

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
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Ep. 127: The Good Life Unpacked: Discovering What Makes Us Thrive with the Heads of Harvard's 80-Year Study, Bob Waldinger and Marc Shulz

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be with Bob Waldinger and Marc Schulz. Bob is the director and Marc is the associate director of Harvard's 80-year study of adult development. This study is truly unique. It's the longest, most in-depth, longitudinal study of human life ever done. It was started in 1938 and followed people throughout their lives to understand not what made people sick, but what made them thrive. As Bob and Marc say in their new book about the study, which is titled *The Good Life* and is wonderful, they recorded the experience of the study's participants' lives more or less as they were happening, from childhood troubles to final days. First and foremost, they say, the study records the personal adventures in being human, but when these adventures are combined with hundreds of others, they become the raw material of science revealing not just lives, but patterns of life. I'm looking forward to finding out more about what a good life is and how we can all have a better one. Welcome Bob and Marc. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Marc Shulz: Thank you for having us.

Bob Waldinger: Yeah.

LT: It is my pleasure. Bob, why did you write the book?

BW: We wrote it because we wanted to bring this science out to the world. We're professors and we've been publishing in academic journals that very few people have access to, but we're talking about human life and about things that we know based on years of evidence, 85 years of evidence. We wanted to bring this in a usable form to many more people than can see these academic journals.

LT: Let's start similar to the way you begin your book, with a question. Marc, what do millennials in surveys say their most important life goals are?

MS: The millennials tell us that being rich, being famous, having a successful career are at the top of their list for their most important life goals. We can look to one survey which actually asked them when they were young adults what was important to them and more than 75% of them told us that being wealthy was their number one goal in life. And there's a strong focus obviously on success and fame. Part of that is age appropriate, but part of it is, I think, a mirror of the social messages that we get in media and advertising. Those are not just for millennials, those are for all of us.

LT: To me, your study is fascinating. Almost two-thirds of the original men in the Harvard study came from the poorest and the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston. The remaining third were Harvard College students. Every one of the college men should have been, as you say, a poster child for the good life in America. You followed these men for the rest of their lives. Bob, what relation did you find between successful careers and accomplishments and living a good life?

BW: Well, there was no correlation between being a successful person in your career and living a good life, which means that there were some very successful, accomplished people who had good lives and there were some very miserable people who, by all standards, were accomplished at work. What we find is that certainly accomplishing things is very satisfying and meaningful for most of us. So there's nothing wrong with accomplishing things, but that's not what predicts whether or not you're going to feel like you are living a good life.

LT: How about wealth? You mentioned that millennials put at the top of their list money and wealth.

BW: There was a study of this in which, in the United States, they looked at how much your happiness increases as your income increases. And what they found was that as your income increases to the threshold of meeting your material needs, yes, happiness goes up. So in this country, a few years ago, until you got to about \$75,000 a year annual household income, that your happiness really did go up as you made more money. But once you got above \$75,000 a year, you didn't get much of an increase in happiness, which means that making more and more money doesn't really do it as far as happiness is concerned.

LT: How about lottery winners? Are they happy forever?

MS: They're not. So we all dream about this serendipitous occasion where we come into good fortune, and people do experience a certain amount of joy when it happens. But what we find is that those folks return to kind of a baseline level of happiness where they were before, that there's a kind of blip that occurs, but after that, they're no more happy than any of the rest of us. So it doesn't appear that wealth by itself and sudden serendipitous wealth by itself, that that doesn't change our sense of happiness or whether we're living a good life.

LT: Marc, what is a good life?

MS: Yeah, such an important question. And that's a question as we talk about in the book that people have been thinking about for ages. In sort of modern social science, usually we're thinking about two pieces of people's lives. The first is really a kind of set of beliefs about life being meaningful, having a sense of purpose, being able to step back and say that in general, that I'm satisfied with my life. So it's a kind of enduring set of beliefs about one's life. The second piece is a kind of more transitory or momentary happiness that we experience joy and pleasure. And those are the two components that social scientists talk about. Those are the components that ancient philosophers talked about as well. And one of the things that we like to emphasize, and we talk about this a lot in the book, is that the emphasis on positive emotions is great. We all love to experience joy and pleasure as a wonderful thing, but life comes with ups and downs. It comes with joys and sorrows. And for us, the good life is about leaning in and experiencing all that life has to offer. It's hard to experience the highs without also experiencing some of the lows and the

challenges.

MS: So a good life is filled with all sorts of stuff, good stuff, hard stuff, challenging things, and also incredible connections to others.

LT: What is the single most important thing for a good life?

BW: Well, if I could boil it down, it would be being engaged in activities that you find meaningful and being engaged with people who you care about. That if you could have those two things, those would be the most important factors in predicting who's going to feel like they're living a good life.

LT: Marc, can you expand on that? What kinds of relationships are important?

MS: Relationships give us so many things, and the other important part of this is that there's so many different kinds of relationships that we can benefit from. So we're talking about friends, we're talking about close relationships at work, intimate partners. They can all play a vital role in helping us thrive in life. And the role that they play could differ, that we come in different flavors. So some of us need lots of people in our life to be happy. Others might want a sort of smaller inner circle. But the research is very clear. There's an incredible amount of research these days that shows us how corrosive being alone is on our body. So a sense of isolation or a sense of an experience of loneliness is literally corrosive to our bodies. It puts us at risk for health problems. It makes it more likely that we won't live as long as others. And it makes sense that that's the case when we think about it because relationships serve so many functions. So you ask what kinds of relationships are important, they're all important. Even the kind of distant weak connections that we might have with our postman in the neighborhood or the bus driver that takes us to work.

MS: And it's again because of the ways in which relationships help us grow, help us survive challenge. They help us figure out who we are, our basic identities that give us so many things. And it's also the place where we experience many of our greatest joys in life as well.

LT: Bob, I love that daily small interactions can make us happier and feel better. Can you give us some examples?

BW: Yeah. The person you ride the bus with every day, the bus driver or the cashier in the grocery store who checks you out regularly or the barista who makes your coffee for you at Starbucks or Dunkin' Donuts. What seems to happen is that when we have small positive interchanges with people, it gives us a little hit of well-being, a little hit of affirmation. I recognize you. I'm glad you're here. And we feel it. We feel it as we move on through our day. And so it's something for us to remember when we think about moving through our day without having those interactions. There's something we can cultivate with practice.

LT: Once you had followed people into their 80s, Bob, could you look back at them when they were young or middle aged to see if you could predict who would grow into happy and healthy octogenarians and who would not?

BW: We did that. And it's one of the great advantages of having a longitudinal study where we keep going back to people year after year, decade after decade to find out how they're doing. So once people had gotten to their 80s, we looked back, we said, okay, we knew a lot about them when

they were 50. From the information when they were 50, could we predict who was going to be healthy and happy in their 80s and who wasn't going to be so healthy and happy? And of course, we thought it was going to be their cholesterol levels. We thought it was going to be their blood pressure. What surprised us was that the strongest predictor when you were 50 of whether you were going to be happy and healthy at 80 was the satisfaction you had in your relationships, particularly your closest relationships. At first, we didn't even believe it because how could that be more important than cholesterol? But it turns out it's true and other research groups have found the same thing.

LT: Marc, can you talk more about the powerful effects of relationships on our bodies and on our health?

MS: There's so many ways that relationships can protect our body and powerful ways. And I want to say that one way of thinking about this is that relationships have a way of getting under our skin. And we can think about the joy we experience while we're with others, the sorrow we experience, we experience loss, that these are things that literally get into our body. If we pay attention to our emotions, maybe that's not surprising on the one hand. But what is surprising is how powerful these effects are. So lots of research that demonstrates that close connections with others can affect our immune processes, can affect things like how quickly we heal when we have a wound, literally a cut or a burn on our skin, affects inflammatory processes which are linked to all sorts of diseases, particularly diseases of aging. So it's becoming more and more clear from research. We're understanding the mechanisms now of how relationships protect our bodies and help us live healthy and longer lives. And another way I think that it's helpful to think about this is if we think back to what experience is like for babies growing up, that babies need to be soothed and parents can often provide that soothing, whether it's through touch or a hug or just words that they use, that we're really grown up babies and we still need that kind of soothing when we face stress, we face challenges all the time.

MS: And that kind of soothing that we get from our connections from others is very powerful and helps protect our body.

LT: In many countries, children are asked from the time they are little what they want to be when they grow up. That is what careers they intend to pursue. And when adults meet new people, often one of the first question asked is, what do you do? Why do you think, Bob, we focus almost entirely on career and accomplishments and not at all on relationships?

BW: Well, it is in part cultural. I have a colleague from Argentina and she once said to me, in Argentina, when you meet someone for the first time, it would be rude to ask them what they do for work. You ask, what's your family like? Who is in your family? We take it for granted that we ask each other, what do you do? But that's because of this emphasis. In part, I think it's because there are these very visible badges of accomplishment that we all hold out for each other. I mean, you know, at the highest level, there's the Nobel Prize. We make jokes about who's going to win the Nobel Prize. And so it's really easy to see those metrics and say, okay, I want that badge. I want to get that.

BW: How do you get good relationships in a visible way? It's not like we can hold that out for each other. It's something quite personal, quite private. And as Marc was saying, everybody needs different things in relationships and everybody needs different numbers of relationships for their

lives to feel good. So it's highly individual. It's a lifelong practice. And it doesn't come with visible badges of accomplishment. Much easier to say, well, I won this or that award.

LT: Marc, what do we know about happiness at different stages of life? When are people happiest?

MS: So research suggests that there's a kind of U-shaped curve of happiness across the lifespan, that younger people, young adults and older adults are the happiest. So the idea is that from middle age, as you begin to age more towards the end of life, people get happier. And what's interesting to me about that is that I don't think that that's intuitive to lots of people. It kind of defies the stereotypes that we have about aging and also defies what we know about the challenges that come with aging. So there are lots of physical challenges. There are transitions like retiring. That can be quite challenging for people. Our bodies are literally declining. We're facing the prospect of death in a way that we haven't before. Friends, our contemporaries are also struggling with similar issues. So it's quite a remarkable thing that people seem to get happier as they age. And research is beginning to, I think, find the answer to that. That part of it is that there is a kind of emotional wisdom that seems to come with aging, that older people are better at taking advantage of their existing networks of connection and focusing on those connections in ways that help them experience life in happier and more kind of fulfilling ways.

MS: So there's a wisdom that comes with aging that allows us to maximize that good life. That's quite extraordinary given the context, the reality of what aging is like.

LT: To quote from your book, "over time, we develop the subtle but hard to shake feeling that our life is here now and that the things we need for a good life are over there or in the future, always just out of reach. Our own life rarely matches the pictures we've created in our heads of what a good life should look like." Can you comment on that? When does a good life start?

MS: I was going to say, who wrote that, Bob? That was a good line.

BW: Yeah, yeah.

LT: It's very eloquent.

BW: Essentially, we are given messages all day long about what is supposed to be a good life. Think about all the visual images we see in the media and all the Instagram feeds we look at and then Facebook photos and all the things that we put out there for each other that make us think that we're supposed to be rich and famous and be on beautiful beaches all the time. And of course, then you get the sense, well, that's not my life. My life has some good times and some bad times and some boring times. And so I think that this idea that we create an image of a good life is based on all the stories that we are told all day long about what we're supposed to think is good. And that's different from what science tells us, what our research tells us, and actually what wisdom traditions tell us about what actually makes a good life, which is what we've been talking about, a sense of meaning and purpose in what you do, good, warm connections that give us more of a sense of the basic okayness of life, even when it's hard.

BW: So your question, when does the good life start? It starts now. It starts with making small choices. Small choices to connect with people you want to be more connected to. Small choices to pay attention to what's really here right now, as opposed to the stories we've been telling ourselves

about where the good life is supposed to be. The danger is if we listen to those stories in our heads, we can end up missing life as it's unfolding right here and now.

LT: Before I ask for the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already talked about? What should I have asked you that I did not?

BW: When you think about younger people, actually people of all ages, we often imagine that if we have a good relationship with somebody, it's always going to stay the same. And one of the things we have to remember is that each of us is constantly changing. Each of us is constantly developing as a human being. And what that means is that the relationship is going to constantly change. Young people need their parents to realize that they're growing up, that they're getting older.

BW: They don't need to be micromanaged in the way they did when they were toddlers. Similarly, we need to allow each other, intimate partners, friends, family members to change and develop. And we need to keep paying attention to who these people are now and who they're becoming and who am I becoming and therefore how is our relationship changing over time.

MS: And I would add one thing that we haven't talked about that to me is kind of an extraordinary part of being involved in this study. The study started in the 1930s and almost two-thirds of the sample were adolescent boys that were growing up in the poorest neighborhoods of Boston. The other one-third, roughly one-third were students at Harvard that live literally just down the street. But they had very different prospects in life and they came from very different places. So one of the things that I reflect on a lot, I know Bob does too, is the sort of basic once you get beneath the surface of what people's experiences are, what they look like from the outside, what their opportunities are like, that there's a kind of basic shared human experience here when you look at people very closely across time.

MS: It's quite extraordinary and I think says something important in a time of sort of great division and a time when we're often cut off from others in ways that have been very hard for folks during the pandemic. So I find this opportunity to learn about people's lives from very different walks of life across a very different period of time, right? We're no longer in the 1930s. There's some shared commonalities that are I think quite exciting to recognize and for me talk about our basic shared humanity.

LT: What are the three takeaways that you would both like to leave the audience with today?

BW: First takeaway, if you were going to make one investment in establishing the foundations of a good life, it would be to invest in your connections with other people. That relationships are so important for our health and our happiness and that we tend to underestimate that importance.

MS: And I'll take a shot at the second takeaway, which is that it doesn't have to be an intimate relationship that's giving us these benefits. That we can thrive from relationships with others that could be friendships, it could be relatives, it could be neighbors. The important idea is having someone that you can count on, someone particularly when you're in need and people that you have a kind of shared connection with that reminds us again of our basic sense of humanity.

BW: And the third takeaway is that it's never too late to start. That we had people who thought, oh,

I'm no good at relationships. It's never happened for me. It's never going to. Some people in their 20s said this and certainly people later in their lives. What we find as we told stories in the book of real people in our study, we found many people who thought that relationships weren't for them, that they weren't good at it. And that sometimes in their 60s, they found for the first time, wonderful friends, a romantic partner, all kinds of things happen that we can't foresee. And so the bottom line is it's never too late to start.

LT: I love your takeaways. I also loved your book, *The Good Life*. Thank you both so much.

MS: Thank you.

BW: It's a pleasure.

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