

What Really Makes Us Happy?

Issue 2/2024 March 8

The ongoing complexity and challenges facing the world globally mean many people are seeking answers to discover, or rediscover, happiness despite growing demands in both personal and work lives. This search for answers to happier lives is pervasively affecting society around the globe, not least for the teachers, parents, families, and caregivers of girls who may find themselves battling falsely idealised social media imagery, bullying, stress and unrealistic demands from society. With such a multitude of self-help content available, where can people turn for reliable answers on what really and truly makes us happy? How can they be sure they are not falling for another empty trend that will have no genuine effect on long term happiness?

Enter Harvard University's study on what makes us happy. Originally known as the *Study of Adult Development* (and now the *Harvard Second Generation Study*), this is the world's longest study on happiness, and what can help increase our happiness. In fact, this study has progressed for so long, that the researchers are now studying happiness in 1300 descendants of the very original participants, with plans to gradually include the next two generations of these families (Mineo, 2023). This current (and planned) research will provide Harvard's team with a better understanding of childhood experiences and how this can impact health in later life (Harvard University, 2024b). This study has been running for 86 years, and has moved with the times to understand how our changing world influences happiness, and what we can do to improve our own happiness at a time when isolation, loneliness and depression are affecting record numbers of people.

Given the extent of this data, what have Harvard University's researchers learned? Their recent findings gathered during the rapidly increasing use of social media and occurrence of isolation in today's world are particularly important, and show that "[c]lose relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives" (Mineo, 2017). Dr Robert Waldinger, current director of the study and a Professor of Psychiatry, even went so far as to say that "loneliness kills" (Mineo, 2017). The Harvard study shows that the impact of these relationships was equally important regardless of the context — marriage, friendships, family and other social supports were all similarly important in determining happiness for people who participated in the project.

Why is this so important for adolescent girls and the young women they are becoming? The study found that young people "tally the lowest life-satisfaction scores among all age groups of those 18 and older" (Powell, 2022). This new finding is a direct reversal of survey results obtained in 2000. The downward trend in young people's happiness began during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is now clear that it is continuing (Powell, 2022). This is concerning given the disconnect that many girls are feeling — a topic that is being addressed in the ICGS' own Connected Girl Podcast (see eBrief Issue 1/2024, February 21) podcast episodes are available here: <https://girlsschools.org/advocacy/blog/2024/01/24/on-educating-girls-the-connected-girl-podcast-series/>).

Robert Waldinger summarises 86 years of research by defining the key to happiness as "meaningful relationships" and their "importance... to our health and well-being" (Chang & Becker, 2024; Davis, 2023). While the project showed that happiness was linked to positive physical health outcomes such as cholesterol and blood pressure levels, the research consistently showed that satisfaction in relationships was "the best predictor of a happy and healthy life" (Mineo, 2023). At first the project researchers questioned if this was an anomaly, but then additional research (both within and outside of the Harvard project) continued to reproduce the same findings, and reinforced Harvard's research that shows "interpersonal connectedness, and the quality of those connections, really impact health, as well as happiness" (Mineo, 2023).

This provides a potentially valuable and relatively achievable solution to the stress and loneliness that plagues so many, including girls and adolescents. The benefit of healthy, positive relationships helps regulate stress, which in turn provides numerous benefits for both physical and mental health. It can improve the body's "fight-or-flight" response, stress hormones, and even levels of inflammation (Mineo, 2023). In a world where people are seeking answers but may feel overwhelmed by self-help tips for wellbeing, this may seem like added pressure. Yet it isn't. The research has shown that there isn't a magic number of relationships any one person needs to be happy. As Waldinger says, "[w]hat we see in our research is that everybody needs at least one solid relationship, someone whom they feel they can count on in times of need" (Mineo, 2023).

He goes on to explain that there is no "right" number of connections or relationships each person needs. The importance is that the benefits come from many areas — these relationships can be from anywhere, such as

friends, family, peers, colleagues, staff at local shops, even regular courier drivers or your local barista (Mineo, 2023). Ultimately, building those solid, strong relationships is important because “everybody needs at least one person that you know would be there for you” if you needed help (Mineo, 2023). Waldinger even describes developing a “social fitness”, similar to a physical fitness, where we can take actions to make new connections, maintain connections with existing friends, have conversations, and encourage “deepening relationships” (Mineo, 2023).

This doesn’t mean there is a need for complicated social networking plans to be developed. Small, simple actions can still improve our happiness, regardless of age or gender. The important thing to remember is that the earlier we develop these positive, healthy relationships, the more time we have to see the benefit of this on our happiness. Developing meaningful, positive relationships doesn’t need to be difficult. It can even be as simple as having a casual conversation or participating in an event or activity that interests you “and do it alongside other people” (Mineo, 2023).

Robert Waldinger has given many interviews about this project and the importance of relationships. He concluded one of his recent interviews by reminding listeners that “nobody is happy all the time”, and this does not mean “we’re doing something wrong” (Mineo, 2023). He talks about life’s challenges, its obstacles, and its ups and downs. Relationships are “a way to increase our happiness”. But they also form a “safety net” of support that can help us during “those hard times that all of us have in our lives” (Mineo, 2023).

The same is true for the girls that teachers, families, parents, friends, mentors, coaches, caregivers and other adults support. Girls will face challenges, obstacles and sadness. But developing positive, healthy relationships as part of a holistic, healthy approach to wellbeing can give girls the best chance possible for healthy, long-lasting happiness. This happiness can then be used as part of girls’ and young women’s holistic wellbeing and resilience to combat the epidemic of loneliness and isolation that seemingly continues to grow in society.

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