

The true price of happiness: three important lessons for a good life

By Sarah Berry

I've had the odd dodgy one. There was the time when I was stark naked on the massage table lathered in baby oil as the therapist picked up my torso and cradled me in her arms, rocking me while softly whispering 'let go'. Afterwards, she told me I didn't have to see her again. I didn't.

But, generally speaking, the price of happiness for me is a massage. Or free things, like a dip in the ocean, a good hug (not from the masseuse) or time with someone I love.

For others though the price is a fair bit higher.



In 1985, one American billionaire paid more than \$200,000 for a bottle of 1787 Chateau Lafite, what was thought to be one of the greatest wines in the world. Unfortunately, the bottle turned out to be a fake.

The story intrigued New York Magazine contributing editor Benjamin Wallace and he took it upon himself to try some of the world's most expensive products, to find out whether the finest things in life make for a happier life.

He tried Kobe beef ("real" Kobe from Hyogo Prefecture in Japan), white truffles ("One of the most expensive luxury foods ... in the world"), a \$30,000-a-night hotel suite that included its own Rolls Royce and wine cellar, a soap made with silver nanoparticles, Tuscan olive oil, \$78,000 gold-encrusted golf clubs, and a self-cleaning toilet that air-dries your nether-regions.

He also tried out an \$89,000 bed that Tom Cruise supposedly owns, the \$2 million Bugatti Veyron and a 1947 Cheval Blanc ("the most mythologised wine of the 20th century") among other things.

He was underwhelmed by the beef and truffles and the wine didn't really stand out amid any other great (lesser priced) wine. The soap smelt nice, but no one complimented him on the cleanliness of his face. The olive oil "tasted fine. It tasted interesting ... But in the blind taste test, it came in last."

Which bottle won in the blind tasting?

The bottle of Whole Foods 365 olive oil "which had been oxidising next to my stove for six months".

Wallace liked Cruise's bed, arguing that "you spend a third of your life in bed ... I don't think it's that bad of a deal" and he definitely liked the car. "When we pulled up to a stoplight the people in the adjacent cars kind of gave us respectful nods ... if I was a billionaire, I would get one."

There can be perpetual pleasure from 'things' we're into, albeit a different kind to experiential pleasure, as a new study shows.

But, as Wallace's experiment shows, money doesn't necessarily buy a finer, happier or better life.

Money may well buy happiness to an extent, but there is a threshold. Despite this a recent survey of Millennials found more than 80 per cent said their major life goal was to get rich. Another 50 per cent said that another major life goal was to become famous. This is what they believed would make them feel happy and fulfilled. Seriously.

Harvard professor Robert Waldinger is the director of a 75-year study following the lives of 724 men. It is the longest happiness study ever conducted. In a new TED talk, Waldinger revealed the three main findings of the study and they weren't being able to buy the world's most expensive wine, becoming famous or being cradled by your masseuse.

While there is room to enjoy other 'stuff', the three things that determined whether the men were happy in their old age were all to do with relationships.

1. The first lesson was that social connections make us, and that loneliness breaks us. "It turns out that people who are more socially connected to family, to friends, to community, are happier, they're physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected," Waldinger said. "And the experience of loneliness turns out to be toxic."
2. "The second big lesson that we learned is that it's not just the number of friends you have, and it's not whether or not you're in a committed relationship, but it's the quality of your close relationships that matters," he explains. "It turns out that living in the midst of conflict is really bad for our health. High-conflict marriages, for example, without much affection, turn out to be very bad for our health, perhaps worse than getting divorced. And living in the midst of good, warm relationships is protective."
3. "The third big lesson that we learned about relationships and our health is that good relationships don't just protect our bodies, they protect our brains," Waldinger says. "It turns out that being in a securely attached relationship to another person in your 80s is protective, that the people who are in relationships where they really feel they can count on the other person in times of need, those people's memories stay sharper longer."

"And the people in relationships where they feel they really can't count on the other one, those are the people who experience earlier memory decline. And those good relationships, they don't have to be smooth all the time. Some of our octogenarian couples could bicker with each other day in and

day out, but as long as they felt that they could really count on the other when the going got tough, those arguments didn't take a toll on their memories."

Waldinger's suggestion, if we want a good life and a happy life, is to start leaning into our relationships.

"Just like the Millennials in that recent survey, many of our men when they were starting out as young adults really believed that fame and wealth and high achievement were what they needed to go after to have a good life," he said.

"But over and over, over these 75 years, our study has shown that the people who fared the best were the people who leaned in to relationships, with family, with friends, with community.

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