

Aging Well: The Art and Science of Growing Old

Review by Laurel Mildred

“Think diet and exercise are the keys to a long, happy life? Think Again.”

With that provocative quote, George E. Vaillant, psychiatrist at the Harvard School of Medicine, introduces the results of a 50-year study on adult development, *Aging Well*. Drawing on longitudinal studies of hundreds of subjects, Vaillant presents data as well as detailed case studies exploring how disadvantages in childhood relate to aging. He outlines three major tasks of successful aging: generativity, preserving the meaning of the past, and facing death with integrity. He reveals that smoking and alcoholism are the factors that present the greatest risks to successful aging, but points out that cultivating intimate relationships, accepting our dependence issues and mastering the major tasks of aging leads to resilience, better health and happiness, and life satisfaction in old age.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development

The Harvard (or “Grant”) Study is the longest prospective study of physical and mental health in the world (Vaillant, 2002). The first sample in the study consisted of 283 health and socially advantaged Harvard graduates born around 1920. Later 456 socially disadvantaged inner city men, born around 1930, were added to the study. Finally, a sample of 90 middle class and intellectually gifted women born around 1910 were added. The characteristics of these three cohorts allowed researchers to make comparisons based on gender, class and family well-being, although racially the study participants were entirely homogenous. Drawing from the three cohorts did however give researchers diverse enough material to offer insight into the commonalities of successful aging.

The Importance of the Past

One of the key issues the study examined was the past – how much does a favored or difficult childhood affect successful aging? The hopeful answer is: less than you would think. “Although we all ‘know’ that childhood affects the well-being of adults, recent scientific reviews reveal that such explanations are rather less important than we thought.” (Vaillant, 2002, p. 94). The study participants, grouped into those with bleak childhoods (called by the study “the Loveless”) and those with warm childhoods (called “the Cherished”), did show marked differences in their ability to develop trust, autonomy and initiative. The Loveless were significantly more likely to be identified as mentally ill, to have difficulty being able to play, to

trust and to have friends. However, the effects of an unhappy childhood became less over time, and positive aspects, such as resilience, became more important. Emotional riches really did prove to be more important to successful aging than material wealth. And emotional maturity gave many Loveless study participants new tools that aided them in aging well, such as forgiveness and the emotional recovery of lost loves.

Generativity

Vaillant argues that successful aging is a result of mastering several of Erikson's tasks of adult development. None of these tasks is more important than generativity. Generativity is defined as "taking care of the next generation" (ibid, p. 114). Mastering generativity was also the best predictor of a happy and enduring marriage in old age. Those who excelled in generativity took care of younger people by teaching, mentoring and especially by being grandparents. They continued to make relationships and become close to younger people, or "take them inside," even when friends their age had died.

Vaillant makes an interesting case that while we should help our parents adjust to old age, our primary energy should be spent on the next generation: "We should help our parents out of gratitude and not at the cost of our own development. If we are to go down on the Titanic, let us give our places on the lifeboat to our children, not our parents" (ibid, p. 115).

Meaningfulness

Another key task identified in *Aging Well* as very important is preserving meaning. Vaillant calls this task becoming a "keeper of the meaning" (ibid, p. 141). Although he points out that this role sometimes becomes unhealthy, rigid conservatism, it can also be very positive to serve as a steward of the past, to honor and preserve its memory, and to work for justice. There are many ways that elders keep the meaning: genealogy, environmental conservation, and preserving history are several examples. But whatever the means, mastering the task of preserving what is best from the past in trust for future generations is an important role that contributes to successful aging.

Integrity

Integrity represents Erik Erikson's final task of adult development, and Vaillant's research bears out the critical importance of this task. It is the task of facing death with acceptance rather than despair. "Positive aging is not simply avoidance of physical decay, and it is certainly not about the avoidance of death" (ibid, p. 161). Vaillant suggests that distributing material goods to

those we want to have them is helpful to this process, and he gives touching examples of a number of study participants who died with dignity and grace. In each case, the person made the most of life, passed on a meaningful legacy to the next generation or illustrated generativity in close relationships with younger people. Each took responsibility and expressed gratitude for life. "Their lives were not only an end, but where also a beginning" (ibid, p. 183). Vaillant believes that "One of the tasks of a keeper of the meaning is to convey to the young that old age is meaningful and dignified" (ibid, p. 178). One of the tasks of the old is to teach younger people what it is to die.

Conclusion

Despite the good news that a bleak and "loveless" childhood does not prevent the opportunity to age well, the Harvard study does tell us some things about why people age badly. Smoking and alcohol abuse indicated poor outcomes for nearly every measure of healthy and successful aging. And despite the cavalier words on the cover of the book ("*Think diet and exercise are the keys to a long, happy life? Think Again*"), preventing obesity was important to successful aging. But the most important factors in healthy aging, this study concludes, are the continued ability to have close relationships, especially with younger people; the ability to accept our own dependency needs; to leave a meaningful legacy to connect the past with the future; and the maturity to face death with integrity rather than despair. Backed by scientific data from the most comprehensive health and mental health study in the world, *Aging Well* is an impressive work of authoritative research and innovative ideas that is of practical use to all of us.

Reference: Vaillant, G. (2002). *Aging well: surprising guideposts to a happier life from the landmark Harvard study of adult development*. USA: Little, Brown and Company.