75 Years In The Making: Harvard Just Released Its Epic Study On What Men Need To Live A Happy Life
BY BRENT LAMBERT • APRIL 29, 2013

In 1938 Harvard University began following 268 male undergraduate students and kicked off the longest-running longitudinal studies of human development in history. The study’s goal was to determine as best as possible what factors contribute most strongly to human flourishing. The astonishing range of psychological, anthropological, and physical traits — ranging from personality type to IQ to habits to family relationships — indicates just how exhaustive and quantifiable the research data has become. Recently, George Vaillant, who directed the study for more than three decades, published the study’s findings in the 2012 book Triumphs of Experience (Amazon) and the following is the book’s synopsis:

“At a time when many people around the world are living into their tenth decade, the longest longitudinal study of human development ever undertaken offers some welcome news for the new old age: our lives continue to evolve in our later years, and often become more fulfilling than before. Begun in 1938, the Grant Study of Adult Development charted the physical and emotional health of over 200 men, starting with their undergraduate days. The now-classic ‘Adaptation to Life’ reported on the men’s lives up to age 55 and helped us understand adult maturation. Now George Vaillant follows the men into their nineties, documenting for the first time what it is like to flourish far beyond conventional retirement. Reporting on all aspects of male life, including relationships, politics and religion, coping strategies, and alcohol use (its abuse being by far the greatest disruptor of health and happiness for the study’s subjects), ‘Triumphs of Experience’ shares a number of surprising findings. For example, the people who do well in old age did not necessarily do so well in midlife, and vice versa. While the study confirms that recovery from a lousy childhood is possible, memories of a happy childhood are a lifelong source of strength. Marriages bring much more contentment after age 70, and physical aging after 80 is determined less by heredity than by habits formed prior to age 50. The credit for growing old with grace and vitality, it seems, goes more to ourselves than to our stellar genetic makeup.

As you can imagine, the study’s discoveries are bountiful, but the most significant finding of all is that “Alcoholism is a disorder of great destructive power.” In fact, alcoholism is the single strongest cause of divorce between the Grant Study men and their wives. Alcoholism was also found to be strongly coupled with neurosis and depression (which most often follows alcohol abuse, rather than preceding it). Together with cigarette smoking, alcoholism proves to be the #1 greatest cause of morbidity and death. And above a certain level, intelligence doesn’t prevent the damage.

With regards to income, there was no noticeable difference in maximum income earned by men with IQs in the 110-115 range vs. men with IQs above 150. Political ideology had no bearing on overall life satisfaction. In Triumphs of Experience, Vaillant raises a number of factors more often than others, but the one he refers to most often is the powerful correlation between the warmth of your relationships and your health and happiness in your later years. In 2009, Vaillant’s insistence on the importance of this part of the data was challenged, so Vaillant returned to the data to be sure the finding merited such important focus. Not only did Vaillant discover that his focus on warm relationships was warranted, he placed even more importance on this factor than he had previously. Vaillant notes that
the 58 men who scored highest on the measurements of “warm relationships” (WR) earned an average of $141,000 a year more during their peak salaries (between ages 55-60) than the 31 men who scored the lowest in WR. The high WR scorers were also 3-times more likely to have professional success worthy of inclusion in Who’s Who.

One of the most intriguing discoveries of the Grant Study was how significant men’s relationships with their mothers are in determining their well-being in life. For instance, Business Insider writes: “Men who had ‘warm’ childhood relationships with their mothers took home $87,000 more per year than men whose mothers were uncaring. Men who had poor childhood relationships with their mothers were much more likely to develop dementia when old. Late in their professional lives, the men’s boyhood relationships with their mothers — but not their fathers — were associated with effectiveness at work. On the other hand, warm childhood relations with fathers correlated with lower rates of adult anxiety, greater enjoyment on vacations, and increased ‘life satisfaction’ at age 75 — whereas the warmth of childhood relationships with mothers had no significant bearing on life satisfaction at 75.”

In Vallant’s own words, the #1 most important finding from the Grant Study is this: “The seventy-five years and twenty million dollars expended on the Grant Study points to a straightforward five-word conclusion: Happiness is love. Full stop.” You can purchase your own copy of Triumphs of Experience by visiting Amazon.

**Critical Thinking Questions**

- **MUST** USE QUOTES and CITATIONS from the text on ALL answers (if you do not, you will only get partial credit)
- Complete sentences
- Thoughtful analysis
- **NO** personal pronouns

1. Look up what a normal IQ range is online. What did the study find with regard to IQ and income? Think critically about why this might be the case and write about your analysis.

2. What is the “greatest disruptor of health” (Lambert), according to the study? Draw a conclusion about why this might be so?

3. The article doesn’t really define “Warm Relationships”, draw a logical conclusion about what this term might mean, and define it. Use examples from life/society to illustrate your points.

4. What is the effect of “Warm Relationships” on a person’s life? Make an inference about why it has this kind of impact.

*5. What is the most fascinating, intriguing, or surprising finding of this study, in your opinion, and why? [personal pronouns okay on THIS QUESTION ONLY. QUOTES are still REQUIRED]