

18 The Good Life

1. Waldinger & Schulz: The Good Life, Social Fitness, and the Harvard Study

A. Their main claim about the good life

- The “good life” is not a life without problems.
- It includes joy and love, but also pain, struggle, and eventual death.
- Core idea: close, supportive relationships are a major determinant of:
 - Happiness and life satisfaction
 - Physical health and longevity
 - Mental health and resilience

So, if you care about living well, you should take relationships as seriously as you take career or physical health.

B. The Harvard Study of Adult Development

Design: - Began in the late 1930s. - Followed two groups of young men across their entire adult lives: 1. Harvard undergraduates (relatively privileged) 2. Boys from Boston’s poorest neighborhoods (less privileged) - Methods: - Regular detailed interviews
- Questionnaires about work, relationships, mental health
- Medical exams and health records

Why it’s important: - It is the longest in-depth longitudinal study of human life ever done. - It tracks people over many decades, instead of just taking one-time snapshots.

Key findings: - What best predicts happiness, health, and longevity is: - Quality of close relationships (family, friends, partners, community), - Not wealth, status, or fame. - Loneliness and social disconnection: - Are associated with worse physical health (e.g., more illness, shorter life), - Are as harmful as some major health risk factors (like smoking or obesity). - Strong relationships: - Protect both body (lower risk of some diseases) and mind (better mood, better memory).

Philosophical upshot: - If relationships matter more than many things we commonly chase (money, prestige, status),
then rational life planning should: - Give high priority to cultivating and maintaining close, supportive relationships.

C. Social Fitness: Why It Matters as Much as Physical Fitness

Analogy to physical fitness: - Physical fitness: - Requires regular effort: exercise, sleep, diet. - Declines if you neglect it. - Social fitness (their term): - Your capacity to form, maintain, and deepen supportive relationships. - Requires regular attention and practice. - Also declines if neglected.

Key idea: - We tend to assume that relationships “take care of themselves” if they are “meant to be.” - Waldinger and Schulz argue this is mistaken:

Relationships, like muscles, weaken without use.

What it means to “cultivate social fitness”: - Regularly assess your relationships: - Who are my closest people right now? - Which relationships feel strong? Strained? Neglected? - Then act to strengthen them: - Reach out, repair conflicts, invest time, show care. - Treat social fitness as something you train deliberately, not as something automatic.

Illustrative idea (John and Leo): - Think of two old friends (John and Leo): - They were close in college but assume their bond will last without effort. - Years of “too busy right now” → fewer calls, fewer shared experiences. - The friendship quietly weakens. - Their point: if John and Leo had treated their friendship like fitness (requiring regular “workouts”), they could have maintained or deepened it.

Why social fitness is as important as physical fitness: - Because, as the Harvard Study shows, relationships are a central determinant of health and happiness. - Just as you schedule workouts or doctor’s appointments, you ought to schedule and protect time and energy for relationships.

2. Brené Brown: Fitting In vs Belonging

A. Definitions

Fitting in: - Trying to change yourself so that others will accept you. - You adjust your: - Opinions, interests, appearance, or behavior - To match what you think others want or expect. - The question underneath: “Who do I need to be so you will like me?”

Belonging: - Being accepted and valued as you actually are. - You can be: - Honest about your feelings and views, - Imperfect and vulnerable, - Still feel you are part of the group. - The question underneath: “Can I bring my real self and still be loved here?”

B. Why fitting in is problematic

According to Brené Brown:

1. It requires self-erasure.
 - You hide or distort parts of yourself to gain acceptance.
 - Over time, this creates shame and a sense of being a “fake.”
2. It undermines real connection.
 - Others are connecting to the mask, not the real you.

- Even if people “like” you, you can feel lonely because your true self is unknown.
3. It is fragile.
 - Acceptance depends on constantly maintaining the performance.
 - Any slip (honest opinion, vulnerability) feels like it might cause rejection.
 4. It exhausts you.
 - Constant monitoring and self-editing are tiring.
 - This leaves less energy for genuine intimacy and support.

Connection to the good life and social fitness: - If you are always fitting in rather than belonging:
 - Your relationships will be shallow or unstable. - They will not provide the deep, supportive connections that the Harvard Study shows are crucial. - So, cultivating belonging—where you can be authentic—is central to real social fitness and long-term flourishing.

3. Waldinger & Schulz’s Three Recommendations for Strengthening Relationships

1. Give Time and Attention

Core idea: - Relationships grow through regular, high-quality attention, not just occasional grand gestures.

Why it matters: - Time and attention signal: - “You matter to me.” - “I’m willing to prioritize you over distractions.” - Without this, people feel secondary to work, phones, or other tasks.

How to do it (examples): - Protect uninterrupted time: - Put away your phone at dinner. - Schedule regular one-on-one time with partner, friends, or family. - Be fully present: - Listen without multitasking. - Notice tone and body language, not just words.

2. Radical Curiosity

Core idea: - Don’t assume you already fully know the other person. - Approach them with deep, open curiosity about their inner world.

Why it matters: - People change over time (views, fears, hopes). - If you stop being curious, you treat them as a fixed character rather than a growing person. - Curiosity: - Prevents misunderstandings, - Strengthens empathy, - Makes the other person feel truly seen.

How to do it (examples): - Ask open-ended questions: - “How are you really feeling about work lately?” - “What’s been on your mind these days?” - When there is tension: - Instead of assuming bad intent, ask: - “Help me understand what was going on for you when that happened.” - Listen to underlying emotions and values, not just surface facts.

3. Give the Support You Want to Receive

Core idea: - Treat others in the way you yourself would want to be treated if you were in their position. - Use your own needs as a guide, but combine this with curiosity about their preferences.

Why this helps: - It encourages: - Empathy: imagining how you would feel in their situation. - Responsiveness: taking their struggles seriously instead of minimizing them. - It counters the tendency to be dismissive or distant when others are in need.

How to do it (examples): - If you would want someone to check in regularly when you are stressed: - Do this for others who are going through something (illness, breakup, exams). - If you would want people to listen without immediate advice: - Offer that kind of listening first. - Then ask: "Would you like advice, or do you just want me to listen?" - If you would appreciate practical help (e.g., errands, food) when overwhelmed: - Offer specific forms of help, not just "Let me know if you need anything."

4. The WISER Model for Dealing with Relationship Difficulties

The WISER model is a step-by-step strategy to handle conflicts or tensions in relationships more skillfully.

Overview of Steps

1. Watch
 2. Interpret
 3. Select
 4. Engage
 5. Reflect
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1. Watch

What it means: - Pause and observe: - Your own emotions and bodily reactions, - What is happening in the situation, - Without immediately reacting.

Why it matters: - Prevents impulsive, heated responses you might later regret. - Gives you a chance to calm down and think.

Example: - Your friend cancels plans last minute for the third time. - Immediate reaction: anger, "They don't care about me." - "Watch" step: - Notice: "I feel hurt and angry; my chest is tight; my thoughts are racing." - You choose to wait before sending a harsh text.

2. Interpret

What it means: - Consider multiple possible explanations for the other person's behavior. - Challenge your first, often negative, interpretation.

Why it matters: - Our default story is often: - “They’re selfish,” “They don’t care,” etc. - This may be wrong or incomplete. - Considering alternative explanations opens space for empathy and better responses.

Example (continuing): - Instead of settling on “My friend doesn’t value me,” you consider: - They might be overwhelmed at work, - They might be struggling with mental health, - They might be bad at time management but still care.

3. Select

What it means: - Choose a response strategy that fits: - Your long-term goals for the relationship, - Your values, - The seriousness of the situation.

Why it matters: - Not every problem requires the same response: - Sometimes you let things go, - Sometimes you have a serious talk, - Sometimes you change your own boundaries. - Selecting intentionally avoids both overreacting and underreacting.

Example: - Long-term goal: preserve an honest, close friendship. - You select a strategy: - Have a calm conversation about how repeated cancellations make you feel, - Rather than sending an angry text or silently withdrawing.

4. Engage

What it means: - Carry out the chosen strategy in real interaction with the person.

How to do it well: - Use “I” statements instead of accusations: - “I felt hurt when our plans were cancelled again,” - Instead of “You never take me seriously.” - Maintain a respectful tone and body language. - Stay open to their side of the story.

Example (conversation): - You say: “I care about our friendship and also feel hurt when our plans keep getting cancelled. Can we talk about what’s going on?” - You listen to their explanation and discuss ways to handle scheduling better.

5. Reflect

What it means: - After the interaction, review: - What went well? - What didn’t? - What did you learn about yourself and the other person? - Use this to improve your approach in future conflicts.

Why it matters: - Conflict-handling is a skill that improves with deliberate reflection. - Reflection strengthens your social fitness over time.

Example: - You realize: - Waiting before reacting helped, - “I” statements kept the conversation from escalating, - Next time you might propose fewer, more definite plans with this friend to reduce cancellations.

5. The Urgent vs the Important: A Threat to Relationships

A. Distinction

Urgent tasks: - Demand immediate attention. - Often come with deadlines or external pressure: - Work emails, project deadlines, exams, bills, minor crises. - They feel pressing right now.

Important tasks: - Deeply matter for your long-term values and well-being. - Often have no fixed deadline, so they can be delayed: - Quality time with loved ones, - Calling a friend who's going through a hard time, - Expressing appreciation or apologizing, - Investing in health and personal growth.

Crucially: many relationship-building activities are important but not urgent.

B. "No time today but plenty of time tomorrow"

Pattern: - People tell themselves: - "I'm too busy today for a long conversation / date night / visit, but I'll have more time later." - Then: - "Later" never really comes; new urgent tasks always appear. - Over months or years: - Relationships receive only leftover time and energy.

Result: - Relationships quietly erode: - Less emotional intimacy, - More misunderstandings, - Feeling taken for granted or distant.

C. How prioritizing the urgent harms close relationships

1. Neglect of maintenance:

- Strong relationships require regular maintenance, just like physical health.
- When urgent tasks always win, you skip the small, steady actions that keep bonds strong (talking, checking in, showing care).

2. Signals of low priority:

- When someone is repeatedly postponed for work or other tasks, they can feel:
 - Unimportant,
 - Unloved,
 - Like "background noise" in your life.
- This weakens trust and willingness to be emotionally open.

3. Lost opportunities for depth:

- Intimate conversations and shared experiences often arise in unstructured, unhurried time.
- Over-scheduling your life with urgent tasks leaves no room for this.

4. Contradiction with your own values:

- Many people say relationships matter most, but live as if work and other urgencies matter more.
 - Systematically choosing the urgent over the important creates a values/practice mismatch.
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D. What the exam may expect you to explain

- Be able to:
 - Define “urgent” vs “important.”
 - Explain that relationship-nurturing activities are often important but not urgent.
 - Describe how always choosing urgent tasks (work, deadlines, etc.) leads to:
 - * Neglected relationships,
 - * Erosion of close bonds,
 - * Ultimately less happiness and well-being.
 - Connect this to the Harvard Study:
 - * Since close relationships are key to thriving, failing to protect time for them undermines your chances of living a good life.
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These points together show how Waldinger and Schulz connect: - The empirical findings of the Harvard Study, - The concept of social fitness, - Brené Brown’s idea of true belonging, - Concrete relationship practices (time and attention, radical curiosity, supportive behavior), - The WISER conflict model, - And the urgent vs important distinction,

into a single picture of how to intentionally build and protect the close, supportive relationships that make a good life possible.