

**65+**  
**THE BEST YEARS OF  
YOUR LIFE**

With lessons for people of every age

**Peter Bowden**  
University of Sydney

Series in Sociology



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[www.vernonpress.com](http://www.vernonpress.com)

*In the Americas:*  
Vernon Press  
1000 N West Street,  
Suite 1200, Wilmington,  
Delaware 19801  
United States

*In the rest of the world:*  
Vernon Press  
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,  
Malaga, 29006  
Spain

Series in Sociology

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018952656

ISBN: 978-1-62273-445-0

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# INTRODUCTION

This is a book about happiness, about what it is, about the responsibilities of individuals and governments to promote happiness. Some studies and media reports suggest that older people are unhappy, prone to depression. Peter Bowden, in this book, is confident that the years after 65 can be happy. He says that 'we are happiest, most fulfilled, if we are engaged in activities that are important to us, that demand, and receive, our commitment and time' (p74). The book shows that happiness after 65 is important to Bowden, and the book is testimony to his commitment and to the time he has devoted to it. Writing a book about happiness can be a fulfilling experience for one who is devoted to happiness.

This is not a "self-help" book. It is not *Finding Happiness after 65* but an 'exploration of happiness in old age' – a positive idea. It expects happiness, and explores it. The importance of happiness is traced through the ages, from the ancient Greece of Hippocrates and the early China of Confucius to the contemporary work of positive psychology, think tanks and business schools.

Variety, enthusiasm, passion – these are the features of a full life for Peter Bowden; they are important elements of happiness. The key message of this book is that happiness, a flourishing life, can be found after turning 65. You don't have to wait till 65, but there isn't some curtain or guillotine that comes down at 65 and cuts off any chance of further happiness. It is a book about life at full stretch. Ancient leaders, philosophers and teachers describe this in different ways. Peter Bowden makes an idiosyncratic selection, finding value in the flourishing life that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the complete person of the *junxi* in Confucius, and in the engagement of Seligman and the positive psychologists.

Bowden is a fan of books, and the positive impact of reading and writing shows. By drawing on many sources Bowden prompts the reader to look further, to dip anew into the writers who appear in the narrative. As I read the manuscript in preparation for writing this introduction a heap of books built up on my desk (and others on screen, for 'available online' is a frequent note in the text). Reading and reflection are active pursuits as this book persistently reminds us. Not only from the age of 65 onward. It is at

the heart of learning and happiness. Bowden draws from Confucius, quoting from the very first lines in the *Analects*, 'Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out...?'.<sup>1</sup> It is as if the words of Cicero were coming true once again, over 2000 years later: 'To myself, indeed, the composition of this book has been so delightful, that it has not only wiped away all the annoyances of old age, but has even made it luxurious and delightful'.<sup>2</sup>

The book is an advertisement for books, perhaps in the tenor of the *Advertisement* that appears in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the topic of chapter 4. That Bowden devotes a whole chapter in this present book to Burton's much reprinted seventeenth century work suggests that a search for similarities between them may not be in vain. So Burton's *Advertisement*, at the head of his volume, might speak to this current book as

so valuable a repository of amusement and information...firmly supported by its own merit, and safe from the influence and blight of any future caprices of fashion. To open its valuable mysteries to those who have not had the advantage of a classical education...translations of the countless quotations from ancient writers... in all instances modernised.<sup>3</sup>

This modern book is a culmination of Peter Bowden's interest in ethics, in bringing about change that will make the world a better place. That commitment to action is apparent in Bowden's other post-65 activities, at least the ones I know about (there is a sailor in there somewhere, but I have very little experience of sailing, whether in small or large boats). It is *applied* ethics that interests Peter Bowden; a purely theoretical ethics, academic and philosophical, is in his mind less able to change the world for the better. So it was that he led a move to change the Constitution of the Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics so that its aims were more explicitly focused on change and action. So it was that he edited and championed a book entitled *Applied Ethics* with the subtitle 'strengthening ethical practices', a book that is about actual practice.

Happiness is not only personal it is also organisational, a feature of the community.<sup>4</sup> Bowden takes this as the basis for his assertion that happiness is, or should be, a focus for government action. As always, there is support in the ancients, both East and West, and in contemporary sources. There is also data, collected for the occasion, for the book is also built on two surveys which provide information about what it is that concerns people over 65 in Australia and what it is that makes them happy. Curiosity, especially curiosity prompted by a desire for greater understanding, is

important not only for happiness but also for achievement, once again bringing Bowden's commitment to action and the achievement of good, making the world a better place, to the fore. The treatment in the book of meditation and reflection brings out one of its enduring messages, that it is within ourselves that happiness resides and that it is our own action that is important and we should be sceptical of those who say they have a cure, especially of those who promote a course. Bowden attended a number of meditation and well-being courses and reports his perceptions and experiences. Alongside those experiences he notes the importance of meditation in the Buddhist and Christian traditions, mentioning by name the great Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila, a woman at once practical in the reform of monasteries and thoughtful in seeking to understand the life of contemplation. Reflection, meditation and curiosity are all active, they are to a purpose.

When I first met Peter Bowden, I suspect he was already over 65. Both of us had begun our professional lives with a university degree in engineering, both had an interest in ethics supported by later study. We met at a conference of the Australian Association for Professional and Applied Ethics and later sat together on its executive committee. We are both engineers, who later took up formal pursuits in ethics, and thought it worth teaching to others.

Bowden suggests (p21) that the five ethical theories listed by Cicero as under discussion on Rome 45bc have grown into 20. If there is active discussion of 20 ethical theories in the world today, in the centres of government and at the heart of nations, that is to be applauded, but I doubt that there is that much debate. This book may prompt further discussion. Its author is certain, without doubt, and that will be a benefit for those confused by multitudinous and conflicting advice. There is something here to prompt a response, a call to engagement, a basis for meditation and reflection. Bowden makes it clear – chocolate, red wine, oysters and canned salmon are good for you... (p63). He sets out in the Afterword a solution to the quest for a single moral rule, a single ethical guideline, 'not to harm others. And if they are suffering harm, to help alleviate that harm in any way we see fit' (p97). His goal is to make the world a better place, and that is surely good.

Howard Harris

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Adelaide, July 2018



## FOREWORD

The original impetus for this book was a depression survey. If you have ever been given such a survey to complete, you will find the title very apt. Depression surveys are unbelievably depressing. A sample of the questions from different surveys is shown in Chapter 1. It is difficult to believe that the lives of some people are so sad that they would answer questions such as these in the affirmative. And, it would seem, older people are faced with more difficulties than they were in their earlier years – they have less money, their aches and pains are more frequent, they no longer contribute to society in the sense of a job that earns a living, and the grim reaper is not that far away. It appears that a bleak picture awaits an ageing population. A health clinic for oldies, run by a local hospital, which I had joined, sent me a depression survey. My reaction was one of sheer disbelief that anybody could feel so miserable. I believed totally the opposite. Hence this book.

That older people are more affected by depression is a widespread belief. The *Better Health* program of the Australian state government of Victoria has a program on depression in older people. Its website states that “it is thought that between 10 and 15 per cent of Australians over the age of 65 experience depression. Rates of depression among people living in residential aged care facilities are believed to be much higher than the general population – around 35 per cent.”

They also published their finding that “On average, one in six people (one in five women and one in eight men) will experience depression at some stage of their lives”.

The Black Dog Institute, a “not-for-profit organisation and world leader in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder” has a webpage devoted to identifying the signs of depression in older people. Symptoms include a loss of interest in life, lack of enjoyment in normal activities, apprehension, poor sleep, and persistent thoughts of death, chronic unexplained pain, poor concentration or impaired memory. One of its findings is that lifestyle changes in mid-life may avert the onset of depression.

This book, however, is not about depression. Or even curing it – although many of its findings may help prevent it. It is about happiness in old age. The research for the book started with the conviction that the years over 65 were in fact the happiest of your life; also that the assumption that older people were miserable was totally wrong. The book documents the explorations underlying the search for the reasons why the post 65 years can indeed be your best.

Three methods were used to find support for this assertion. The first method was direct interviews – asking people over 65 years of age whether they were more satisfied with their lives now than before they were 65. Sixty-five was seen as the break between work and retirement. The initial discussions were informal and quite extensive. Eventually they were structured in a survey sent to every person over 65 that I could locate. The objective of the survey was to obtain measurable results. It asked whether the respondent preferred life now to before he or she turned 65, and if the answer was a yes or no, then why. It questioned their preferences for life over 65 rather than ask about their happiness, or fulfilment or flourishing. It was thought that the answers to this question would be more considered, less subjective to the mood that respondents were in at the time they responded to the survey. A short summary of a fascinating series of answers is that a majority of people do agree that their years after they turn 65 are their best. They prefer their lives now than to earlier. The majority is not huge, but it is nevertheless, a majority. The reasons are many. The overriding one is that people over 65 are freer to do what they want to do, and that many have found activities that are totally satisfying and fulfilling.

The second method was to find out what the world had written on happiness over the last two thousand years. Our happiness has been an issue of great curiosity to the human race almost from the beginning of time. Starting with the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, along with Herodotus, a historian giving us the views of Solon, a Greek political leader, they provide us with a powerful introduction. The Romans followed them, particularly in the writings of Cicero, one of the more outstanding contributors to the thinking of the human race. Also included are the thoughts of the Asian philosophers, particularly Confucius, Mencius, and the Buddha.

The world's great intellects have since written on happiness over the centuries, ending with a brand-new discipline, positive psychology, which is less than 20 years old. Identifying the findings of the positive psychology movement became then the third method used to determine the contributions to our happiness. A fascinating finding is the extent to which this

new discipline, utilising the techniques of the modern-day sciences, found answers that reinforced the earlier thoughts of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, even Buddhism.

The surveys were usually organised through a formal body that catered for people over 65, such as a Probus (a worldwide association of clubs for retirees), the University of the Third Age or government support organisations for senior citizens. They were organised in the Eastern and Southern states of Australia. When organised through a group that could meet after completing the questionnaire (such as Probus or U3A), the findings were opened, analysed and reviewed with that group. This book then attempts to capture the essence of these findings and compare them with the thoughts and writing that had been developed over the centuries.

One of the early findings was that the word happiness is open to multiple interpretations. It can be that bubbly feeling when your enjoyment is at a very high level, to a contentment, even deep satisfaction with how your life is unfolding at this moment in time. In short, happiness has many paths, each of which set out in the later chapters. Nevertheless, there is an amazing congruence between the ancient philosophers and the modern psychologists. The findings of the surveys also support the ancient philosophers and the modern psychologists. But the agreement is not total. They are not one hundred percent in agreement with each other. There are some intriguing differences.

On a different note, it is to Greece that we owe the word melancholy - the word comes from the ancient Greek melas, "black", and kholé, "bile". It was considered as a distinct disease - a person whose constitution tended to have a preponderance of black bile had a melancholic disposition. Hippocrates, again a world's first, a physician, studied melancholy, issuing many pronouncements on its causes: "Grief and fear, when lingering, provoke melancholia," he tells us. Hippocrates conceived four fundamental personality types, sanguine (enthusiastic, active, and social), choleric (short-tempered, fast, or irritable), melancholic (analytical, wise, and quiet), and phlegmatic (relaxed and peaceful). Most personality formulations, including his, include a mixture of the personality types, where an individual shares two or more temperaments. This book is conceived as an antidote to one of Hippocrates' types: melancholic. It explores ways to achieve a happy, fulfilling life.

Aristotle wrote his book on happiness in 350 BC. He was not the first; his fellow countryman, Plato wrote *The Republic*, in 380 BC in which he spoke through Socrates, arguing that happiness is obtainable by human effort. Aristotle used the word eudaimonia to describe happiness, a word that has had philosophers and psychologists arguing for 2500 years. The argument

is whether eudaimonia is best translated as happiness or whether words such as flourishing or fulfilment or well-being are more appropriate. This argument raises the question, what is happiness – a question on which this book endeavours to find an answer.

That goal then creates two subsidiary objectives: Firstly, once you determine what is a eudaimistic or happy life, then how do you achieve it? The second objective is whether older people can achieve that eudaimistic life. Within these objectives the book attempts to answer the question, if we are unhappy can we apply some of Socrates' human effort, or other lessons, to correct the problem?

The findings of the research can be presented in summary at this stage. The survey found that most people over sixty-five believe that their life is better now than it was, but it is not by a massive majority (87 Yes to 68 No). The positive reasons given by the respondents to the survey do in part reflect the development over the centuries of human thought on this topic. But the respondents also have some special reasons for their answers. Happiness is unique to each individual. Some universal rules were identified, but each of us is different, with often very different lives. The findings that emerged were in the context of each person who reported those findings. But they can be and were aggregated. Each reader will need to sort his or her own way through the lessons of history, both ancient and modern, and determine for him or herself, how those lessons are best applied. Help will be provided in later paragraphs in how best to apply those lessons.

One of the findings that appears in two of the research sources, is that our governments have some responsibility for our happiness. Plato said it in 400 BC; Cicero echoed him in 40 BC. Some of the Asian philosophies also agree. A number of the influential psychologists of the twenty-first century echo them in turn. The over 65 respondents do not mention this concern, but it is an issue with which they should be concerned. It is not an easy task on which to come to a clear-cut resolution on how governments might fulfil this obligation. An attempt has been made in the penultimate chapter, by examining the priorities of several think tanks around the world, supplemented by some research documented in the Afterword.

The book is set out in the three parts outlined above – the writings over history, the modern positive psychologists and then the findings from the questionnaire, supplemented by an examination of what possible future role of our governments could play in this process. All categories are, in a sense, independent third-party findings. In the final section, the author attempts to interpret the findings. This interpretation attempts to be impassionate and balanced. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to feel the

need to write this book, and then to put in the months required for the survey discussions and to undertake the extensive reading over many centuries of human writing, without arriving at some conclusions on how we best ensure our happiness. This attempt at a balanced conclusion is set out in the final chapter.

The book incidentally, is of value to all ages, not only those who have reached 65 and beyond. Of the three sources of information, two – the writings over history and the modern-day psychologists, are relevant to people of all ages. The third, the findings from the questionnaire sent to those over 65, has several lessons of value to younger people. One lesson worth learning is to start early in preparing for a life after 65 that will be satisfying and fulfilling. Initiating habits and practices that were identified by the survey respondents, in midlife or even earlier, will be major contributors to a happy, healthy and long lasting old age.

#### **An addendum to the foreword**

A copy of the survey is reproduced in the chapter outlining the findings from the questionnaire. The respondents were Australian, located primarily in the eastern states, generally in the average middle-income brackets. Roughly equal numbers of men and women were surveyed. With 155 responses, we can draw some firm conclusions. But additional responses would give us a more reliable understanding of issues such as the differences in happiness attendant on place of birth or current residential location, on gender, even on income, or on age. Readers of this book who are over 65 are urged to go to the website *www.65plusthebestyearsofyourlife.net* and respond to the questionnaire. That website will be periodically updated with the research findings.



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See more of The Best Years of Your Life on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of The Best Years of Your Life on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. Page created 10 December 2009. The Best Years of Our Lives uses this concept via irony. The three Shell-Shocked Veteran spent their best years fighting World War II, and come back to their former lives. One of them finds out that his wife is cheating on him, and she is unrepentant: Marie: I've given you every chance to make something of yourself. I gave up my own job when you asked me. I gave up the best years of my life, and what have you done? You flopped! Pink: All I'm saying is that if I ever start referring to these as the best years of my life remind me to kill myself. The World's End starts with Gary King talking about a high school escapade which was the best night of his life, and ends with him revealing what viewers had long since realized: That it never got better than that night. Literature.