

# Aging Well, by George E. Vaillant

reviewed by [Thomas H. Schmid](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

Reading this book will not grant us an escape from eventual death or the inevitable losses of old age. But it can help us to learn from those who have aged well. Since two or three decades of advance notice may be helpful to people as they consider the exigencies of the later years, those in their 40s, 50s and 60s will benefit most from reading the book.

For the past 30 years George Vaillant has been part of the progressive Harvard Study of Adult Development, which began in 1939. A group of Harvard sophomores was interviewed extensively, answered biennial questionnaires, submitted physicians' evaluations every five years, and participated in personal interviews every decade or so into their maturity and old age. As *Aging Well* was written, these subjects were nearing 80.

For balance, Vaillant uses 90 women of the Terman project, a Stanford-based progressive study whose gifted subjects were born about 1910, and the Inner City Study of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, whose subjects were Bostonians born between 1925 and 1932 and who grew up in vastly different socioeconomic environments.

Of course, health is a major consideration in aging well. One mark of how well people age is their level of self-care. Exercise, watching one's weight, not smoking and being temperate in one's use of alcohol throughout adult life all contribute to a better old age. Good news for former smokers is that by age 70 the bodies of those who stopped smoking by age 45 are as healthy as the bodies of those who have never smoked. A pleasant affirmation for the happily married is Vaillant's assertion that a good marriage at age 50 is more predictive of positive aging than is a low level of cholesterol.

In his interviews with older persons Vaillant consistently asks how they have replaced the friends who have died. Certain older people are more successful than others in populating their lives with friends and acquaintances of varying ages. When we are children and for as long as we remain in school, our friends tend to be our contemporaries. In young adulthood some of our friends may be a good bit

older, perhaps of a different generation. And in later middle age some of our friends may be as young as or younger than our children. Vaillant's study tells us that forming these kinds of relationships are important to aging well.

He wants to know what his subjects have learned from their children. A few say that they have learned nothing, or stress only what their children have learned from them. Those who are aging well tend to say that they have learned specific skills from their children or have observed in them certain traits the parents do not possess themselves. Successful agers seem to enjoy qualities in their children which they would not themselves have thought of and did not expect.

Those who had difficult or abusive childhoods will be glad to learn that childhood influences, which may have loomed large at 20, recede in importance by 50 and seem to be of only minor importance by 70. Vaillant asks married people how they depend on each other. Not surprisingly, he finds that a sense of humor contributes to the health of marriages as well as to healthy personalities.

He differentiates between sickness and illness. A person of any age, including and especially old age, can be ill without feeling sick. Several of the people he interviewed during their terminal illnesses continued to feel reasonably well and were able to enjoy each day. The extreme categories of the Harvard Study are the sad/sick and the happy/well. The study finds that a number of persons who are ill turn out to be in the happy/well category.

Vaillant found that his study did not bear out the conventional perception that people become more spiritual and wiser as they age. There are plenty of people who are both spiritual and wise in their later years, but they tend to be the same people who were spiritual and wise in their middle and even their younger years.

Though statistics do appear in this book, the personalities revealed in the personal interviews are the focus. One of the pleasures of reading *Aging Well* comes from meeting exceptional and well-balanced people, people who are still learning and giving and who are enjoying the benefits of self-care and love. Vaillant also reports the negative interviews, warning readers that "old age is like a minefield; if you see footprints leading to the other side, step in them." His book helps us to see and follow in those footprints.