

Editors' Newsroom: Longitudinal studies hold clues to a long and happy life

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ABSTRACT

In our latest editorial, Editor-in-Chief Dr. Bob Stewart reflects on his lifelong interest in the psychology of happiness and discusses the value of taking a long-term approach to studying happiness and well-being. Bob provides an overview of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, and the Christchurch Health and Development Study, along with recent longitudinal works published in *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*. He also provides practical tips for improving social fitness.

KEYWORDS

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Since I was very young, I have been interested in the psychology of happiness. From early adolescence until now, in my 80s, I have continued to study social psychology and the keys to a long and happy life. I have, in effect, been studying this all my life.

Over my career, as both a professor in human development, and founder and Editor-in-Chief of this journal, I have seen the value in longitudinal research that has explored how all kinds of variables affect our happiness and well-being. Such research involves the investment of incredible resources, for example, maintaining relationships with participants that extend over many years, not just the length of one survey or experiment. Analyzing the data from these studies is a mammoth task, requiring high-capacity systems and talented scientists. I want to draw attention to some of these exceptional studies being conducted around the world—including in *SBP Journal's* home country, New Zealand.

The world's longest-running happiness study began at Harvard University in 1938. The Harvard Study of Adult Development followed 724 men from adolescence to old age (Harvard Medical School, n.d.; Mineo, 2017). After 86 years, the researchers found that the quality of our relationships is the most important factor in determining our happiness (Harvard Medical School, n.d.). The study also found that *social fitness*, or the ability to build and maintain strong relationships, was more important to a long and happy life than were genes, social class, or IQ (Mineo, 2023).

There are many things we can do to improve our social fitness. Here are a few practical tips: **Spend time with loved ones.** Make an effort to connect with your friends, family, and other important people in your life on a regular basis.

Be a good listener. When you're with others, really listen to what they have to say.

Be supportive. Be there for your loved ones when they need you.

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Be forgiving. Everyone makes mistakes. Learn to forgive others and yourself.

Be positive. A positive attitude can go a long way in strengthening relationships.

New Zealand is the location of the world-renowned Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (The Dunedin Study), which began in 1972 and is still actively in operation, with phase 52 of data collection happening now (Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit, University of Otago, n.d.). One contribution of these longitudinal data has been the development of a tool to assess the rate at which a person ages (Whitman et al., 2025). This metric can predict the likelihood of developing age-related diseases and inform interventions to slow the aging process. The Dunedin Study results have provided deep insight into how genetic predispositions interact with lifestyle factors and the environment to influence health outcomes. I reflected on this contribution last year with an in memoriam article remembering Dr. Philip Silva, The Dunedin Study's first director (Stewart, 2025).

Not far from Dunedin, another group of researchers set out to track the health, education, and life progress of babies born in 1977. The Christchurch Health and Development Study has since provided data for over 570 scientific reports, book chapters, and other publications (University of Otago, Christchurch, n.d.). These data have been used, for example, to examine the long-term effects of lead exposure in childhood. Uniquely, researchers were able to investigate the psychosocial impacts of a major natural disaster, the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010/2011.

I am delighted that authors are choosing to submit longitudinal research reports to *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, to enable deep analysis and expand understanding of well-being and life outcomes. Recent articles have looked at young people and internet gaming (Xu et al., 2026), depression and cyberbullying (Ma, 2025), and mental health and academic performance among students (Chen et al., 2023). The time and effort involved in longitudinal research may be weighty, but I am in no doubt about the benefits to all society of such worthwhile endeavors.

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