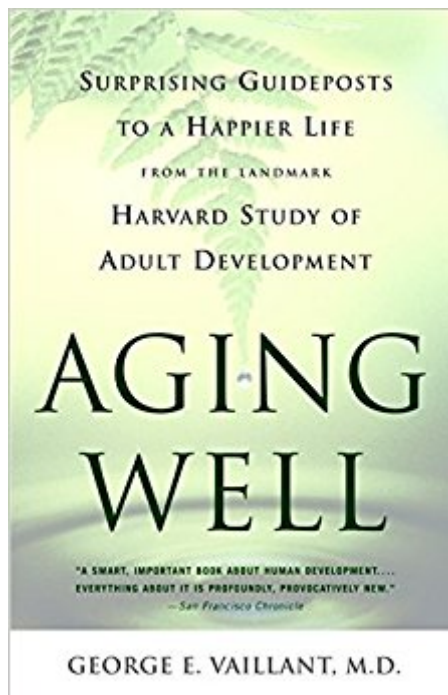


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# Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts To A Happier Life From The Landmark Harvard Study Of Adult Development



## Synopsis

In a unique series of studies, Harvard University has followed 824 subjects from their teens to old age. Professor George Vaillant now uses these to illustrate the surprising factors involved in reaching happy, healthy old age.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"We all need models for how to live from retirement to past 80--with joy," writes George Vaillant, M.D., director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development. This groundbreaking book pulls together data from three separate longevity studies that, beginning in their teens, followed 824 individuals for more than 50 years. The subjects were male Harvard graduates; inner-city, disadvantaged males; and intellectually gifted women. "Here you have these wonderful files, and you seem little interested in how we cope with increasing age ... our adaptability, our zest for life," one of these subjects wrote to Vaillant, a researcher, psychiatrist, and Harvard Medical School professor, about how he was using this information. Vaillant took this advice to heart. In *Aging Well*, he presents personal narratives about people from these studies whom he interviewed personally in their 70s and 80s. He describes their history, relationships, hardships, philosophies, and sources of joy. We learn their perspectives and what makes them want to get up in the morning. We also learn what makes old age vital and interesting. Vaillant discusses the important adult developmental tasks, such as identity, intimacy, and generativity (giving to the next generation), and provides important clues to a healthy, meaningful, satisfying old age. Health in old age, we learn, is not predicted by low

cholesterol or ancestral longevity, but by factors such as a stable marriage, adaptive coping style (the ability to make lemonade out of life's lemons), and regular exercise. Vaillant is empathetic and sometimes surprisingly poetic: "Owning an old brain, you see, is rather like owning an old car.... Careful driving and maintenance are everything." He freely includes subjective observations and interpretations, giving us a richer picture of the people he interviewed and insights into their lives. Aging Well is recommended for readers who are interested in learning about the quality-of-life issues of aging from the people who have the most to teach. --Joan Price --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This groundbreaking sociological analysis is based on three research projects that followed over 800 people from their adolescence through old age. Subjects were drawn from the Harvard Grant study of white males, the Inner City study of non-delinquent males and the Terman Women study of gifted females, begun respectively in 1921, 1930 and 1911. In all three studies, subjects were interviewed at regular intervals over time, a design that prevented observations from being skewed by the distortions of memory and allowed for analyses that distinguished effect from cause. Vaillant (The Natural History of Alcoholism), a psychiatrist and professor at the Harvard Medical School, brings a nuanced point of view and an acceptance of the project's limitations. (Those followed were not randomly selected and were overwhelmingly Caucasian.) Nevertheless the author makes compelling use of his data, which is based on intensive contacts with a variety of subjects. Vaillant posits that successful physical and emotional aging is most dependent on a lack of tobacco and alcohol abuse by subjects, an adaptive coping style, maintaining healthy weight with some exercise, a sustained loving (in most cases, marital) relationship and years of education. This is good news since factors that cannot be altered, such as ancestral longevity, parental characteristics and childhood temperament, were among those ruled out as predictors. The book's academic tone will reassure some readers and put others off, but Vaillant's arresting interviews with selected subjects (recounted here) and his ability to learn from the subjects make this an outstanding contribution to the study of aging. National publicity. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I am 94, and I loved every thought in this book! My summary of the book would be what my mother always told me, "There are two words that will get you not just THROUGH life but enjoying it as you are living it: attitude and gratitude. "They seemed to be a theme of this book! I felt a real sense of peace as I turned these pages and found myself agreeing saying, "yes, that is right." They work for

me.

I have read this book fully twice in the past decade. It is both the most solidly based research on what makes for a happy old age, and one of the most humane and thoughtful records of elders speaking for themselves to a sympathetic, wise, and literate hearer. As I move into the age group discussed by the book, I find it an invaluable guide to self-care in both the physical and the mental/spiritual dimensions. Thank heaven George Vaillant started this work at a young age and has continued it for so many years. Give it to anyone you know who hopes or expects to live into their 60s or later.

The areas that were the "intellectual set up for the "Aging Well" documentation were the deeper and least entertaining of this book but quite necessary for providing what would be required for drawing the meaningful conclusions for this book! However I will say that that without this documentation the conclusions drawn for the "Aging Well" premise would not be as well understood. I found the conclusions drawn and recommended to be very insightful and will be helpful on a personal basis. I will reread several of the last chapters where the major conclusions are shared and given meaning that I will personally benefit from for my own "Aging "Well" perspective. I can see where after having lost my wife last year after 50+ years of marriage this information will help me in dealing with my own personal grief reconciliation. Anyone needing a healthy perspective for aging and beginning to face their own immortality would also benefit from reading this book!!! I would never have found this book if it had not been on the end table of the Assisted Living Facility and caught my interest while awaiting an opportunity to talk with the Administrator of the facility where my wife was living prior to here passing.

This book has been out a long time. I was looking for something more contemporary. I'm an "aging warrior" a life long athlete, and I haven't really found anything that speaks directly to those of us who have continued our physicality generally since we began in the 50-60. I may need to write the book myself. If you want general advice (exercise, eat right, get sleep, etc) this book will do.

This is the latest volume reporting the findings of a decades long study about how we "grow up". Two conclusions: 1. we should give a copy to every twenty-year old, but it would be a wasted effort!, 2. I found my perceptions re. my view of both the sources of success and the sources of wounds largely confirmed. There is comfort in both end points: that we may be gratified at the first

and left with a clearer understanding that so much of our discomforts about who we are arose from many events and persons which were beyond our control. There is contentment to be found in these pages.

I think this is an outstanding book, and would like to briefly respond to several of the critical reviews.<sup>1</sup> The author is quite conscious of the impact of privilege on the lives of the Harvard graduates he studies, and repeatedly makes efforts to determine what kinds of success are, or are not, the result of privilege. He pays close attention to the lives of the women in the Terman study, and the "Inner-City" men who were not born into privilege, to compare them with the experience of the white male Harvard graduates.<sup>2</sup> The methods of the study (as, I assume, with the field in general) repeatedly make efforts to correct for the bias of individual observers, including the author. Over the decades, there have been many efforts by "blind" raters to examine one part of the subjects' files, with no knowledge of the rest of that subject's file. I.e. a physician reads the file to evaluate the subject's physical health, with no knowledge of that subject's childhood, professional or personal life, etc. This is not simply about the author interviewing people and confirming his pet theories, although you could superficially get that impression.<sup>3</sup> The author is very frank and aboveboard, that he, like every one of us, has certain biases and prejudices in how he sees the world: he is a liberal East Coast academic. However, it is absurd to say that the book is simply a reflection of his prejudices. He writes sensitively and appreciatively about business-executive Republican types (though he is an academic liberal) and about religious believers (though he is not one). I personally am acutely sensitive to the ubiquitous and un-self-conscious liberal bias in the media and academia, and I really did not find any here. Any given page of the New York Times is 100x worse than this book, if liberal bias is something that bothers you. Finally, a couple of interesting points that I believe the book proves well: \* Within the cohort of (those who were privileged enough to be) Harvard grads, there was little or no correlation between social status at birth and at the end of life. Many men began with trust funds and boarding school, and ended up scraping by; others from small country towns wound up wealthy. \* Many of the "Inner-City" men, who were raised in or near poverty, with few opportunities or privileges, were able to have healthy, rewarding, inspiring lives, with happy marriages, satisfying work, community ties, grandchildren, rewarding hobbies, etc. On average, they had worse physical health, less prestigious occupations, and lower incomes than the Harvard cohort, but were in no way less happy -- again, on average. What I take away from this book is the idea that although gifts, talents, luck, personal, physical and intellectual qualities, looks, social status, and privilege are all very unequally distributed

in life, it is possible to respond well or badly to life's slings and arrows, and that the nature of this response can have a huge impact on your later life. (i.e.: Avoid alcoholism at all costs!!! Seriously.)

I am slowly reading this book; savoring it. There is so much information to take in and use or think about. It is not a difficult read, just one that helps you understand the image in the mirror. Read it; learn from it; enjoy it.

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