

A happiness hypothesis

Nearly a century of science suggests one action outweighs all others. Rotary members have a head start.

By **Erin Gartner** | Photography by **Sarah Elizabeth Larson**

One of Rotary's single most ambitious projects, to confront malaria in Zambia, has roots in a friendship.

When Rotarian Bill Feldt discusses the initiative, which grew to receive **The Rotary Foundation's** first \$2 million Programs of Scale award in 2021, he doesn't mention dollars secured or accolades collected. He focuses on the doctor in Zambia who became his friend: Mwangala Muyendekwa.

"I stayed with Dr. Muyendekwa four times in his house in Zambia," says Feldt, a member of the Rotary Club of Federal Way near Seattle who was among those pushing hardest for the initiative that brought malaria care and prevention directly to a targeted group of Zambian communities for the first time. "And he stayed with me and my wife here in Washington. We email, sometimes talk on the phone. It's very personal, this work. We have some very, very close relationships stateside and in Africa."

He pauses, then adds: "This makes us happy, helps me feel fulfilled. Maybe that's it: Find something that's meaningful, and that's what gives you longevity."

Feldt is onto something. A vast and expanding body of research is illuminating clearer pathways to happiness, ones that differ substantially from many people's expectations. The overarching lessons from decades of science on happiness won't surprise Rotary members: No matter your culture, strong social relationships make us happier and healthier.

"What makes people happy, in the long term, is the feeling that their lives are meaningful and that they have a richly connected life," says Steven Heine, a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver who studies cultures around the world, including how people search for meaning in their lives. "And we find that people, that their community relationships, such as through Rotary clubs and similar organizations, are especially important in helping make their lives meaningful."

One pioneering contribution to this global field of research is what has become the longest-running study on happiness — still going at Harvard University after about 85 years. It taught us that the top predictor of long-term well-being isn't our wealth, our jobs, or even our genetics — it's the quality of our relationships. "People worry about their health, their diet, exercise. That's important, but being more socially active is one of the most important things you can do to improve your health," says Heine, who teaches social and cultural psychology at his Canadian university.

The advice seems to come at us from all directions: self-help books and podcasts, online health influencers, ads promoting supplements or specific diets, and wellness retreats on secluded beaches. The wellness industry juggernaut, worth an estimated \$6 trillion or more worldwide (depending on what you measure), pumps out so many bold promises it can be difficult to know what to pay attention to when the question inevitably floats into our minds: What will make me feel happier?

The science — which is still revealing insights — suggests you should look past the noisy hype and focus on lifelong connections. You can even get a prescription for it. Doctors and counselors are increasingly turning to what's known as "social prescribing," formally prescribing that their patients engage in social activities, such as going on a group hike or volunteering or joining a club.

Happiness, however we define it individually, is relative, of course, when people face trauma or overwhelming challenges like discrimination, poor health, homelessness, or poverty. Researchers wouldn't make a one-to-one causal connection that having good friendships means you're a happier person because many factors contribute. And much of the research on happiness examines how we feel over the long term, because of course sadness will find us at times.

Rotary members may have another thing going for their happiness, according to a parallel field of research into how benevolent acts — volunteering, donating, caregiving — seem to make us happier. But not all good deeds are equal in growing our well-being, says the 2025 World Happiness Report.

Science says...

If you're the type of person who believes people will act with kindness, that's a top predictor of happiness.

It turns out that benevolent actions benefit you most when they're done in "caring communities" that keep you more socially connected. Best known for its annual rankings of the happiest countries, the University of Oxford report also synthesizes the body of research on happiness. This year, one focus was "how to amplify the joy of giving." The effects are stronger when you have choices for how to help and can understand clearly how your actions had an impact.

A top example of how Rotary members have built on their connectedness is their wave of actions big and small to support mental well-being for their RI friends and for people in their communities and beyond, particularly in reaction to what's recently been coined a loneliness epidemic. The potential happiness benefits of our relationships are another reason to embrace the goal of Rotary founder Paul Harris, who was driven to start the organization because he was missing his old happy friendships after moving to Chicago.

If you ask 10 Rotary members about their friendships in RI, you can expect to hear 10 stories about enduring, meaningful connections that make them feel content, valued — and yes, happy. To help deepen those friendships, many Rotary clubs layer humor, joy, and even silliness on top of service. One example: The Rotary Club of Melawati in Malaysia starts its meetings with "laugh therapy," when everyone forces themselves to guffaw or chuckle until they can't help it and the laughing becomes genuine. That sets the tone for the meeting and sparks hugs between friends, club member Mahendran Daniel says. "You must keep the fun in the fundamentals of Rotary."

There's also the "Order of the Zucchini," created this year in Canada by the governor of District 5360, Manon Mitchell. As she visited clubs and presented members with honors, including Paul Harris Fellow recognition, she offered some people squashes, which helped her give away her garden's overproduction and made for an amusing photo of members holding large, bulbous gourds.

"It got a good chuckle," Mitchell says. "I find that in some clubs, things can be so serious at times, and I wanted to make people smile and feel great. There are so many ways of doing that." (She considered extending the gag to the Order of the Tomatoes but made sauce instead.)

These small moments of shared joy and connection are important, researchers say, in part because they help us relax and act as a balm from the harmful effects of stress. But researchers say long-term happiness, the kind that has lasting health effects, often takes a bit more work. After all, quality relationships can be hard to maintain, whether in Rotary, at work, or in our personal lives.

When the epic Harvard Study of Adult Development started uncovering in the 1980s the link between a person's well-being and the quality of their relationships, researchers didn't believe the data at first. "But then other studies began to find the same thing," Dr. Robert Waldinger, study director, said in a TED Talk interview in 2022. "We found that people had less depression, they were less likely to get diabetes and heart disease, that they recovered faster from illness when they had better connections with other people."

One study Heine worked on at the University of British Columbia is an example of the expanding research about people from varied cultures, ethnicities, and geographies. About 1,000 people across India, Japan, Poland, and the U.S. shared the ways they find purpose in their lives for the research published in 2025 that investigated how their varied pursuits affect their well-being. "We found the same predictors across each country: connection to family, close relationships, feeling what you do really matters, feeling a sense of purpose," Heine says. "Usually, we're struck by the differences among cultures — what they value, what they're motivated by. But here, when it came to meaning in life, the similarity was striking."

Science says...

Starting a conversation with a stranger on a commuter train, a city bus, or in a waiting room made people feel happier compared with those who stayed quiet.

The Harvard study started in 1938 and initially recruited 268 undergraduates, including future President John F. Kennedy. Researchers regularly interviewed the men and their families and collected data about their mental and physical health. (At the time, Harvard didn't enroll women as undergraduates, so all original participants were men.)

Around the same time, Harvard researchers separately began interviewing a group of 456 boys from disadvantaged families in nearby Boston. The two cohorts were brought together in the 1970s, as researchers began taking a deeper look into longevity. This combined study aimed to examine what happened over the course of people's lives — how their opinions changed, their health shifted, and what ultimately led to a healthy, happy life. Today the study focuses on the original participants' children, and women make up more than half of the 1,300 participants.

If Waldinger's name or the Harvard study sounds familiar, maybe you've seen the now famous earlier TEDx Talk in 2015, when he first presented the findings to a small audience. The video has more than 50 million views across multiple websites and is one of the most-watched TED Talks of all time, likely because his advice still resonates: If you want to make one choice today that will make you healthier and happier, pay attention to improving your connections to other people.

The link between the quality of our lives and our social connections keeps turning up as the science of happiness and longevity continues to give. The same goes for the connection between giving, gratitude, and our well-being.

The benefits for individuals and society from volunteering, donating money to others, and helping strangers — what researchers call prosocial behavior — are well documented, the World Happiness Report notes. Increases in such altruism are connected to decreases in deaths from suicide, overdose, or alcohol misuse. "People who engage in prosocial behaviour are healthier and happier, and they experience a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life as well as improved psychological flourishing," says the report, citing studies spanning two decades and covering data from over 100 countries.

The good feelings from altruism go both ways. "Gratitude is one of the first big ideas from this space of positive psychology," says Emiliana Simon-Thomas, science director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

She gives the example of how you feel grateful when a friend brings you a gift, like flowers, when you're going through a difficult time. "Gratitude is a shared emotional experience," she says, "when you have a moment where you recognize that something good has occurred in your life, and it's due to someone or something outside of yourself."

And don't turn down opportunities for volunteering, she says, because it offers a way to socialize with people who have common interests or a similar sense of purpose. A bonus: Volunteering often includes physical activity, especially beneficial as we age, she notes.

Happier together

3 key lessons (so far) from the Harvard Study of Adult Development:

- Social connections promote health. People are happier and live longer when they are more socially connected to family, friends, and community.
- Quality over quantity. It's not the number or types of relationships you have; it's the quality of your relationships.
- Good relationships don't just protect our mental health. They protect our physical health, in part by helping buffer stress.

Simon-Thomas co-created the **Greater Good Science Center's** popular online Science of Happiness course, which anyone can take for free. Beyond the eight-week course, the center publishes an online magazine that serves as a public repository for articles, videos, quizzes, and ideas to improve our mental health, distilled from the wide pool of research. Suggestions include simple "microacts" of joy such as listing things you're grateful for or asking someone to share something that made them happy. "We wanted to provide regular people access to the actionable insights from all the research," she says.

The power of our relationships even shows up in our brains. Scientists can clearly map the neurological pathways of emotions like happiness and loneliness in detailed brain scans using advanced imaging tools, says neuroscientist Kay Tye, who leads a laboratory at the **Salk Institute for Biological Studies**. "You would absolutely see different patterns of activity," she says. "If someone is self-reporting joy or self-reporting pain or self-reporting fear, all of these things are represented differently."

Tye investigates neural circuits in the brain to better understand our emotions — and, she hopes, find better ways to treat mental health disorders like anxiety and depression. (The independent research nonprofit she works for was founded by Jonas Salk, well-known among Rotarians for developing the first successful polio vaccine.)

"Aligning with other people through emotional connections is healthy for your brain. It helps build positive, altruistic social connections," she says. "So focus on quality connection, which doesn't need to be a lot of time. It doesn't need to be a lot of people. Play games, hold hands on a walk. Anything that's a positive interaction."

Our relationships can even affect the tiny tips of our chromosomes, which carry our genes. Our interactions and daily choices, like how we respond to stress or experience companionship, affect the chromosomes' protective ends, called telomeres, according to research by 2009 Nobel laureate Elizabeth Blackburn and other scientists. Longer telomeres are healthier and help slow the aging of cells.

Supportive relationships, when you feel loved and a sense of belonging, seem to buffer the effects of stress and keep telomeres healthier, according to data detailed in *The Telomere Effect*, a book that Blackburn co-wrote with fellow scientist Elissa Epel.

Austin, Texas-based psychotherapist Betty Richardson, who spent decades of her career as a nurse and a hospital administrator, says she has repeatedly seen the positive effects of warm relationships, especially when people are going through their worst moments. "Having support of a loved one or loved ones is very important when a person is ill or facing possible death," she says. "Loved ones certainly present a strong case for working hard to get better."

Science says...

Young adults increasingly report lower happiness in recent years, but educating them about how people are more empathetic than they think may help build social networks.

Richardson, a member of the Rotary Club of the Austin University Area, experienced the importance of these connections when her son, Mark, was treated for cancer, before he died eight years ago. One thing that brought him joy during those treatments was watching funny TV shows with friends or family. "He also perked up when getting mail," she says. "He would say, 'People do care about me.'"

Her friends with Rotary, in Texas and in Mexico, for her she has long worked with Rotary clubs, showed up for where. Her club helped her establish a memorial fund in her son's name, which has supported scholarships as well as the purchase of computers for a school in the border town of Reynosa, Mexico.

Richardson has also celebrated many a birthday in Reynosa because hers falls on World Tuberculosis Day, and she has long focused on fighting the disease in that region. "Just being with people who are interested in some of the same things, it provides a sense of accomplishment. Some of these projects aren't easy. Many require a fair amount of cooperation," she says. "But without it — Rotary and volunteering — life possibly would have been quite boring."

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