

18 The Good Life

1. The Harvard Study of Adult Development & Why Social Fitness Matters

What the Harvard Study Is

- Began in the late 1930s.
- Followed two groups of boys/young men across their whole adult lives:
 - Harvard undergraduates (mostly relatively privileged).
 - Boys from disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston.
- Methods:
 - Regular interviews, questionnaires about work, family, mental health.
 - Medical exams, brain scans later on.
 - Contact with spouses and children for fuller picture.
- It is the longest in-depth longitudinal study of adult life ever done.

Main Finding Relevant to The Good Life

- Flourishing (being happy, healthy, and fulfilled across a lifetime) is complex and influenced by many things.
- But the single most powerful and consistent predictor of:
 - physical health,
 - mental health,
 - and overall life satisfaction was the quality of close relationships, not:
 - wealth,
 - fame,
 - career success,
 - or IQ.

Roughly: Good, supportive relationships protect your body and mind across life.

Why This Supports “Social Fitness”

Waldinger and Schulz argue:

1. Relationships strongly affect health and happiness.
 - People with warm, reliable relationships had:
 - lower rates of chronic disease,
 - better mood,
 - longer lives.
 - Loneliness and conflict were associated with:
 - worse health outcomes,

- earlier decline,
 - more depression and anxiety.
- 2. Relationships do not maintain themselves automatically.
 - They weaken when neglected.
 - Conflicts, misunderstandings, and life transitions (moves, job changes, parenting) can erode them.
- 3. Therefore we need “social fitness”, not just physical fitness.
 - Physical fitness: exercise, nutrition, sleep → stronger body.
 - Social fitness: intentional effort to build and maintain relationships → stronger network of support.
 - Both:
 - require regular, ongoing work,
 - decline if ignored,
 - are easier to maintain than to repair after serious damage.

What “Social Fitness” Involves

- Regular assessment:
 - Asking yourself:
 - * Who are “my people”—those I can really count on?
 - * Which relationships feel neglected or strained?
 - * When did I last invest time and attention in them?
- Deliberate cultivation:
 - Scheduling time with people.
 - Reaching out, checking in.
 - Repairing conflicts.
 - Practicing good communication and empathy.

Conclusion: Because relationships are a central determinant of long-term happiness and health, Waldinger and Schulz think cultivating social fitness is as important to the good life as maintaining physical fitness—and should be consciously prioritized.

2. Brené Brown: Fitting In vs Belonging

Definitions

- Fitting In:
 - Trying to change yourself in order to be accepted by a group.
 - “What do I need to be, say, or hide so that they will like me?”
 - Involves:
 - * people-pleasing,
 - * masking or hiding parts of yourself,
 - * conformity motivated by fear of rejection.
- Belonging:
 - Being accepted as your authentic self.
 - “I can show up as I really am, and I am still valued and included.”
 - Involves:

- * vulnerability (showing your real feelings and flaws),
- * mutual respect,
- * feeling safe to disagree or be different.

Why “Fitting In” Is Problematic

Brené Brown argues that “fitting in” undermines genuine happiness and connection because:

1. Self-betrayal:
 - You deny or hide your true preferences, values, or identity.
 - This erodes self-respect and can generate shame.
2. Shallow or conditional connections:
 - Others are connecting with your performed self, not your real self.
 - Acceptance feels fragile: “If they knew the real me, they’d reject me.”
3. Loneliness even in groups:
 - You can be surrounded by people and still feel alone if you’re never fully seen.
 - This blocks the kind of deep, supportive relationships that Waldinger and Schulz argue matter most.
4. Exhaustion and anxiety:
 - Constantly monitoring yourself to conform is draining.
 - Fear of being “found out” or making a mistake increases stress.

Thus, Brown thinks we should aim for belonging, not fitting in: - Being honest about who we are. - Seeking (and offering) spaces where people can be real. - This is precisely the kind of authenticity that sustains close, supportive relationships.

3. Three Ways to Strengthen Close, Supportive Relationships

Waldinger and Schulz give three concrete recommendations:

3.1 Give Time and Attention

Idea: Relationships deepen when you invest quality time and focused attention.

- Why it matters:
 - Signals to the other person: “You matter to me.”
 - Creates opportunities for shared experiences and emotional connection.
 - Counters the tendency to prioritize work, screens, and chores over people.

Practical ways:

- Schedule regular time:
 - Weekly phone call with a friend.
 - Date night.
 - Family dinner without phones.
- Be mentally present:
 - Put devices away.
 - Listen actively, not half-distracted.
- Small consistent acts:

- Short texts (“Thinking of you”).
- Quick check-ins after a hard day.

Exam tip: Emphasize that time + attention is a resource allocation choice; it reflects treating social fitness as important, not as an afterthought.

3.2 Radical Curiosity

Idea: Approach people in your life with deep, open-ended curiosity, instead of assuming you already know what they think or feel.

- Why it matters:
 - People change over time; old assumptions become inaccurate.
 - Curiosity helps you understand their inner world (fears, hopes, perspectives).
 - Feeling truly heard and understood builds trust and belonging.

What radical curiosity looks like:

- Asking open questions:
 - “How are you really doing with all this?”
 - “What’s been on your mind lately?”
 - “Help me understand how you see this.”
- Listening without interrupting or planning your reply.
- Checking your interpretations:
 - “I’m hearing that you feel X; is that right?”
- Being willing to be surprised:
 - Letting go of “I already know who they are” stories.

Example: - Instead of assuming a partner is “snapping” because they’re rude, you ask, “You seem stressed—what’s going on?” and learn they’re worried about a sick parent. This opens the door for empathy instead of escalation.

3.3 Give the Support You Want to Receive

Idea: Offer others the kind of thoughtful, reliable support you yourself would want in hard times, while also being attentive to their specific needs.

- Why it matters:
 - Supportive relationships are mutual.
 - Being a dependable source of care builds closeness and trust.
 - People remember who showed up when life was difficult.

Forms of support (imagining what you’d want):

- Emotional:
 - Listening without judgment.
 - Validation (“That sounds really hard; it makes sense you feel that way.”)
- Practical:
 - Helping with tasks: rides, meals, childcare, errands.

- Presence:
 - Showing up at the hospital, funeral, or stressful event.
 - Checking in consistently, not just once.

Important nuance: - Use your own needs as a starting point, but then ask: - “What would actually feel helpful right now?” - Some people want conversation; others want space; some want concrete help.

Example: - You’d want someone to remember your big exam or surgery, so you: - Text your friend the night before, wishing them luck. - Follow up afterward to ask how it went.

4. The WISER Model for Handling Relationship Difficulties

Waldinger and Schulz’s WISER model is a step-by-step approach to responding to conflicts or tensions in relationships more thoughtfully.

Overview of the Steps

- W – Watch
- I – Interpret
- S – Select
- E – Engage
- R – Reflect

Use these especially when you are upset, hurt, or angry.

W – Watch

Meaning: Pause and observe what is happening—both externally and internally—before reacting.

- Notice:
 - What exactly was said or done?
 - What am I feeling (anger, hurt, fear, embarrassment)?
 - What is my body doing (heart racing, tense shoulders)?

Example: - Your friend cancels on you last minute. - Instead of immediately sending an angry text, you: - Notice you feel disappointed and disrespected. - Acknowledge the urge to lash out, but hold back for a moment.

I – Interpret

Meaning: Consider multiple possible explanations for the other person’s behavior instead of jumping to the worst one.

- Ask yourself:
 - Could there be reasons I don’t know about?

- Am I assuming they don't care, or is that just my fear?
- Aim to separate facts from stories:
 - Fact: They cancelled.
 - Story: "They don't value me" or "They always do this because they're selfish."

Example: - Alternative interpretations for the cancelled plan: - They had an unexpected work issue. - Family emergency. - Mental health struggle. - They messed up time management and feel ashamed.

This doesn't mean excusing everything; it's about entering the next step with a more flexible, less hostile mindset.

S – Select

Meaning: Choose a response deliberately, based on your values and relationship goals.

- Options might include:
 - Letting it go (if minor and unusual).
 - Calmly raising the issue.
 - Asking for more information.
 - Taking time to cool off before talking.

Questions to guide the choice:

- What kind of relationship do I want with this person?
- What response aligns with that?
- What will I likely regret later?

Example: - You decide: - "This matters enough that I want to talk about it, but I want to do it calmly rather than texting in anger."

E – Engage

Meaning: Actually communicate with the other person, using the thoughtful approach you selected.

- Use:
 - "I" statements (to express your feelings without blaming):
 - * "I felt hurt when our plans were cancelled at the last minute."
 - Curiosity:
 - * "Can you tell me what happened?"
 - Specific requests:
 - * "In the future, can you let me know earlier if you need to reschedule?"

Example script: - "Hey, I was really looking forward to seeing you, and I felt pretty disappointed when you cancelled last minute. I know things come up; can you help me understand what was going on?"

R – Reflect

Meaning: After the interaction, look back at what happened and how you handled it.

- Reflect on:
 - How did my response affect the relationship?
 - What went well?
 - What would I do differently next time?
 - Did I learn anything about the other person—or about myself?

Example: - You notice: - Speaking calmly led to a better conversation. - Your friend apologized and explained a genuine crisis. - You feel closer instead of more distant. - Or, if it went badly, you consider: - “Maybe next time I should wait until I’m less angry.”

Why WISER Helps Social Fitness

- It slows down impulsive, destructive reactions.
 - Increases understanding and reduces unnecessary conflict.
 - Encourages repair rather than withdrawal or escalation.
 - Over time, this preserves and deepens close relationships instead of letting them fracture.
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5. The Urgent vs the Important: A Threat to Relationships

Distinction: Urgent vs Important

- Urgent tasks:
 - Demand immediate attention.
 - Often come with deadlines or alarms.
 - Examples: work emails, texts, bills due today, minor crises, notifications.
- Important tasks:
 - Matter deeply for long-term goals and values.
 - Often not time-pressured in the short run.
 - Examples:
 - * Maintaining health (exercise, sleep).
 - * Building and maintaining close relationships.
 - * Reflecting on life goals and values.

Key point: Many relationship activities are important but not urgent: - Calling a friend. - Planning a date or family outing. - Having a difficult but meaningful conversation. - Checking in on someone quietly struggling.

“No Time Today but Plenty of Time Tomorrow”

Waldinger and Schulz (and Rinard’s lecture) highlight a common pattern:

- We tell ourselves:
 - “I’ll focus on relationships later—when things calm down.”

- Today, we prioritize:
 - Urgent work tasks.
 - Daily hassles.
 - Digital distractions.
- Tomorrow, the pattern repeats.

Result: - The urgent systematically crowds out the important. - Weeks or months pass without quality time or serious conversation. - Relationships quietly weaken: - Less closeness. - More misunderstandings. - People drift apart.

How This Undermines the Good Life

Connected back to the Harvard Study:

- If close, supportive relationships are a key driver of long-term happiness and health, then:
 - Continually prioritizing urgent tasks over important relationship investments is self-defeating.
- You may achieve more short-term productivity, but at the cost of:
 - Loneliness,
 - Lack of support when you need it,
 - Regret later in life.

Responding to This Problem

To protect and build social fitness, you need to treat relationships as important, not optional extras:

- Schedule important-but-not-urgent social time just like appointments:
 - Put calls, dinners, walks, and check-ins on your calendar.
 - Protect that time from being overrun by the urgent:
 - Say no to some work or social obligations.
 - Limit distractions (phones, email) during that time.
 - Remember the long-term stakes:
 - In old age, people in the Harvard Study most valued:
 - * the quality of their relationships,
 - * not how many emails they answered on time.
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Overall Connections for the Exam

- Harvard Study → Shows empirically that relationships strongly predict flourishing.
- Social fitness → Treating relationships like muscles that require regular exercise.
- Brené Brown (fitting in vs belonging) → Deep relationships require authenticity and mutual acceptance, not self-erasure to fit in.
- Three recommendations (time/attention, radical curiosity, give the support you want):
 - Concrete tools for building strong, supportive bonds.
- WISER model → Strategy for handling conflicts so relationships survive difficulties.
- Urgent vs important → Explains why people fail to invest in relationships, even when they know they are crucial.

All together, Waldinger and Schulz argue that a good life—joyful but challenging—is built not mainly from status or achievement, but from cultivated, maintained, and repaired relationships sustained through ongoing social fitness.