
**How relationships impact our health and well-being with Dr. Robert Waldinger**

**Jen Fisher (Jen):** Hi WorkWell listeners. I'm really excited to share that my book *Work Better Together* is officially out. Conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you inspired this book. It's all about how to create a more human centered workplace. And as we return to the office for many of us, this book can help you move forward into post pandemic life with strategies and tools to strengthen your relationships and focus on your well-being. It's available now from your favorite book retailer.

What's the secret to a long and happy life? In 1938, the Harvard Study of Adult Development was created to answer that very question. While the study is still going on today, the findings thus far have provided insight into what a good life looks like and what we can do differently to live a longer and more fulfilling life. This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being. I'm here with Dr. Robert Waldinger. He's a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and a Zen Priest. He's also a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital, where he directs the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the longest scientific study of happiness ever conducted. Dr. Waldinger is the author of *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, which examines the central role of relationships and shaping our health and well-being. Bob, welcome to the show.

**Robert Waldinger (Bob):** Thank you. Glad to be here.

**Jen:** Yeah, glad to have you. So let's get to know you. Tell us who you are, how you became passionate or got involved in studying happiness and longevity and well-being. And then the most important question I have for you in this whole podcast is, I want to know more about being a Zen Priest.

**Bob:** Alright, so my name is Robert Waldinger. I'm a psychiatrist. I'm professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and I'm the director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which as far as we know, is the longest study of adult life that's ever been done. It's been going for 85 years. We're still collecting data. And I have been interested in studying human life, gosh, probably since I was a kid. But specifically, I trained to be a psychiatrist and my passion has been psychotherapy. So I take these deep dives with people every day into their lives and have loved that. And then I went back and retooled in research methods to try to understand lots of lives in the aggregate. And that's when my predecessor Dr. George Valiant took me out to lunch one day and said, how would you like to inherit the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Because I'm the 4th director, he was the 3rd director. And so that's where we started. I've been doing it for 20 years now.

**Jen:** Yeah, that's amazing. And I want to get into the Study on Adult Development and the details of it and how it works, but again, you got to tell me more about being a Zen priest.

**Bob:** Absolutely. So Zen is, my wife calls it my great big hobby. I've been practicing Zen for about 20 years and I have found Buddhist philosophy and Zen meditation to be wonderful additions to my life. I never thought I would be a spiritual person or have a spiritual practice, never. And really have found this to be so useful, meaningful. So I started sitting in meditation regularly studying with a teacher almost 20 years ago, sitting with the group that I now lead on Monday nights online and trained first to be a Zen priest, and now I'm a Zen teacher as well. I'm a Zen master, a Roshi. And being a Zen priest is really a vow of service and all that means is really that I'm trying to devote as much of my time as I can to fostering well-being, to helping people live better and reducing the suffering in our lives, that's optional, because as we know, there's some suffering that isn't optional, but there's a lot of suffering that really is optional and that's what I'm committed to helping with.

**Jen:** Well, thank you for that. I know we all need more of that, myself included. So I'm really good at the suffering that's optional. I'm probably a master at that.

**Bob:** Well, if you ever want to talk more about Zen, let me know.

**Jen:** Absolutely. I'm gonna take you up on that. But let's shift back to the Harvard Study on Adult Development. Tell me how it works, like I want to understand the details of it because it's a big study and as you stated, it's been going on since 1938. So like what does that look like?

**Bob:** Right. It started as two studies that didn't even know about each other. Both started at Harvard. One started at the Harvard Student Health Service. They chose undergraduates, 268 of them, who they thought were fine, upstanding young men, and they wanted to study normal development from adolescence to young adulthood. So of course, if you want to study normal adult development, you study all white guys from Harvard, right? I mean now it's the most politically incorrect sample you could possibly have, but then they thought, oh, this would be a good thing to do. So John F. Kennedy was part of the study. Ben Bradley, the long-time editor of T*he Washington Post*. A lot of people. But then in addition to that study at Harvard Law School, there was a study of juvenile delinquency started by Sheldon Gluck, a law professor there, and Eleanor Gluck, a social worker. They were interested in how some children from really troubled families managed to stay out of trouble and stay on good developmental paths. So they chose 456 of the children from Boston's, not just poorest neighborhoods, but most troubled families in 1938. Families beset by domestic violence and familial mental illness and physical illness and extreme poverty, and they studied them. All of them, 724 young men all together, eventually we brought in their spouses, and we brought in their children more than half of whom are women. So now we have pretty good gender balance in the study.

**Jen:** What have you concluded from this study so far and why has it gone on for so long? Is there, like, an expectation that the conclusion is going to change or?

**Bob:** Well, some people have said why is it going on for so long. We have to convince NIH every few years. When some reviewers say, why has this gone on so long? Well, the reason is that longitudinal research is so unusual, and it allows us a window on human life that you don't get through most research. Most research relies on people remembering the past, and we know our memories are fallible and full of holes. It also relies on snapshots. So let's say we want to study depression. We could take a snapshot of 20 year

olds right now and 40 year olds and 60 year olds, and that would give us what we think is a way to track depression across the life cycle. But actually, it's misleading. And so, what we can end up doing accidentally is making a great many assumptions that aren't true. So that's why that's my long answer to why has this study been going so long. Because what we could do is we can track things. So for example, we asked the same six questions about marriage. We asked them 8 times over 50 years and we can do a little plot of each marriage of marital satisfaction across 50 years for each couple. And then we can look at all those plots together to get a kind of mega trajectory of marriage over 50 years of adult life, and that's like unheard of in the world of science.

**Jen:** Yeah. I guess I want to get into the conclusions of the study so far. But how do you, like now I understand how this study started, but are the people that are involved in this study today still kind of ancestors of have relations with those that where the study started, like have you continued that or have you broadened it?

**Bob:** They are all ancestors. They are all people from the 724 original families. We had to decide. Do we want to broaden this. Do we bring in more diverse groups and what we concluded was that our unique value is in this longitudinal data, in these treasure troves of historical documents on each family. And if we bring in new, more diverse groups, we're not going to have that background. So we decided that we would let other studies carry the ball forward in terms of diversity and they are. So everybody's part of the same original 724 families.

**Jen:** Okay, so let's talk about what has been concluded from this study so far and then maybe, like as a researcher, either you or others, is it what you thought the outcomes would be?

**Bob:** Okay, two, probably big findings. Now remember, we've written hundreds of scientific papers, 11 books now, but two mega findings. One will not surprise anybody among the listeners, which is that if you take care of your health, it really matters for your longevity and the quality of your life. And so what that means is eating well, getting regular exercise, taking care of your health in other ways, getting preventive health care, not abusing drugs or alcohol, not becoming obese. So, all of that. That's not a surprise. The surprise was when we looked at the best predictors of who was going to stay healthy as well as happy. It was the quality of your relationships with other people. And initially when we found that we didn't believe it. So, we thought, okay, it stands to reason that if you have better relationships, you'll be happier. That makes sense, but how could having better relationships mean you'd be less likely to get coronary artery disease or type 2 diabetes or arthritis? Like, how could that possibly be a thing? And then other studies began to find the same results, and we began to understand that this is a really robust scientific finding. So we've spent the last 10 years in our laboratory looking at how this works, like how do relationships get into our bodies and shape our physical health.

**Jen:** And so how does that?

**Bob:** Okay, so we're still working that out, but the best hypothesis is about stress. The best hypothesis says, we are all stressed, stressors happen to us every day. That's not a problem. And when we're stressed, the body goes into fight or flight mode, right? Our heart rate increases, our blood pressure goes up, blood goes to the muscles. That's all to prepare the body to meet a challenge. Again, that's a good thing. Then, when the challenges were moved, our bodies are meant to go back to baseline to equanimity. What we think happens is that relationships, good ones, help us manage stress. So let's say something stressful happens to you today and you're really upset and you're still worrying about it. You go home, you talk to

your husband, and if he's a good listener, you can literally feel your body calm down. Now, what if you're alone? What if there's nobody you can talk to? Nobody you can call. What we think happens is that lonely and isolated people, or people in acrimonious relationships, they stay in a kind of low-level chronic fight or flight mode, which means that they have higher levels of circulating stress hormones, like cortisol. They have higher levels of chronic inflammation, and these things break down many different body systems, which is how if you're chronically stressed, it could break down your coronary arteries and your joints.

**Jen:** And with the recent advisory from the US Surgeon General on loneliness and the prevalence of that, we're probably not headed in a great direction.

**Bob:** Exactly, exactly. So, it's a real worry that social isolation and loneliness are on the rise and have been for 20-30 years.

**Jen:** Yeah. I do have a question. On the other studies that are taking place with more diverse populations than what's in the Harvard study. Are they seeing similarities to the study that Harvard does?

**Bob:** We are seeing similarities. They are finding to the strong connection between social connection and health and that's why, Vivek Murthy wrote the Surgeon General's report just recently about loneliness. Because we're finding it everywhere, not just in our study. Because no single study proves anything of this kind, right. You need multiple studies to point in the same direction, and they do.

**Jen:** I guess there's a lot out there about happiness. And what makes us happy. Is the happiness that we experience from relationships, unique or different? And can we experience the same kind of happiness from money or fame? And I think if I reflect on what you just said around levels of stress, do money and fame not lower our levels of stress, I guess.

**Bob:** Right. Well, they don't, in fact fame raises people's levels of stress. Because often what happens is you stop having the freedom when you're famous, that you did when you were anonymous. You can't walk down the street and not be recognized and often approached. You can't be in a restaurant without people coming up to you and wanting things and on the one hand that can feel great, but on the other hand, it’s like oh, I just want my privacy. So, fame doesn't work so well for that.

**Jen:** And it's not a real relationship, right? There's people, everybody wants something from you.

**Bob:** No, and lots of people have fantasies about you that have nothing to do with who you really are. So that's a problem with fame. With money, I mean money is empty. Think about it, you can't eat it, you can’t wear it. It doesn't keep you warm, right? So, money is just a vehicle. It allows you to do things. And so often, actually when I work with people in psychotherapy, some young people say oh, I want to make a lot of money and that's going to make me happy. And I say, well, what's the money for? And many of them are like deer in the headlights. It's like, I don't know what it's for. I just want to make money because everybody says that's when you'll have a good life. So, we find that money does not make people happy or beyond. It's true that you need enough money to get your basic needs met, but that once you get beyond that, money really doesn't make us significantly happier.

**Jen:** Right. So, let's transition a little bit to your views on how this impacts the workplace. And I know that the study doesn't necessarily directly look at that, but we can make some assumptions that having a few good relationships in the workplace really matters and. And this is in my view, kind of a long-debated topic of should we have best friends at work? Should we not? But I'd love to hear your thoughts on that?

**Bob:** Sure. Well, again, I'm going to go back to research that I'm sure you know from the Gallup Organization, the 15 million workers surveyed. And they said they asked people, do you have a best friend at work and what that meant was, do you have someone you can talk to about your personal life, who knows something about you and your life outside of work. And only 30% said they had that kind of relationship at work. But then they asked those 30% and they asked their bosses what they're like as workers, they were happier. They were better workers. They were better with customers. They earned more. They were less likely to leave their jobs for a better offer. And the 70% who didn't have a best friend at work were way more likely to be checked out to be essentially silently retiring, silently disengaged. So, that idea that well socializing at work is a distraction that turns out not to be true. And so what we know and business schools have done some good research on this. That when leadership, not just HR people but CEOs, actually set the example of fostering better relationships of sharing more about their own lives, of making themselves vulnerable in that way. When leadership does that, that they create a culture in which this kind of interpersonal connection is more common, is more supported and accepted, and the bottom-line benefits from it.

**Jen:** Yeah, absolutely. And do you feel like this is a kind of like a new, it's a new skillset or a new leadership skillset or expectation?

**Bob:** It is, because we have these models out there in the culture of leadership by fear. And what we know is that it works in the short term. People get scared and they produce results. And then in the long term, it doesn't work at all. There's a lot of passive aggressive behavior. So leadership by fear looks like it works until it doesn't. And leadership by fostering a culture of safety and connection works much better in the long term.

**Jen:** Yeah. And what I guess, and this is probably a leadership question, a workplace question, but more than anything, I feel like it's a societal question. What do we need to be doing differently to change this trajectory that we're on as a society, but also in the workplace? Like, what actions need to happen beyond raising awareness about this?

**Bob:** To some extent, yeah, I mean we're all worried about it. Especially because of remote work because we know that virtual meetings don't have those same spontaneous side conversations. You can't walk away from a meeting with somebody and say, hey, let's get a cup of coffee. You don't have the iconic water cooler where people see each other by chance and make conversation. So, all of that is a worry. So, then the question is, what can we do? And a lot of it probably involves having specific structures set up to get to know each other in the workplace. Again, going back to Vivek Murthy, he started instituting something in his staff meetings where they had a 5-minute part of each weekly staff meeting where one person on the staff would share something about their personal life that they wanted other people to know. And the staff loved this because they got to hear about each other in ways they wouldn't hear, and then it sparked all kinds of conversations offline. Oh, I didn't know you were into that. And so, I think that structuring ways to connect with each other personally is what we have to figure out how to do better.

**Jen:** And are there, like what are your favorite ways to do that?

**Bob:** Well, I'm much more active than I used to be. So like, I'm a Harvard professor. I could work 24/7. And I did for a while.

**Jen:** No, that's not good for your well-being, Bob.

**Bob:** It's not good. I have figured it out, especially once my kids were grown so. When my kids were at home, they'd come in and say, dad, do this with me or dad drive me here and I would drop everything and do that because that was my priority. Thank goodness. But once they were gone, my wife and I are both busy professionals, and we realized, we could just work all the time. And my research began to say that's not so good. So now I am much more deliberate. I reach out to friends, I take walks, I'm going to go on a walk this afternoon with a friend. I take walks with people. I have dinners with my friends, so it used to be that like my wife would arrange our social life and we would go out in couples, but I would never go out by myself with somebody. We've started doing that now. I make it a point, and often I like, will text people. I'll e-mail people and say I just want to say hi. I never used to do that before. And what we found in our longitudinal study was that the people who were best at keeping vibrant social connections with the people who did this kind of thing, little actions that you do kind of day after day week after week to just keep your connections more vibrant. And that people who don't do that have perfectly good relationships wither away and die just from neglect.

**Jen:** Yeah. You mentioned something and then your comment now about texting people and emailing people and you mentioned about, in the workplace that virtual and remote work and virtual connections don't really replace true in person connection. But what is your view on the role of technology in supporting healthy relationships? I think we all know the detriments, right?

**Bob:** Right, we do, we do.

**Jen:** What's the role of technology and actually supporting those relationships?

**Bob:** Yes, well and right and it's easy for us to say oh technology is bad. We got to get rid of it. And of course, it's not going away. We're not getting rid of these wonderful screens that we're so addicted to. So, there is some research on this that suggests that how we use technology and particularly how we use social media, makes a difference. So, we know that if we use social media passively to scroll through other people's feeds, right, we get more depressed, we get more anxious, we feel more FOMO, fear of missing out. We feel like other people have it all figured out. They're living their best lives. And I'm not. All that awful stuff. Teenagers are particularly vulnerable to this, but we're all vulnerable to it because we know that we end up curating our lives for each other. I don't show my most depressed photos on social media. I show the photos where I'm happy and I'm on a nice beach or I'm out with friends. So, if we use social media passively, we get more depressed, our moods lower. If we use social media to actively connect with each other, we get more energized and we foster those connections that we know support our health and well-being. So, I'll give you an example. During the pandemic, one of my friends reconnected with his elementary school buddies, right. They're all over the country now, but they reconnected. Now they have coffee every Sunday morning. And they are just thrilled. And they're reminiscing about what happened in the third grade. And they're actively enjoying the use of social media.

**Jen:** I love that. I'm not sure I would remember what happened in the third grade, so I actually love that.

**Bob:** And we all, memory is so fallible that we just make stuff up, right?

**Jen:** Yeah, and if it helps them connect with one another, then it's all good, right. So, let's talk a little bit about personality or personality traits. When we think of people who are really good at building relationship, I think we've kind of perhaps been misled to think that, oh, extroverts are the ones that are really good at building relationships. Did you all look at the difference in kind of some of these personality

traits around extroverts, introverts and is that really true that extroverts are better at building relationships?

**Bob:** We did look at that some and what we know is that extroverts need more relationships. And that introverts need fewer relationships. And that's the distinction, not who's good and who's bad. But, one of things we know is that extroverts get their energy from being with other people, so they want people around a lot. Introverts get their energy, more of it, from being alone. They refuel from alone time and that's perfectly healthy. Nothing wrong with introversion. It's just that we in the culture kind of glorify extroverts. But there's nothing healthier about being an extrovert. It's just different. So, what we know is that each person needs to check in with themselves, like how many people do I need in my life and what sorts of activities with people help me feel more energized. What sorts of activities are exhausting and depleting, and so one size doesn't fit all in that way. There's no set formula for how many relationships you need. None of that.

**Jen:** And I think that I mean, for me that kind of, I'm a pretty extreme introvert, which often surprises people, but I think can you talk a little bit and perhaps this is obvious for some. But when I started to really learn about it, but there's a difference between being alone and being lonely.

**Bob:** Absolutely. I mean I know this from Zen.

**Jen:** I want you to go into it.

**Bob:** I sit alone on the meditation cushion every day, and occasionally I do feel lonely as thoughts come up, feelings come up. But mostly, I don't feel lonely at all. And we know that there are people who can spend most of their lives alone and be quite content. So, loneliness is a subjective experience of not feeling as connected as you'll want to feel to other people. And that's how you can be lonely in a marriage, you can be lonely in a crowd. You can be perfectly content alone on a mountaintop. And so, let's remember it's a subjective experience. Social isolation is the physical distance from other people that's often imposed outside. So, many people became socially isolated during the pandemic, not by choice. And many of them suffered, but some people didn't suffer. Some people were okay with that isolation.

**Jen:** And is there anything that is like connection to? How does our connection to ourselves, or perhaps our understanding of ourselves and our own needs have to do with our ability to connect with others?

**Bob:** It has a lot to do with it. One of the things I know both as a Zen practitioner and also as a psychotherapist, is that when we don't accept ourselves as we are, when we are hard on ourselves, it's very difficult to connect with others because we're more sensitive. We're expecting other people not to like us. We're expecting other people to be critical. If we don't accept things about ourselves, we're always waiting to be found out. Like, oh, this person's going to see this thing about me that I don't like. And so one of the things that I've found actually about meditation, but also in psychotherapy, working with people is that greater and greater self-acceptance allows people to connect better with other people because they're more relaxed, they're less afraid. They're just more at ease in the world.

**Jen:** Yeah, I think that's so important for all of us. We haven't talked about your book at all. So, I want to give you that opportunity to talk about your book and as you said in the beginning, there has been so much written specifically about the Harvard Study on Adult Development. So, what inspired your book and perhaps what can listeners expect from reading your book? What will they get out of it?

**Bob:** What inspired this was our understanding is that people were really hungry for this information. So, we've been publishing our findings in fancy academic journals that nobody reads, even my colleagues don't read it. But when I would give talks, I'd realized that the questions from the audience, even audiences of scientists, would quickly move from the statistics I was using to, well, what happens if your children fail to launch? Or what happens if you get divorced in your 50s? They became very personal. And what we realized was that people are hungry for the information that we know, that there's good scientific evidence for. And so, we wrote this book that focuses particularly on relationships, but it focuses on the science of adult development and what we did was we wove the stories from our studies. So stories of real people's lives woven all the way through, the details are disguised so that you can't identify any particular person because many of these people are still living. And so, we guarantee their privacy. But they're real stories and we weave them in to illustrate the scientific findings that we present. And so, what we do is we basically tell you everything we know that developmental science knows about what makes a good life as we go through adulthood.

**Jen:** And are there some particular, like in terms of feedback that people are giving you from the book? Like, what are the things that are like the biggest a-has or that are changing people's views or behaviors around this?

**Bob:** Yeah. So actually.

**Jen:** I know as an author myself, you're often surprised by what people take from a book. It's not always what you thought they would take from it.

**Bob:** Well, one of my friends who's been my friend since my teenage years. She's pretty snarky, and she's kind of cynical. She's a media person, actually. And she called me after she read the book. And she never gives compliments and she said, I just want you to know I finished the last page of your book. I put it down. I called my friend Rachel and said, this is crazy. We love each other. We love being together. Why don't we see each other more? We have to make this happen. And I said that is the best gift you could have given to me. And that's what the feedback we're getting is that it makes people think about their lives and it makes them think about ways that they want to start doing it slightly differently, not turning their lives upside down in any sense, but just making little adjustments to make life better and ideally to make themselves feel more connected in the world.

**Jen:** Yeah, I love that. Alright, one final question. What's the future where you guys taking this next?

**Bob:** We're collecting data even as we speak. We're asking people to go online and fill out a survey and actually what we're asking about now is, what was your experience like during the pandemic? We want to know more about that. We're also asking them more detailed questions about social media use. Because we want to know who's using and in what ways, and these are, the second generation is mostly baby boomers, and so as we know baby boomers are using social media differently than Gen X'ers or millennials, or Gen Z'ers. What we're trying to do is keep studying the big domains of adult life, mental health, physical health, work life relationships, but also add some of the most timely things that come into the culture. So that's where we are.

**Jen:** I'm excited to continue to tune into the great work that you guys are doing as I shared it, had a big influence with me and my co-author on our book and just generally in the work that I do every day and the work that we care so much about at Deloitte. So, thank you for all that you do.

**Bob:** Well, thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure to talk about with you.

**Jen:** Yeah, absolutely. I'm so grateful Dr. Waldinger could be with us today to talk about the Harvard Study of Adult Development. Thank you to our producers Rivet360 and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more. And if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series, or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter at JenFish23. We're always open to your recommendations and feedback. And of course, if you like what you hear, please share post and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.