30 Lessons for Living
Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans
by Karl Pillemer

Hindsight Is 20/20
Gain foresight from people looking back on life.

QUICK OVERVIEW
For his book 30 Lessons for Living, gerontologist Karl Pillemer interviewed, surveyed and sorted through responses of more than 1,000 people living in their “third age.” These men and women in their 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s share relevant life lessons on topics ranging from marriage and parenting to careers and living without regrets. Pillemer based the book on a single idea: “the accumulated wisdom of America’s elders—the experts—can serve as an excellent guide to life for people of all ages. The experts possess deep knowledge of just about every problem a human being can experience.”

Pillemer distills that knowledge into six main categories: enjoying marriage, finding a fulfilling career, parenting successfully, aging well, living without regret, and choosing happiness. The experts, as Pillemer calls them, bring firsthand experience, guidance and the benefit of hindsight to discussions about some of life’s most significant questions. Well worth the read, this book is one to share with your adult children and your friends.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
Why do you work? Is it for money, prestige or power? One of the points made by “the experts” cited in 30 Lessons for Living is that a career should be chosen for its intrinsic rewards—not the financial ones. “If I work principally for the pleasure or the fulfillment it gives me, my success is assured,” notes a 79-year-old woman. Certainly, money is important, but the message Pillemer heard time and again was that no financial reward could make up for time lost on a boring, tedious or unfulfilling job.

“Get into something that you love, that you have an aptitude for, and where you are totally happy,” advises an 83-year-old man.

If your current career doesn’t fit that description, consider scoping out options for a new line of work. Life is too short to spend it doing something you don’t enjoy.

SUCCESS Points
In this book you’ll learn:
• Why communication is essential for long-term marriage success
• How to get the most good out of even the worst jobs
• How to be a better parent
• Why “getting old” isn’t all that bad
• How to live without regrets
Older people have one unique source of knowledge that the rest of us do not: they have lived their lives. They have the enormous advantage of life experience. They are extraordinary people. America’s elders have lived through experiences many of us today can barely imagine. Their limits have been tested by illness, failure, oppression, loss, and danger—and they have been pushed to the limit more than we have. They have survived these experiences, absorbed them, and gained invaluable insights from them.

This book is predicated on one idea: that the accumulated wisdom of America’s elders—the experts—can serve as an excellent guide to life for people of all ages. The experts possess deep knowledge of just about every problem a human being can experience. There are things about life—secrets, if you will—that are probably impossible for younger people to know firsthand. We need to consult those who have already traveled the roads, byways, dead ends, and unexpected detours to understand which directions our lives should take.

**LESSON FOR A HAPPY MARRIAGE:**

*Don’t Keep Score*

Toward the end of my project, I could have almost lip-synced the responses to my question about what makes for a long and satisfying marriage: “Well, it’s a lot of give and take.” “Both partners have to be prepared to give and take.” “You can’t just give or just take, it has to be both.”

Alvin Baker, an eighty-seven-year-old who had been married for sixty-three years, explained the marriage relationship this way: “Don’t consider marriage a fifty-fifty affair! Consider it 100 percent or even 110 percent—that’s to allow for the lack of objectivity about our own 100 percent. It’s got to be mutual. The only way you can make a marriage work is to have both parties give 100 percent all the time.”

In short: You can’t be calculating 50 percent in, 50 percent back. The attitude has to be one of giving freely. And if you start keeping score, you are already in trouble.

For long-term success, couples have to orient themselves to giving more than they get. If both partners engage in the relationship with the goal of offering more to their partner than they receive, both benefit immensely. This is the advantage of true cooperation: both individuals are contributing to a relationship, the benefits of which transcend immediate interests on a given day. What couples must avoid—if they wish to remain together as long as the experts—is keeping score regarding who is getting more and who is getting less. This kind of economic attitude is one we would use, say, with a vending machine: if I put in my dollar, I will get a candy bar of equal value. According to the experts, this approach does not work in marriage.

We need to consult those who have already traveled the roads, byways, dead ends, and unexpected detours to understand which directions our lives should take.

I came to focus on the fifty-fifty fallacy because it resonated strongly with the experts. A number of them used vivid imagery to illustrate this idea, which was sometimes otherwise difficult to express. An image that predominated was that of a team, used to portray the notion of a marriage in which both partners have the other’s interest so much at heart that they “pull together” as one, lightening the load of life’s difficulties because of their unified effort.

Antoinette Watkins, eighty-one, offers a piece of advice that encapsulates the idea that marriage is not about keeping score.

*I talk with my kids about marriage, and here is one little jewel that I pass along to them. When you wake up in the morning, think, “What can I do to make her day or his day just a little happier?” The idea being that you need to turn toward each other, and if you focus on the other person even just for five minutes when you first wake up, it’s going to make a big difference in your relationship. You need to work out a way to support each other and work together as a team—then that’s likely to really work for many years. So start each day thinking about what you can give that special person in your life.*

**LESSON FOR A SUCCESSFUL AND FULFILLING CAREER:**

*Choose a Career for the Intrinsic Rewards, Not the Financial Ones*

After listening to a thousand of America’s elders give advice about fulfillment at
The experience of regret in later life is a painful one, so acting now to avoid it makes sense. When asked for what advice they would give to younger people, a number of experts suggested, “Stay out of trouble!” These lessons, with their emphasis on honesty, caution in major life decisions, and searching for a sense of purpose, help point us in the direction of staying out of trouble.

1. **Always be honest.** Avoid acts of dishonesty, both big and small. Most people suffer from serious regret later in life if they have been less than “fair and square.”

2. **Say yes to opportunities.** When offered a new opportunity or challenge, you are much less likely to regret saying yes and more likely to regret turning it down.

3. **Travel more.** Travel while you can, sacrificing other things if necessary to do so. Most people look back on their travel adventures (big and small) as highlights of their lives and regret not having traveled more.

4. **Choose a mate with extreme care.** The key is not to rush the decision, taking all the time needed to get to know the prospective partner and to determine your compatibility over the long term.

5. **Say it now.** People wind up saying the sad words “it might have been” by failing to express themselves before it’s too late. Don’t believe the “ghost whisperers”—the only time you can share your deepest feelings is while people are still alive.

Work, nothing makes me cringe more than when I hear a young person describe his or her primary goal in life as “making a lot of money.” As a professor, my students say with sad regularity, “Well, I’d really like to study philosophy, but I’m good at the business courses, so I guess I should stay with that,” or “I love to cook, but you can’t make money doing that, so I’m pre-med.” Many bright young people who would make wonderful teachers, social workers, or artists are seduced by the salaries and bonuses of the financial industry. By the time they finish college, they are on a career trajectory that takes on a life of its own. Once ensconced in a field—especially one that pays well—it can require heroic effort to take the dramatic step of shifting gears. And so the years go by.

The experts have a real problem with this scenario. The view from the end of the life span is straightforward: time well and enjoyably spent trumps money anytime. They concur that it’s vastly preferable to take home less in your paycheck and enjoy what you are doing rather than live for the weekends and your three weeks (if you get that much) vacation a year. If doing what you love requires living with less, for the experts that’s a no-brainer.

Esther Brookshire, seventy-seven, worked at a number of interesting jobs and spent the last twenty years of her career directing a large volunteer program. This position was enormously fulfilling because it was in line with her personal values. Esther had the kinds of skills that would have allowed her to succeed in professions where she would have made much more money. However, she offered this advice:

> My granddaughters say, "Oh, I've got to make this much money, and it's important for me to have money and everything." And I've said to them, "Just make sure that what you're doing to get that money makes you happy. Because the job can pay a million dollars a week, but if you're not happy, you're never going to enjoy it. And it's for life. Remember, you have to get up in the morning and do it every day." My recommendation would be to make sure that if you are searching for a purpose, it includes others. Then the self will take care of itself.

Looking at the data on this lesson, one of the most striking points is what the thousand-plus experts didn’t say. When asked about their prescription for happiness at work, what wasn’t mentioned spoke the loudest. And fancy statistics aren’t necessary because the results are so clear.

No one—not a single person out of a thousand—said that to be happy you should try to work as hard as you can to make money to buy the things you want.

No one—not a single person—said it’s important to be at least as wealthy as the people around you, and if you have more than they do it’s real success.

No one—not a single person—said you should choose your work based on your desired future earning power.

Now it may sound absurdly obvious when worded in this way. But this is in fact how many people operate on a day-to-day basis. The experts did not say these things; indeed almost no one said anything remotely like them. Instead they consistently urged finding a way to earn enough to live on without condemning yourself to a job you dislike.

You know those nightmares where you are shouting a warning but no sound comes out? Well, that’s the intensity with which the experts wanted to tell younger people that spending years in a job you
dislike is a recipe for regret and a tragic mistake. There was no issue about which the experts were more adamant and forceful. Over and over they prefaced their comments with, “If there’s one thing I want your readers to know it’s....” From the vantage point of looking back over long experience, wasting around two thousand hours of irretrievable lifetime each year is pure idiocy.

So take the experts’ advice and look back over the past few months. Did you wake up dreading going to work? They’re not saying that you have to leap out of bed raring to go, barely able to wait to get to your desk. For many people, work doesn’t have that magnetic excitement (although for some of the experts it did). However, if dread, depression, or foot-dragging reluctance characterizes how you feel as you leave for work, America’s elders say it’s time to look inside yourself and then outside around you. It may well be time for a change.

Lesson For Living a Life Without Regrets:
Always Be Honest

In connection with avoiding later-life remorse, one word was repeated again and again: “honesty.”

This virtue is deeply rooted in the elders’ worldview, so much so that it appeared to most of them to be self-explanatory. The experts were asked, “What are the major values or principles you live by?” Just about everyone included a response like “Always be honest” or “Honesty” or “Tell the truth and don’t cheat anybody.” For people age seventy and beyond, honesty is an indisputable core value, one that was bred in the bone when they were children. But it’s also the key to a practical lesson—one that many of them have learned the hard way—for avoiding regret.

A typical response came from Arnie Hoffman, eighty-three, who gave this advice:

Honesty is one value that will guide you through the rest of your life. I think honesty controls everything. If you’re honest with yourself, you’ll be honest with your wife and family. If you’re honest with all the people around you, no matter what happens, you can look at yourself in the mirror in the morning and say, “I haven’t done anything wrong.” In other words, you’ve made the right decision if you’re honest.

In their views on honesty, the experts didn’t leave much wriggle room. Yes, some suggested that a “little white lie” might occasionally be okay (for example, when dealing with no-win questions like “Do these pants make me look fat?”). However, with a consistency that surprised me, they advise us unconditionally to be honest, to have integrity, to be someone others can trust. If not, we will regret it. The prescription to be honest was usually unqualified. I didn’t hear, “Be honest when you have to,” or “Be honest up to a point.” Instead America’s elders saw this prescription as unconditional: be honest above all.

One discussion of honesty made a particular impression on me. It was at the end of a long day of interviews, and the late afternoon sun slanted through the windows of Eugene Earnhart’s room in an assisted-living facility. Eugene is a trim, handsome man with close-cropped gray hair. He looks a decade younger than his eighty years, despite his health problems. Eugene’s speech is halting due to the effects of a stroke, and it took him a while to tell me his most important life lesson. He did so with such emotion that he was forced to stop at times to collect himself before continuing. But in the end, he was relieved at the knowledge that others might profit from his experience.

Eugene served in the Korean War and later worked in manufacturing. His career involved frequent relocation and extensive business travel. The traveling was bound up with a life regret he cannot get over. He told me:

Listen this is important and it’s... it’s that people should respect fidelity. I’m the worst one in the world to appreciate that because I was not a faithful husband and I regret it. I think it was the fact that I roamed around the country in my work. And I really want to make this point about how fidelity is important to marriage. That’s what I’d do over if I could. Oh, definitely! I was an idiot.

And she was a wonderful wife. I could never make it up to her. Even to the end, I was unfaithful. Fidelity wasn’t there. It’s hard for me to say this and sometimes I get really depressed about it. But tell people, “Don’t ramble around the country, doing what I did.” Faithfulness is one of the most important things that people should cling to.
The same principle holds for honesty in the workplace. Larry Handley experienced betrayal in his job. A dishonest superior plotted to have him laid off because he wished to distribute Larry’s sales territory to other employees. Decades later, this experience is still painful. “You know, you experience things from somebody that you believed in and trusted, and you find out that they did something exactly the opposite of what they told you.” This betrayal made him all the more dedicated to honesty at work, and he found satisfaction—even, he says, joy—in treating others honestly.

**THE LAST LESSON**

Every human lifetime has a beginning and an end. But although the individual human life is lost, the legacy doesn’t have to be. We are fortunate that lives overlap in a way that ties even long-past historical periods to the present day. At one point I had a stunning realization.

---

**Happiness Is a Choice, Not a Condition**

When asked about her most important lesson for younger people, Gretchen Phelps didn't hesitate: “In my eighty-nine years, I've learned that happiness is a choice—not a condition.” It felt to me like a “eureka!” moment.

I pressed Gretchen to describe this idea for me. She explained that taking charge of one’s own happiness simply must happen at some point if one is going to live a fulfilling life. Not, she emphasized, trying to assume control over everything that happens to us—she laughed at that idea—but over our own conscious attitude toward happiness. “My single best piece of advice is to take responsibility for your own happiness throughout your life.”

Happiness in the experts’ view is not:

- A passive condition dependent on external events
- The result of our personalities—just being born a happy person

Instead, happiness requires a conscious shift in outlook and choosing daily:

- Optimism over pessimism
- Hope over disillusionment
- Openness to pleasure
- New experiences over boredom and listlessness

Happiness is created through intentional attitude change—the opposite of the sense of powerlessness inherent in waiting for life to deal out a better hand.
Action Steps

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. Do you take 100 percent responsibility for your relationships?
2. What can you do today to make your spouse’s life easier, better or happier?
3. Do you love your career?
4. What opportunities are being presented to you right now? Will you regret not saying yes to them?
5. To what degree do you value honesty in your life? Is there an area of dishonesty that is affecting your career, relationships or self-esteem?
6. Who do you need to thank? To whom do you owe an apology? Who needs to know you love them? Don’t wait until it’s too late to speak up!
7. What “experts” can you connect with and learn from? Don’t overlook the wisdom of the elders in your life.

About the Author

Gerontologist Karl Pillemer is the professor of human development at Cornell University and founder of the Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging. He has written five books and more than a hundred scientific publications. He speaks worldwide on the issues of successful aging, family relationships and elder care.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed this summary of 30 Lessons for Living, you can find the book in the SUCCESS Store at SUCCESS.com. You might also want to check out:

Things I Wish I’d Known Before We Got Married by Gary Chapman
Daring Greatly by Brené Brown
How Will You Measure Your Life by Clayton M. Christensen, James Allworth and Karen Dillon

© 2013 SUCCESS. All rights reserved. Materials may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form without prior written permission. Published by SUCCESS, 200 Swisher Rd., Lake Dallas, TX 75065, USA. SUCCESS.com. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Plume. 30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans by Karl Pillemer. © 2011 by Karl Pillemer.