

December 2006 Newsletter

Aging Well: What Does it Take?

Lessons from the Harvard Study of Adult Development

Dear Patients & Friends:

When Harvard Psychiatrist George E. Vaillant set out to take over the Harvard Study of Adult Development two decades ago, he did not imagine that the study of 268 socially advantaged Harvard men would eventually include both an inner city cohort of 456 socially disadvantaged men, and a cohort of 90 middle-class, gifted college educated (i.e., Terman) women, all of whom had been followed, interviewed and examined by physicians, psychiatrists and counselors for more than five decades, many at five year intervals. Indeed, it was the invention of the internet that enabled the researchers to track down all but two of the inner city men so that the findings of this longitudinal study could be reported.

The net result of the landmark *Harvard Study of Adult Development* (originally termed the *Grant Study of Adult Development*) was summarized by Vaillant recently in his now classic, *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 2002). Dr. Vaillant concludes that there were 6 variables that at age 50 were predictive of whether we will be alive and well, as opposed to disabled or dead, by age 75.

The six variables include:

1. No Smoking
2. No Alcoholism
3. Stable marriage
4. Some exercise
5. Not overweight
6. Good Coping behaviors (i.e., having “mature defenses” that help us deal with stress)

Ultimately then the findings generally support the conclusions of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), that healthy aging depends more on the lifestyle choices we make than on genetics: http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/spotlights/holiday_tips.htm

An excellent biography of this wonderful work, published in the American Journal of Psychiatry is available online:

<http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/full/161/1/178>

I highly recommend this work, it is a great read and the vignettes and interviews weave an amazing story about how we are not destined to fail by our childhood, but by how we respond to it. This coming year we'll be looking at behavioral techniques and exercises to help us deal with stress, live longer, and healthier.

Please do have a joyful holiday and a Merry Christmas,

Sincerely,

Robert A. Leach, D.C., M.S., F.I.C.C.

