What Actually Makes Us Happy? Lessons From An 85-Year Study Transcript

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Introduction and Study Background

This is Doctor Talks, real talk from real doctors on the issues that matter to you most. Dr. Robert Wildinger, what an honor to interview you twice, literally in almost a year.

Just a year ago, I interviewed you for my podcast. It's not even a year ago. It was a few months back and it was one of our most well-received podcasts.

You have such a beautiful way of explaining What we instinctively know to be the truth, but in this busy day and age of quick fixes and busy lives, we don't apply your truth.

You're phenomenal. You are phenomenal. You are an American psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, Zen priest. You're a part-time professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

You direct the Harvard study of adult development and the longest running study of adult life ever conducted. I mean, I can go on and on and on with your CV, but I'm going to hand it over to you to do justice to the incredible work that you're doing.

And then we're going to dive into this happiness study, the longest study ever run. That's just phenomenal. Welcome and thank you. Well, it's a pleasure to be here.

Why don't I start by telling you a bit about the study and where my information comes from. So this is the longest study of the same human beings that's ever been done.

It's followed the same people through their entire adult lives. It's called the Harvard Study of Adult Development. It was started in 1938, and it was started with two groups.

A group of undergraduate students from Harvard College, chosen by their deans as fine, upstanding young men, and it was meant to be a study of normal development from adolescence to young adulthood.

I mean, now we think, you know, studying normal development, you wouldn't just choose white males from Harvard, but that's what they did in 1938. So 268 of them, and then also a group of boys from Boston's poorest neighborhoods, kids who were around the age of 12, six of them chosen because They were from some of Boston's most troubled families.

And again, the question in both studies was, how do people thrive as they move from the teenage years into young adulthood? And with the inner city kids, the question was, how, if you're born with so many strikes against you, as we say, how do you end up thriving despite all that?

So we followed both of those groups and eventually brought in their spouses when they grew up and got married. And we brought in their children, more than half of whom are women.

And so we have a lot of gender balance now and over 2000 people who we have studied over 86 years. Incredible. Yeah. That's absolutely incredible. I remember you in one of your talks, because you've done some incredible talks, and I really recommend people listen to your TED Talk and your various interviews, because they'll learn so much.

But one of them, you said that your TED Talk that you did in just an underscript small elementary school, suddenly it was one of the top 10 TED Talks in most listened to, or something like that, top two or top 10 TED Talks listened to ever.

Why Relationships Predict Happiness and Health

I mean, that's just crazy. So tell us about that and tell us why, because this obviously is from the outcome of your research. But you know, you obviously hit something that is really cool to our humanity.

Yes, and it was such a surprise. So the talk has had over 48 million views. That's unreal. Congratulations. Very large for a TED talk. It's the eighth most watched talk in the history of Ted.

And when I gave the talk, I actually thought, oh, this is so obvious. People are not going to be that interested. And then it went viral, I think, because the main message of the talk from our research is that People are happier, but also stay healthier and live longer when they have better connections with other people.

And on the one hand, we could say, well, that's obvious. I mean, my grandmother could have told me that, right? My clergyman could have told me that. But at the same time, this is a fact that's hidden in plain sight because most of us take relationships for granted.

We don't think, gee, I need to take care of my relationships because I'll be happier and healthier if I do that. And so my naming that in a TED talk seemed to spark recognition among a lot of people saying, oh my gosh, how am I doing?

Do I have friends? Am I seeing people as much as I want to? It was that kind of assessment of my social connections and my social engagement that I think the talk probed it.

So, so interesting, you know, as I was re-listening to that talk and then listening to another interview of yours where you mentioned that as well, it made me immediately question whether I'm doing that in my own life.

And, you know, it got me. And, you know, I'm a pretty social person, but I, and I'm very close to my family and, you know, I kind of can tick all the boxes.

But i find myself thinking hey you know when did i last really have a deep connection with x person and when did i last i need to set up a regular talk and every time i see that person i feel so great and i could do this it stimulated a whole string of a mindstorm of.

the desire and I felt excited. And so I would love you to just explain to people the three main findings that you found from your study. And then if you could talk about stress and how relationships are such a great way of regulating our stress and maybe take us through an exercise.

You do a really simple exercise that really helped me. Sure. Well, the findings of the study are that, first of all, as I said, good relationships keep people happier and healthier.

That it's not just the number of connections we have with people, but it is really the warmth of those connections to other people that all of us need.

At least one person in the world who we feel will be there for us. if we're in trouble, if we need help. It's that thing we call secure attachment. We need to feel securely connected to at least one other person on the planet in order to feel okay.

And the third thing is that good relationships protect our brains as well as our bodies. So what we find is that the people with warmer connections have cognitive decline later if their brains decline at all as they get older.

And when they do start to decline, it happens more slowly.

How Social Connection Regulates Stress

So what that means is that good warm connections with other people are protective and staying socially engaged as we get older is now we understand protective against the ravages on our brains of old age.

So those are the big findings from the study. And then You know as you as you said we began to investigate why that is so how do relationships work how do they get into our bodies and change our biology like how could that be possible.

And the best idea that we have from good research now is that it has to do with stress, that relationships help us regulate stress. So, for example, you know, something upsetting may happen to me today.

It does, you know, often I'll have upsetting things happen during the day. I can literally feel my body rev up. My blood pressure goes up, my heart rate goes up, and that's normal.

The body goes into what we call fight or flight mode, perfectly normal. then the body is meant to calm down again. And if I can go home and talk to my wife, or if I can call a friend and talk about this upsetting thing that happened, I can literally feel my body calm down.

And that's normal. And what we think is that having good relationships allows us to relieve stress in that way by connecting with someone else when we're having a hard time.

If we don't have anybody like that, If we're lonely, if we're isolated, what we believe happens is that our bodies stay in a low level fight or flight mode, meaning they have higher levels of circulating stress hormones like cortisol.

Our immune systems get weaker. They don't function as well. that and that we don't heal from minor wounds as well. So all of this has been demonstrated by research when we have higher stress.

So that's how we think that social isolation gradually breaks down our body systems and social connection protects our body systems. That's how we think it works.

Oh, that's incredible. And it's so lovely to have all the research backing it up. I work in the field of psychoneurobiology. We have a research team doing, showing the impact of when you manage your mind.

And one of those things is definitely forming relationships. There's a change in the brain and the body. I mean, you see it, it's just, and you feel it immediately.

So the reality is there. Yes. And, and you, so just in terms, could you, would you share maybe just like a little exercise? Cause you did something that people could actually do because I know there's, I mean, some, not everyone has, some people are lonely.

They don't have anyone they could turn to and maybe we could discuss that afterwards, but could you do an exercise? You did a great one in one of the talks that I listened to that was just such a simple thing, but it just made me think.

Yes. Okay. The exercise comes from our finding that the people who had the best connections with other people were the people who practiced connecting with others day in and day out, that it was something we call social fitness.

We meant it to be an analogy with physical fitness. Because if you think about it, We don't go and work out today and then say, good, I'm done. I don't ever have to work out again.

No, physical fitness is a practice that's ongoing. And what we found was that the people who had best relationships were the people who practice social fitness.

And what that meant was they connected with other people daily, weekly, monthly. They made sure that there were people in their lives who they were always in touch with.

And so the exercise I'd like to encourage people to do right now is this.

Social Fitness Exercise and Daily Connection

Think of someone who you appreciate, who you enjoy, who you're always glad to be connected to and that you haven't seen in a while or you haven't been connected with in a while.

So call that person to mind. Now, once you have that person in mind, take out your phone and send them a short text. or an email, whatever you usually do.

Or if you want to pick up the phone, stop this video if you're watching a video and pick up the phone. And you might just say something simple like, hi, I was just thinking of you and wanted to connect, or whatever works for you in your language with your friend or your family member.

Just send it now. That's all you need to do. And then what I would suggest is that over the next few hours, take note of whether you get anything back.

Now, sometimes you won't get anything back, but more often than not, you will get something back. Very often people will say, oh, I'm so glad you reached out.

Or, you know, one person in this exercise wrote back saying, oh, I just had surgery and I'm so glad you reached out because I've been lonely and You know, and another person said, I've wanted to see you.

Let's make a date for dinner. And so what you'll find is that these small gestures, they don't have to be big. They don't have to require huge effort or lots of time.

I mean, look, look how long it took you, Caroline, to do that. It was less than a minute. And I've had a response already. But a response already and that person, they're like big hearts and immediate.

I mean, that's not even, it's under a minute, the whole thing. And I feel great. I can feel the difference. I mean, it just didn't take much effort. And it's someone I've been thinking, oh, I must text him.

I must text him. I thought, do it now while we're talking. Done. Exactly. Exactly. Could you build that into your day? And everybody is saying, oh, my life is so full.

I have so much I have to do. I am so busy. I can't add one more thing. Well, what if you could find a way to slip it in to time you're already using in other ways?

What if during your commute, on the train to work or while you're taking a walk or while you're at the gym, you just said, okay, I'm just going to call somebody or I'm going to text somebody each day that I'm idling on my phone.

Instead of looking at social media, take a few moments to connect with someone. Build it into your day using time you would use in another way that isn't that valuable anymore.

So you don't have to add something big to your day. Just find a way to slip these things in and you will be amazed at these little hits of wellbeing like you just got.

when someone comes back to you, happy to be connected. It's so simple. If you think of the time that we spend maybe reading the news, sure, we need to know what's going on, but you could read one article in 10 minutes and then you could spend 10 minutes texting five people or you could spend one minute texting one person and you could take the 10 minutes and add it up and find 30 minutes in the weekend to speak to that person or text them and talk for 10 minutes.

There's just so many ways, but as you say, it's a practice. It's a social fitness. It's a physical fitness. It's a mental fitness. You know, as you said, we all get, we all get the exercise thing.

It's the same thing with the mental ideas. Well, I work with people helping them with their mental health. It's mental

fitness. I tell them the same thing.

You brush your teeth every day. You go work out in the gym. Mental fitness, social fitness as well. Go ahead. Yes. And when you mentioned mental fitness, this is really important because one of the things we know is that people who are more isolated, people who are more lonely have higher levels of depression and anxiety.

So one of the ways to ease a mental health problem is often to connect with other people. Absolutely. It's protective of our mental health. And I'm so glad you said that because it's kind of logical, but when people are in that depressed state or anxious, they maybe don't want to bother someone else or they don't feel like it.

But just even text, if you don't have the energy to talk, just to text someone and say, hey, I need to, I feel, don't feel great, whatever. Or even the other side, I mean, Robert, isn't there, Bob, isn't there a research?

Well, I know there is, but I'm sure you've come across the research showing that when you're feeling in a bad place, and you reach out to someone else and say, hey, I was thinking about you, how are you?

Helping someone else can actually help yourself feel better about what you're going through. Oh, absolutely. We know that when, for example, when people are lonely, if they volunteer to work with people who are lonely, they feel better.

Many people will start volunteering.

Quality, Mutual, and Authentic Relationships

If they feel too lonely, they'll volunteer to read to preschoolers, or they'll volunteer to visit older people in a retirement community, or they'll do one of those things where They'll visit, take care of, be of help to people who want their help.

And it makes you feel so good. It makes you feel like you belong. It makes you feel like you're useful. And that goes a long way to easing loneliness and depression.

And there's research backing up what you've just said. There's actual scientific research showing that when you're in that bad place and you reach out and help someone else, your own healing will improve by, I think it's honest, I can't, I don't want to quote the figure, but in some way it's a very high percentage, above 60% kind of boost to you managing your own healing.

Absolutely. So it's a reality. I used to give my patients when I was still practicing, and I encourage people to do this now to the work that I do. I would also say to them, literally on the prescription pad, I would say things like, go and visit a friend or go and volunteer.

And I would give them, in this area, these are the things you could do. And that's how you can also build a community. Can you talk a little bit about, you know, could you talk, one of your second findings is the quality of relationships.

So it's not the number, because now I don't want people to start thinking, oh my goodness, I must have 15 new friends this week. That's not what Bob is saying, that Dr.

Walding is saying. Could you talk about quality relationships? Yes, and that is really important what you said because you could imagine from what we're talking about that you need to be an extrovert and you need to be a party animal.

Not at all. You know, we're all on a spectrum somewhere between introverts and extroverts and all of it's healthy, all of it's good. Introverts just need fewer people in their lives.

So you may only need a few people. But what everybody needs are what we're calling quality or good

relationships. And what that means is relationships where you feel like you can both ask for help and receive help and give help, where relationships are mutual, where you are mutually helpful, beneficial, supportive to each other.

in relationships where you really take an interest in the other person and want them to take an interest in you. It's a relationship that's not all one way, where one person does all the talking and the other does all the listening, or one person does all the helping and the other person does all the receiving.

What we really look for in good, stable relationships is mutuality. And the other aspect that's important is what we think of as authenticity. Can you be yourself in this relationship or do you have to pretend, do you have to close off really important aspects of who you are, those are relationships that are much harder to maintain.

They're more stressful if you can't be yourself. So you want to seek out those people with whom you feel more comfortable just being who you are and being appreciated for who you are.

And in exchange, you appreciate the other person for who they are. You're not trying to change them. You're not trying to make them into a different person.

That never works. But you just appreciate each other. It's that reciprocity that's so authentic and that's so important. So this is wonderful. I mean, as you say, it hits you in the gut and we all need these reminders because this is what we instinctively know is at the core of our humanity.

We need these deep, meaningful relationships that are authentic. Question, I know that these people, and I'm so glad you mentioned the spectrum, by the way, that the fact that some of us are totally introvert you know, maybe one or two, and some of us are totally extroverts in some way on the scale.

So that was wonderful. I'm glad you mentioned that. What about if people do have friendships where it is one sided, where you tend to have to control what you say because, you know, they're going to get worked up if you can't share your belief system, they can't accept you for who you are, or they're just pretty toxic.

You know, they're just always wanting to download on you and talk about their own stuff. What would you recommend? Because that's a question we get a lot on this podcast.

What would you recommend in those situations? Well, I'd recommend a couple of things. One is seeing if the relationship can shift, seeing if you can ask the person to, if you can talk more about yourself and see if the other person is interested.

If you could even name it, could say, sometimes I feel like we only talk about you and I'd like to be able to share more about what's going on in my life and see if that works or see if the other person always has to turn it back to themselves.

If you can't shift the relationship, then you may want to spend less time with that person and spend more time with the people with whom it is more mutual.

There is more give and take. Because some people just can't be very mutual in relationships. It doesn't mean you have to change that. It doesn't mean you have to cut off the relationship.

Compliments, Specific Appreciation, and Closing

But you may want to spend less time in that relationship. And you may want to look toward the relationships where there is that give and take. That's such good advice.

And then I have so many questions for you, but I want to respect your time. I'll ask if I could ask you one more question that I think is something that I'm pretty certain you have come across in the study.

I read some interesting research the other day about compliments and about how at work That authentic obviously

not just giving someone a compliment for manipulation purposes but complimenting someone finding something in that person even if it's just a smile to just and and it showed that people that that colleagues whether it's bosses or whether it's coworkers.

And then also translating into family relationships. I think the rate was like being able to give sort of a 40, 50, 60% of the conversation if you could paper with some level of a compliment.

Like even if they did something badly in the, if they didn't quite do the job properly or they didn't do the project portion of the project properly, there's something that you can find that was good and then dive into dealing with the other stuff.

And I have a friend who I've been friends with for nearly 40 years, who, she's, she's a professor and she's, I mean, she was my mentor with my master's and PhD.

And she actually was good, very direct with her feedback. If things were not right, she would, but she, despite that, she always, every time you're around her, no matter who it was, she would find something authentic and genuine, totally coming from a place of authenticity, something to compliment them on.

She would find some, and it was always real. It was nothing that she made up. She wasn't, you know, just dragging it, sucking it out of thin air. What is your opinion around compliments and quality relationships?

It's a great point because we all need appreciation from other people and we need it for things that are true about us. And so I love that to appreciate what's true.

Right. And and also to appreciate things specifically. One of the problems in giving positive feedback is we often say, oh, you're doing a great job. And if someone is trying to learn how to be better at what they do, Actually, you're doing a great job, doesn't go very far in helping.

So what if I said to you, actually, what I really like is the way you ask questions that allow me to give expansive answers that allow me to clarify what I'm saying.

That's a very specific thing I'm appreciating about your interviewing style, right? As opposed to just, you're a great interviewer, I like you, right?

And so I think that what we want to do is appreciate each other and appreciate in ways that are specific enough that the other person can say, first of all, oh, yeah, I do do that well, and can learn how to do more of a specific thing that's going well.

I love that answer. That being specific, because then the person feels like you've tuned into them. Like, I felt like you tuned into me. I feel heard.

You feel heard. And then people are much more likely to say, oh, that's amazing. I did that well. What can I do? Is there something else I could do better?

There's an immediate trust and bond and a chance for growth and in all different ways. So that is such a great answer. Thank you. I tell you, you're wonderful to talk to and you have such great insight.

And I know there's so many more pearls of wisdom that you could share with us. So I know I'll be hopefully having you back on my podcast. We will dive a little deeper.

I'm going to ask you lots of specific questions because I have so many. But thank you for your wisdom and your work and the way that you come across with such kindness and compassion.

Everything about you uses that kindness and compassion. So it's so easy to listen to you. It's genuine and authentic. Exactly what you teach, you practice.

So thank you for that. It's easy to talk to you. It's a pleasure. Thank you so much. I really appreciate what you're saying that that means a lot to me.

Where can people learn more about the study? You have written some incredible books that people, I mean, I love your books. They've helped me so much.

Can you tell people where they can get hold of your books? What's the best way to learn from you? Well, the best way probably is just to go to my website.

It's RobertWaldinger.com. RobertWaldinger, all one word.com. And the book is called The Good Life. There's a link to it on my website, but you can find it wherever books are sold, as they say.

It's very much in bridge. It's been a best seller. And I have Dharma Talks if anyone wants to hear. about me teaching meditation and Zen, there are links to some of those Dharma talks through the website.

So there are a variety of ways that the things I have to teach are available, but probably the best place to go is to my website and you can find links there.

Fantastic. That's perfect. We'll put all those links in the show notes and thank you once again for your time and I'm really looking forward to our next conversation.

Me too. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for tuning in to Doctor Talks. We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health.

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