

News Column for week of February 7, 2022

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Successful and wealthy vs. happy and healthy

If you were going to invest now in your future best self, where would you put your time and energy? Research has shown that most would answer this question with activities that would bring success and wealth. Our worldly pressures push us to work harder so we can achieve more to reach those successes to have a better life.

I would challenge you to think about successful and wealthy vs. happy and healthy. For over 75 years, The Harvard Study of Adult Development has tracked the lives of 724 men -- following their work, their home lives, and their health. Sixty of the 724 still live with most of them in their 90's.

One group of the men studied finished the Harvard college, and most of those went on to serve in World War II. The second group consisted of a group of boys from the poorest neighborhoods in Boston, specifically chosen because they were from some of the most disadvantaged families in that city in the 1930's.

Whole families were interviewed at the beginning of the study. These men entered adulthood in all walks of life. Some climbed the social ladder all the way to the top. Some went the opposite direction.

Follow-up continues with the remaining men, with interviews taking place in their own homes with them individually and with their families, studying their medical records, and questioning their doctors. What they have discovered so far, is that having a good life doesn't have anything to do with wealth or fame or working harder, but simply that good relationships keep us happier and healthier.

Here are three main lessons learned:

Firstly, social connections are really good for us, and loneliness stifles. Those more socially connected to family, friends, and their community are happier, healthier, and they live longer. Loneliness is toxic. They are less happy, their health declines earlier in mid-life, and their brain function declines sooner.

Secondly, the quality of close relationships matters. Living in the midst of conflict is bad for our health. Living in the midst of warm relationships is protective. When the men had been followed into their mid-80's, a look-back into the two groups was done to see if at age 50, a prediction could be made as to how they would grow old. It wasn't their mid-life cholesterol levels that forecasted how they were going to age, it was how satisfied they were in their relationships. Those most satisfied with their relationships at 50 were the healthiest at 80. Good relationships add a protective factor from other life crises.

Thirdly, good relationships protect our brains in addition to our bodies. Being in a securely attached relationship to another person in your 80's -- where one can really count on the other person in times of need, is protective. Memories stay sharper longer. Bickering aside, when things got tough, they knew

they could still count on that other person, and those arguments would not take a toll on their memories.

This isn't new information. We are human and all like a quick fix. However, relationships are built over time. They require dedication, can be complicated, and take work over a lifetime to achieve meaningful relationships.

In the study those that were happiest going into retirement were those that replaced their friends from the work place with new friends in retirement. What might that look like? Replace screen time or being holed up in your home environment with spending time with people. Doing something new together with your spouse or a special someone, or reaching out to someone you haven't spoken to in years. Feuds take a toll on those who hold grudges.

While acquaintances and friendships of all kinds are important, meaningful relationships can provide an increased sense of satisfaction and well-being. For more information on relationship building, contact a Southwind District Extension Office with locations in Erie, Fort Scott, Iola and Yates Center.

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