

# What Matters Most

By Dr. Linda Miles

## *What do you think matters most at the end of life?*

Decades ago, part of my work entailed performing psychological evaluations on people who had been handicapped by work accidents. Understandably, most of the people in this rehabilitation program wrestled with anxiety and depression.

One test, however, caught my attention as being unusual. The man who had been tested was in his 40s and had been suddenly injured at work. His test showed unusual results given his situation: it presented him as being extremely mentally healthy on every evaluation instrument.

When I interviewed him, I asked about his family. The man explained that he had a wonderful marriage and that his parents lived down the street and helped out with his children. He told me that the whole family understood that the accident had been something that he could not control and that they were supportive of him.

Curious, I asked him if he'd ever been in a relationship with someone who had not treated him well. A puzzled look came over his face. "Why would anyone do that?" he asked me. His response floored me. He literally had no concept of what a toxic relationship was like; he was very fortunate to have healthy role models around him.

It occurred to me that his family was playing a very vital role in helping him deal with his accident and in enabling him to remain mentally strong. This man's story reminded me of a long-term Harvard Study that I'd once read about. This study began in 1938 and continues to this day, chronologically following the lives of specific men.

Like numerous other studies, this research has shown that quality relationships help individuals lead longer, healthier, and happier lives. Mark Waldinger, the current director of the study, has noted: "The men in the study who were the most satisfied with their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80."<sup>[1]</sup>

If you want to be happy and healthy at 80, work on the quality of your relationships at age 19. That is the age when Harvard began to study. These were similar men in terms of intellect and aspirations at age 19 and most continued

to be successful in their careers. What accounted for best health and happiness was not finance or success, but the quality of their relationships.

Human beings are wired for connections so the quality of our relationships affects overall wellbeing. Emotions are contagious. Ask yourself the following about your close relationships:

- Do we support one another's dreams?
- Do we connect often?
- Do we share fondness and admiration?
- Do we have meaningful family rituals and celebrations?
- Are we able to dialogue with conflicts?
- Do we avoid name calling?
- Do we share affection?
- Do we know how to tell the truth with love?

As a result of a sudden illness at age 50, I almost died. As I slipped in and out of consciousness, I had the clear awareness that the only thing that mattered at the end of life was how much I had loved.

[1] [www.inc.com/dana-severson/after-studying-lives-of-724-men-for-79-years-harvard-reveals-1-biggest-secret-to-success-happiness.html](http://www.inc.com/dana-severson/after-studying-lives-of-724-men-for-79-years-harvard-reveals-1-biggest-secret-to-success-happiness.html)

*Take care, be kind, be considerate of other people and other species, and be loving.*

~ John Lithgow (born 1945), American Actor, Musician, Singer, and Author

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