

They Studied Happiness for 80 Years | How to Live a Good Life, Part 1

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

351 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Yesterday afternoon, at eight minutes to five, I got the best professional news I have had in three years.

Tell them what it was.

A radio station in Manchester confirmed a live interview I had been chasing for eight months.

So I picked up my phone.

I opened my contacts.

And I just stood there in the kitchen, scrolling.

Scrolling for what?

For someone I really wanted to tell.

Not someone who would say congratulations.

Someone who would actually care.

And how long did you scroll?

Long enough for the kettle to boil and go cold again.

So here is my question, and it is the question for this whole episode.

What is good news worth, if there is nobody you truly want to share it with?

Welcome to Your English Toolbox, the podcast that trains your English while you live your real life.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

And today we begin something new.

Four conversations about how to live a good life.

Not a perfect life.

A good one.

Four conversations about happiness, relationships, purpose, and the small choices that improve our quality of life.

And we start with a study that took eighty years to answer one question.



But before the study, a game.

Oh, I like games.

Imagine our listener, right now.

On a bus, in a kitchen, walking to work.

If they could invest in only one thing today, to be happier in twenty years, what would they choose?

Easy.

Money.

That is my bet too.

Money first.

Then health, obviously.

Then freedom.

Not having a boss.

Success.

Recognition.

People knowing your name.

A nice house.

A warm house.

And a very good sofa.

A sofa.

Do not laugh.

A really, really good sofa changes a person's life.

I am not laughing.

You are laughing with your eyebrows.

I am writing it down.

Sofa.

Under furniture.

I am serious.

When I moved to England, I slept for two months on a sofa that folded in the middle like a taco.

I promise you, nobody is happy on a taco.

Alright, alright, the sofa stays on the list.



Now listen, none of these answers are stupid.

No, they are not.

Money matters.

Health matters.

If you are living in a new country and you cannot pay the rent, nobody needs to tell you that money matters.

And we are not going to do that thing where two comfortable people tell you that money does not buy happiness.

Absolutely not.

But here is the thing.

Not one of the answers on our list was the answer that came out of the study.

Not even the sofa?

Especially not the sofa.

So.

Nineteen thirty-eight.

Before the Second World War.

Before television in most homes.

A group of researchers in Boston decide to do something nobody had done before.

Instead of studying people who were sick, they wanted to understand people who were doing well.

And instead of asking them once, they wanted to follow them for their whole lives.

That is the key phrase.

To follow someone over time.

They chose two groups that would never normally meet.

Group one.

Two hundred and sixty-eight students from Harvard University.

Young men with every advantage.

Group two.

Four hundred and fifty-six boys from some of Boston's poorest neighbourhoods.

Some of them lived in homes with no hot water.

So, seven hundred and twenty-four people in total.

They all agreed to take part.

And every two years, a questionnaire.



How is your work?

How is your marriage?

How do you sleep?

Every five years, medical records.

Blood, heart, everything.

And every fifteen years or so, a researcher goes to their house, sits in their living room, and talks to them for hours.

With their wives.

Later, with their children.

The researchers kept track of everything.

Every job, every illness, every divorce.

And this is the part I love.

The people who started the study never saw the answer.

No.

The first director died.

The second one retired.

The files passed from one team to the next, like a relay race.

Boxes and boxes of paper, moving through the decades.

Today the study is on its fourth director, and it now includes spouses and more than a thousand children of the original men.

So it is not just a study anymore.

It is a family tree.

And one detail, because people always ask.

One of the Harvard students became President of the United States.

Really?

John F.

Kennedy.

His records remain restricted, but he was one of the participants.

And among the Boston boys?

Some became doctors.

Some became teachers.



Some ended up alone, or drinking, or both.

And some of the Harvard men, with all their advantages, ended up the same way.

The starting line still mattered.

Poverty, opportunity and health shaped many lives.

But the starting line did not tell the whole story.

It did not decide, on its own, who would build a good life.

So what did matter?

When the men reached fifty, the researchers had thirty years of data on each one.

Thirty years of blood tests, work histories, family stories, everything.

And they asked one question.

Which of these measures, at fifty, helps predict who will be healthy and happy at eighty?

Cholesterol.

That is what many people expected.

Cholesterol, blood pressure, weight.

And?

It was not cholesterol.

The strongest predictor of health at eighty was how satisfied each man was with his relationships at fifty.

Say that again, slowly, for the people cooking dinner.

The men who were most satisfied with their relationships at fifty tended to be the healthiest at eighty.

Not necessarily the richest.

Not necessarily the most famous.

And not simply the ones with the best cholesterol.

The ones with people they felt connected to.

Now, we have to be careful here, because this is a podcast, not a miracle.

Good relationships do not guarantee a long life.

No.

And they do not guarantee a painless life.

People with wonderful families still get sick.

But over eighty years, the same pattern kept appearing.

That is the word the researchers use.



A pattern.

Warm, reliable relationships appeared again and again as one of the strongest foundations of a good life.

Foundations.

Like the foundations of a house.

Exactly.

Not the roof, not the decoration.

The thing everything else stands on.

Okay, but I want to go back to money.

Please do.

Because I have heard money does not buy happiness a thousand times, usually from people who have money.

And it is not true, is it?

It is not that simple.

Researchers have looked at this carefully, and for most people, more money is associated with a little more happiness.

Full stop.

Because money can buy security.

Money can buy a safer home.

It can help you see a doctor when you need one.

Money can buy the plane ticket home when your mother is ill.

If you are living abroad, money is not a luxury.

It can feel like oxygen.

So the study never said that money does not matter.

What it showed is something more precise.

Money and relationships give us different things.

Money gives us options.

Relationships give us someone to call.

And you cannot simply swap one for the other.

You cannot phone your bank account at midnight when you are scared.

No.

It does not pick up.

So where do people go wrong?



I know exactly where.

The postponed life.

Tell me about it.

I will see my friends when things calm down.

I will call my brother when this project is over.

I will join something and meet people once I have settled in.

And things never calm down.

The project ends, and another one starts.

This is called putting something off.

You put off the phone call.

You put off the dinner.

And the strange thing is, we do not put off the things that matter less.

No.

We put off the people we take for granted, precisely because we think they will always be there.

That phrase, to take someone for granted, is worth learning.

It means you stop noticing someone, because you assume they will never leave.

And slowly, without any argument, you lose touch.

To lose touch with someone.

No fight, no drama.

Just a silence that grows.

Let me tell you about Daniel.

Is this a real person?

No.

Daniel is fictional.

But I think many of our listeners will recognise part of themselves in him.

Daniel Okafor.

An engineer from Lagos, living in Calgary, in Canada, for eight years.

Cold place.

Very cold.

Minus thirty in January.



Daniel arrived with one suitcase and a plan.

Ten years, senior engineer, then the house.

A man with a spreadsheet.

A man with a spreadsheet.

He worked weekends.

He said no to almost everything.

And on a Tuesday afternoon in March, his manager calls him into the office, and he gets it.

Senior engineer, two years early.

So he picks up his phone.

He picks up his phone, and he opens WhatsApp.

And the first thing he sees is his sister.

What about her?

Three messages from her, from January and February, and he had never answered.

Not because he did not care.

Because he was busy, and he was going to answer properly, later, when he had time.

Oh, that hurts.

Then he scrolls down.

His best friend from university, the one who came to the airport when he left Lagos.

The last message was a birthday emoji, from two years ago.

Two years.

And then Amara, the woman who shared a flat with him his first year in Calgary, when neither of them knew anybody.

She moved to Vancouver eight months ago.

He found out from a photo.

He did not know she had moved?

He found out from a photo.

So what did Daniel do?

Well, he did not quit his job, if that is what you are hoping.

I was not hoping that.

Good, because that is the wrong story.

Daniel kept his job.



He liked his job.

What he did that night was open his sister's chat.

And he wrote three words.

Three words.

It took him twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes for three words.

I love this man.

He typed and deleted, typed and deleted.

What were the words?

How are you.

That is it?

That is it.

Not I got promoted.

Not sorry I disappeared.

Just how are you, and then he waited.

And?

She was awake.

She was worried about their father.

They talked for an hour.

Did he tell her about the promotion?

At the very end.

She said I am proud of you, and then she said, why did you not call me in January?

And he had no answer.

He had no answer.

He had not repaired everything.

No.

But the silence between them was finally broken.

Okay, I want to bring this home to our listener, because I think they are feeling something right now.

Go ahead.

If you are listening to this in a country that is not yours, every conversation you have in English costs you something.



Effort.

Courage.

And a willingness to feel a little vulnerable sometimes.

And it is easy to think of those conversations as practice.

As a test you pass or fail.

But they are not a test.

Every imperfect conversation in English is more than language practice.

It might be the beginning of the network that supports your life ten years from now.

The neighbour you talk to today might be the person who waters your plants in five years.

So let us give you some tools.

Three sentences for reconnecting.

For picking up a relationship you have let go quiet.

Not perfect sentences.

Real ones.

Listen, then repeat in the pause.

I was thinking about you today.

How are things?

It has been too long.

Can we catch up this week?

Tell me about you first.

What is new?

One more time, all three.

I was thinking about you today.

How are things?

It has been too long.

Can we catch up this week?

Tell me about you first.

What is new?

To catch up with someone means to share what has happened since you last spoke.

And notice the third sentence.



Tell me about you first.

Because reconnecting is not about announcing your news.

It is about making room for theirs.

And that brings us to our sentence of the day.

Ready?

A good life is not something you reach.

It is something you build with other people.

A good life is not something you reach.

It is something you build with other people.

Say it with us, one more time.

A good life is not something you reach.

It is something you build with other people.

So.

The kettle.

The kettle.

Yesterday, at eight minutes to five, you were scrolling.

Did you find someone?

I did.

My cousin Ellie, in Leeds.

We used to talk every week.

Now it is Christmas and birthdays.

And what did you say?

I did not start with the interview.

I said, it has been too long, how are things with the new job?

That is the sentence.

That is the sentence.

And she talked for twenty minutes before I said a word about myself.

And then?

And then I told her.

And she screamed.



Properly screamed.

So the question at the start of the episode was, who will celebrate with me?

And the real question, I think, is different.

Who am I available for?

Not who is there for me.

Who am I there for?

Here is something to carry with you this week.

Imagine a photograph of your life, twenty years from now.

Not the house.

Not the job.

The people standing next to you in the photo.

Who are they?

And what do you need to do this week, so that they are still there?

Here is your task.

One person.

Twenty-four hours.

Someone you have let go quiet.

Send one of the three sentences.

You do not need perfect English.

You need to press send.

Next time, we look at something strange.

Why you can be surrounded by people all day and still feel completely alone.

And what a famous experiment on a train discovered about it.

But each episode stands on its own, so start wherever you like.

The interactive transcript, translations, vocabulary and reconnection sentences are waiting for you at youenglishtoolbox.com.

You can listen and learn on the page, and download the study PDFs with your free student account.

Thank you for spending this time with us.

Go and press send.

See you in the next one.

