

Good Genes Are Nice, But Joy Is Better

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What keeps us happy and healthy as we go through life? Is it wealth, fame, travel, or good health? In 1938, a group of scientists began tracking the health of 268 Harvard sophomores in 1938 during the Great Depression. They hoped the longitudinal study would reveal clues to leading healthy and happy lives. They got more than they wanted. After following the surviving Crimson men for nearly 80 years as part of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the world's longest studies of adult life, researchers have collected a cornucopia of data on their physical and mental health.

Of the original Harvard cohort recruited as part of the Grant Study, only 19 are still alive, all in their mid-90s. Among the original recruits were eventual President John F. Kennedy and longtime Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee. (Women weren't in the original study because the College was all male.) The study has been expanded to also study the children of these men.

If you think it's fame and money, you're not alone – but, according to psychiatrist Robert Waldinger, you're mistaken. As the director of 75-year-old study on adult development, **Dr. Waldinger** has unprecedented access to data on true happiness and satisfaction. He states, "The surprising finding is that our relationships and how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health. Taking care of your body is important, but tending to your relationships is a form of self-care too. That, I think, is the revelation...Another reality is that loneliness kills. It's as powerful as smoking or alcoholism." Dr. Waldinger shared in a Ted Talk almost 10 years ago about the study and its findings that are still truly relevant today. You can watch the talk here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KkKuTCFvzI

Another psychiatrist involved in the research, **Dr. George Vaillant**, authored a book entitled "***Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Study of Adult Development***." He said, "When the study began, nobody cared about empathy or attachment. But the key to healthy aging is relationships, relationships, relationships!"

Through all the research gathered from this impressive study spanning nearly 80 years, the following key points were found to contribute to healthy, happy lives:

- Being physically active

- Having healthy habits--diet, limiting alcohol, drugs, and smoking
- Demeanor-mature responses to life's difficulties
- Healthy weight
- Stable marriage
- Continuing to learn through education and self-study

What areas in your own or your couple's life might you want to look at how you are doing and what might you want to focus on to make some changes?

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