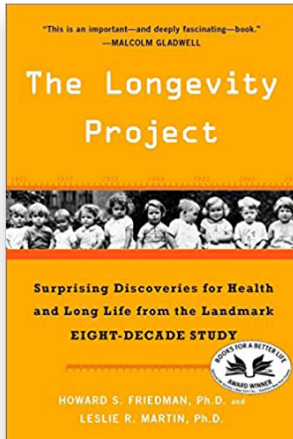


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Howard S. Friedman

Howard S. Friedman is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside.

Leslie R. Martin

Leslie R. Martin is professor of Psychology at La Sierra University and a research professor at the University of California, Riverside.

The Longevity Project

THE NUTSHELL

A Plume Book 2012

Introduction: The Breakthrough Studies of a Lifetime

We have spent the past twenty years following up on the lives of 1500 people in Dr. Terman's studies and investigating why some people thrive well into old age while others die prematurely. Along the way, we've discovered that many common health recommendations are ill-advised or simply wrong.

Chapter 1: Personality and Long Life: Who Stays Well?

If we want to understand how you can find your optimal path to health and long life, we need to turn to health psychology, medical sociology, life-course epidemiology, genetics, and life-span development.

Chapter 2: Long Live the Prudent and Persistent

The initial statistical findings clearly revealed that the best personality predictor of longevity was conscientiousness. The young adults who were thrifty, persistent, detail oriented and responsible lived the longest.

Chapter 3: Friendly and Convivial: Healthy or Trivial?

We found that sociable children did not grow into healthier-than-average adults and did not live longer. Those who rank high on

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sociability often find themselves in environments that encourage unhealthy behaviors.

Chapter 4: Happiness and Health? A Cheery Conundrum

One of the biggest bombshells of our entire project was that cheerful and optimistic children were *less* likely to live to an old age than their more staid and sober counterparts.

Chapter 5: Catastrophic Thinking: The Fates of Chicken Littles

The Chicken Littles of the world who think the sky is falling can bring trouble on themselves. Instead of seeing problems as limited and specific, they fear they will undermine everything they do. The results were clear: catastrophizers died sooner. The difference was especially large for the men.

Chapter 6: Childhood and School Days: Head Start, Early Finish

Generally speaking, an early health advantage or disadvantage was not that important to later health trajectories. We were surprised to find the level of education was not a very good predictor of later health and longevity.

Chapter 7: Parental Divorce: Some Were Resilient

The death of a parent during one's childhood had no measurable impact on life-span mortality risk. However, children from divorced families died almost five years earlier on average from intact families. In fact, parental divorce during childhood was the single strongest social predictor of early death.

Chapter 8: Running for Their Lives: Jocks vs. Nerds

When we looked across the decades, we found that being active in middle age was most important to health and longevity. Being inactive in childhood was not a problem if a person becomes more active as he ages. Such a person will do almost as well in terms of life span, and sometimes equally well.

Chapter 9: To Sickness or to Health? Love, Marriage, and Divorce

It turns out that it is not the married *people* who live longer but rather married *men*. The evidence does not show much advantage, if any, for married women. Steadily married men were very likely to live to age seventy and beyond, but less than a third of divorced men reached old age.

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Chapter 10: Careers, Success, and Satisfaction:

The damaging sort of workplace stress arises from conflicts with other people such as the overbearing boss and difficult coworkers, rather than the challenges and demands of the work itself. On average the most successful men lived five years longer than the least successful.

Chapter 11: Long Life Meets the Afterlife: Religion and Health

We saw that religious involvement at midlife did not matter much for the men. But for the women, the religiously inclined were clearly more likely to live long lives. The most important characteristics, especially for women, are linked in social networks and community engagement.

Chapter 12: Confidants, Networks, and the Power of Social Life

Taking time to cultivate social networks is important not just to the quality of life but also to its quantity. Our studies showed it is not those who *felt* the most connected, but those who had many actual ties in their social networks, and who were engaged with helping others, who lived the longest.

Chapter 13: The Gender Gap in Long Life

Almost everywhere in the world, women outlive men. In our studies of this mysterious phenomenon, longevity often seemed to come down to social relations. The women and the less masculine men were better able to establish and maintain deeper social connections, which saved their lives.

Chapter 14: The Toll of War and Trauma: Why Some Thrive

Our studies have shown that the psychological stress of war itself is not necessarily a major health threat. Rather, it is the cascade of unhealthy patterns that sometimes follows. Those individuals who can find meaning in a traumatic experience are usually able to return to a healthy pathway.

Chapter 15: Individual Paths to Health and Long Life

What have we learned about how to stay healthy and what individuals can do? Our studies show it is not enough to focus on our bodies. It is equally important to focus on families, work, and social relations. At its essence, individual health depends on social health.

Epilogue: Long Life and Public Health: Looking Ahead

Policy makers and laypersons alike tend to make two major conceptual errors when thinking about health and longevity. The first is to overestimate the importance of family biology. The second is the idea that we can make a major difference in health and longevity by giving people lists of health recommendations. If you hand most patients a list of life-altering changes, they will not make them.