

‘The Good Life’ apparently requires other people

Being alone might feel better sometimes, but according to a study of happiness, we need others to thrive



By Meredith Goldstein | GLOBE STAFF

A confession: Every now and then I ask myself, “Wouldn’t it be easier if there were fewer people in my life? What if I *leaned* into my introversion and occasional discomfort with intimacy

and just ... limited my connections to other humans.”

Most recently I had this thought while watching Episode 3 of HBO’s “The Last of Us.” I thought I might actually enjoy Nick Offerman’s character’s initial “I can do it all alone, even in an apocalypse” living situation for quite a while, especially if I had good food. (If you haven’t watched that episode of TV, please do.)

I do *love* the people in my life and do not want to live on my own island. But caring about them means *worrying* about them — and tending to them. And because I suffer from anxiety, I can turn positive thoughts into fears.

“Why have I not heard from them? What if I have not been putting enough effort into the relationship? What if I lost this person? What if going out to see them overwhelms me, especially after the last few years?”

Sometimes I wonder if being more alone in the world is a secret path to less pain and panic.

According to the recent book “The Good Life,” it is not.

Connection — even for those who sometimes fear it, or are overwhelmed by it — is what real happiness is all about.

I read “The Good Life” — by Harvard researchers Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz — because I love studies about feelings, and this book is based on the world’s longest scientific look at what makes people happy and thrive. The Harvard Study of Adult Development launched in 1938. It was a specific look at Harvard undergrads — all men — with the hope of figuring out what made them tick. Not a very broad sample of humanity!

But then another study, which focused on the paths of young men from disadvantaged families around Boston, joined with

the first one. As the world changed, Waldinger and Schulz, the director and associate director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, expanded the work to the descendants of the initial subjects, assessing physical and emotional health, looking for trends in what made them happy or unhappy.

Now there's 80-plus years of data. Waldinger and Schulz released their book "The Good Life" in January to explain what they've learned.

I picked up the book assuming it would *not* offer a magic key to happiness, but it kind of does. The book has plenty of nuanced things to say about technology, work-life balance, money, and family, but it does come to one massive conclusion — that we probably need real connections with other humans to be happy. And it doesn't have to be lots of people.

As Offerman's character in "The Last of Us" learns when Frank comes along, caring for other humans is always the answer, even if it scares us.

I interviewed Waldinger after reading "The Good Life" and asked him about his work.

Q. Gender is such an important part of this and any study. In the Globe Magazine in 2017, one of our most-read stories, by Billy Baker, basically said that a health threat to middle-aged men was lack of friendships. At the time I thought, "What's wrong here? Is this laziness?" Then I read the part of your book about a subject named Sterling, who avoided close ties because of fear of loss.

A. When Marc and I wanted to write about gender in particular, we said, OK, we're pretty sure that the literature is going to say women are more concerned about relationships. But it turns out that when you actually look at great big studies, the gender

differences aren't that huge. But what you're describing sounds exactly like everybody in the world I know. Where it's the men who are turning around saying, "I don't have any friends." At least when they study it, men say, "I do care about relationships, I want them."

Q. Is this supposed to be a prescriptive book? Were you designing a guide?

A. Our hope was that the process of self-reflection would inspire certain changes and action.

Q. I often ask, "How happy am I supposed to be?" In a world that promotes wellness as a concept and goal, I can wonder, "Am I *failing* at happiness?"

A. I've never met a human being — in my research, in my life, in my clinical practice — who is happy all the time. That is just not the truth of life. I think what we find is that you can build a kind of bedrock of well-being. A sense of OK-ness, even when life is hard. And that the relationships often help us through the hard times, but the hard times are going to be there.

Q. How has this work — and writing a book about it — changed your perception of finding happiness?

A. My wife's a clinical psychologist. We both love our work. We could work all the time. So I've had to be much more intentional in my own life. It's about reaching out to my friends, about planning walks, planning coffee. Now when someone asks me to do something, I'm way more inclined to do it. I realized how important it is for me.

Q. I think we think of happiness in terms of *big* things and *big* philosophies. But I remember asking a friend to tell me something that made her happy. What she came up with was: "I

really like going into a bathroom and finding out that the soap is foamy.” Her response was so small and pure — and hilarious. I probably don’t think about the tiny things in a day that add to my joy. Can you speak to that — and how to notice that small stuff?

A. I do meditation every day, and the reason I got into it was ... it was like I was missing my life. And then when you meditate, you realize you could spend time just looking at a little portion of a sidewalk and find so much cool stuff in it. Little flecks of stone. Actually, here’s a quote I love from one of my Zen teachers: “Attention is the most basic form of love.” If you really give your undivided attention certainly to other people, but also to appreciation for the world — and with meditation — it slows everything down. It sounds weird, but it can be mind-blowing.

“*The Good Life: Lessons from the World’s Longest Scientific Study of Happiness,*” by Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, Simon & Schuster, \$28.99

Interview was edited and condensed.

Meredith Goldstein writes the Love Letters advice column and this monthly column, Working on It, about self-help books. Subscribe to her Love Letters newsletter or write to her advice column at loveletters.boston.com. She can be reached at meredith.goldstein@globe.com.