that we find when we sort of step back

and think about it that achievements themselves

have very little meaning to us,

unless it's in a relational context.

So, exciting, Bob, and I'm really pleased

that our book has gotten some attention.

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It feels great, but it feels particularly good when people that we care about say, I really enjoyed reading your book, it's so neat that you did this, right? So it's that success or sense of meaning that you've achieved something important that is important in the context of your connections with others. So meaning is important, meaning beyond connections themselves, but oftentimes our sense of meaning or purpose is derived from the things that it does for other people that are important to us in our surroundings. Bob, does that sum it up? Oh, well, it does sum it up. I mean, one of the things that we find is that everybody asks themselves at some level the question, do I matter? And that usually means, do I matter to other people? And I'll give you an example, not in our study, but in another study, the Health and Retirement Survey, they tried all these ways to get older women to exercise because it was becoming a real problem that women were leading more sedentary lives, particularly as they aged. And they tried all these scare tactics, advertisements that said, you'll get sick and didn't do a thing. Well, when they showed an older woman holding a baby, obviously a grandchild and said, be there for your grandchild. These women flocked to exercise, right? And the issue was whether they mattered to somebody in the world. And so all the things we're talking about boil down to the question of, do I matter? And does my being here in the world make a difference in what happens for other people and in our future? So I think that's the question we're all asking and we all find wonderfully different unique ways to answer. It's so interesting to think about the language we use when we talk about touching the lives of others, right? That's the metaphor that we use.

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And that's often that sense of meaning  
and purpose that we describe.  
Have we impacted others' lives by our touch,  
our reach in some ways?

So interesting.

That's a beautiful place to end.

Mark, Bob, thank you so much.

Yeah, great. Thank you for your pleasure.

Thank you for listening.

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