What Science Can Tell Us About Living Well:
Lessons from an 80-Year Study

ROBERT J. WALDINGER, M.D.
HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL
Measuring world happiness

- GDP per capita
- Social support
- Healthy life expectancy
- Freedom to make life choices
- Generosity (donations)
- Trust (absence of corruption)
The happy life gets defined for us, not by us
We are always comparing our insides to other people’s outsides.
What's Been Studied

- Mental health
- Physical health
- World War II experiences
- Work
- Relationships
- Aging and retirement
Loneliness is toxic

Loneliness $\Rightarrow$ Earlier cognitive and physical decline
Relationships are not static

Marital Satisfaction

Marriage  Children arrive  Children leave  (Children return)

... and they don’t have to be entirely smooth
“The best things in life aren’t things.”
A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.

- Oliver Wendell Holmes
Which Work Teams Are Most Productive?

- High social sensitivity (empathy)
- Equal time for each person
- More women
Bowling Alone

Joining clubs and civic organizations down by more than half over last 25 years.

Family dinners and family vacations down by one third in the last 25 years.

In 1983, 12% of Americans lacked a confidant

In 2004, 25% lacked a confidant
Workplace Isolation and Loneliness

- Nearly half of workers have no close friend at work
- Lack of social connections ➞ Less ‘discretionary effort’
- Greater loneliness ➞ Poorer performance
Leaning in to relationships:

“Attention is the most basic form of love.”

- John Tarrant
Continuous Partial Attention
Our closest adult relationships don’t demand our attention
What we model . . .
Preventive medicine
Creating Workplace Connections

- Learn what’s happening in your workplace
- Make strengthening social connections a priority
- Encourage giving and receiving help
- Create opportunities to learn about each others’ personal lives
Worries no one cares about his project

Wonders if she should share her idea

They saw “something” on her mammogram

Excited about tonight’s date

Up all night with sick child
“Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?”

-Henry David Thoreau
Take-home messages

- Science tells us that human connection is a major source of happiness and health
- Technology has the power to isolate or connect
- Lives and workplaces can be structured to combat isolation
• Current 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation study: How Childhood Adversity Reaches Across Decades to Affect Midlife Physical Health

• Collaborative studies in Bhutan and the UAE

• Lifespan Research Foundation
My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.

-Maya Angelou