Sarah Alger: Welcome to Proto, a podcast that explores the frontiers of medicine. I'm Sarah Alger.

Dr. Robert Wald...: And I'm Dr. Robert Waldinger. If you're listening to this in the spring of 2020, your life has taken a sudden and wildly unexpected turn. You may be dealing with new worries about your health, an uncertain economy, and the stress of being stuck at home.

Sarah Alger: Is this any time to talk about living the good life? Today we'll ask that question. How to think about personal relationships, mental resilience, and yes, even making the very best of an unparalleled moment.

Dr. Robert Wald...: We'll look at some of the pressures on mental wellbeing in quarantine and how you and your loved ones can navigate them.

Sarah Alger: The secret to the good life under lockdown coming up on this episode of the Proto podcast brought to you by Massachusetts General Hospital. How are you coping with life inside? The COVID-19 pandemic has seen major changes at hospitals, supply chains, and other major institutions, but that stress and reinvention is happening at the household level, too. It is happening and how people are reinventing care for an older relative, changing their relationships to work, or trying to teach a young and restless child at home. Most of us are coping day by day and just getting by. But if this is the new normal, can we do more? Are there any principles that might help us lower the stress and build up our mental resilience again? For answers, we turned to Dr. Robert Waldinger, he's the director of the center for psychodynamic therapy and research at Massachusetts General Hospital.

For the past 15 years, he has also served as the director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, a research project that has followed the lives of 724 men and their descendants since 1938. This ambitious 82-year-old study has turned up a number of factors that seem to play into human health and happiness. Dr. Waldinger's TED talk about those findings entitled What Makes a Good Life has been viewed more than 32 million times. Dr. Waldinger, welcome.

Dr. Robert Wald...: Thanks, Sarah. It's great to be here.

Sarah Alger: So for the past few weeks, you've been hosting kitchen table chats, broadcasts from your kitchen recorded live every Tuesday. How did those come about?

Dr. Robert Wald...: They came about in many ways in the same way that your introduction framed this, which is that I realized that with all of our concerns about health, and social distancing, and masks, that one of the things we also want to pay attention to is how we're dealing with each other in this new normal, or sometimes I call it the new abnormal. And it seemed that having a series of chats about our relationships and about all the complexities of this new way of living together and living apart seemed like an important thing to add to the discussions we're all having about health.

Sarah Alger: One of the most noteworthy findings of the Harvard study has been the role that relationships have played in our lives. Can you tell us more about that?

Dr. Robert Wald...: We actually found that relationships and the quality of our relationships turn out to be one of the strongest predictors of staying healthy and living longer as we go through life. And these were findings that began to emerge in our study in the 1980s, and that initially, we didn't believe. I mean, we all knew that the mind and the body are connected, but really could warm relationships predict how long you were going to live? And it turned out that that was the case in our data and then we saw that other research groups were finding the same thing. So we found that in fact, how connected we are to other people and the warmth of those connections is really a strong factor in keeping us not just happy, but physically well.

Sarah Alger: So now under quarantine, those relationships are in two very different places it seems to me. On the one hand, some of our loved ones are right under foot in the same household all day long, and on the other hand, some of the most important people for us are very far away. How do you preserve both of those types of relationships? Let's start with the people we're cooped up with.

Dr. Robert Wald...: Such an important question. And I think we're surprised by the cooped-up part of it. That I, for example, thought, "Oh, my young adult son, he's moved back home from his Boston apartment and we're all together. What a wonderful thing." Should it be a wonderful thing? And in part it is, but in part we rub elbows, we're not used to living together 24/7. We get on each other's nerves. And I'm hearing that from my patients. I'm hearing that from my friends, from my colleagues. And so what I think we're dealing with is the difference between what we imagined this is supposed to be like, and what life is really like cooped up 24/7. And what life is really like is a mix of good, joy, closeness, and annoyance, and worry, and frustration. And so I think the first thing that we want to do is to accept that this really is normal.

That sometimes we say to ourselves, "Oh, I should be treasuring this time. It should be all joy and family togetherness." And of course, it's not, that's not realistic. And so probably the first thing to think about is how we can find new routines where we have time together, maybe at meals, but give each other a lot of space. Where we leave each other alone a lot, because we're not used to being together 24/7, even people who are in intimate partnerships, people who live together, we're not used to being together all the time. We go our separate ways during the day, we work. Sometimes we'd go out to work, sometimes we go to a home office, and we send our children out to school. We are just not used to this 24/7 togetherness.

And so the first thing is to remember, it's normal to find this strange, it's normal to find it frustrating at times, and then to cut each other a lot of slack because we're not used to this, and at the same time, the pandemic is causing us a lot of anxiety. So that combination of real anxiety out there in the world, because of this unknown viral enemy and the new normal of being together so much, all of that combines to make us more on edge with each other, maybe a little more irritable with each other, and the bottom line is that we need to give each other space, not react irritably when we can help it, and to take time out when we need it from each other.

Sarah Alger: So now what about all the people we're forced to be apart from, whether it be relatives, friends, or even colleagues?

Dr. Robert Wald...: Yeah. People who we're apart from, and we miss. I didn't even realize how much I missed some of my colleagues. They're the people I take for granted. And yet, "Oh, I miss seeing them. I miss some of the annoying things that happen in meetings. I miss all the things that I used to take for granted about my work life." And so I think what we can do is to keep in contact, to attend those Zoom meetings that are being set up, not just because we share information in those meetings and we get work done, but because it reminds us that we're together and that we are still connected. What I find to my surprise is that the Zoom meetings, the video chat platforms, actually helped me feel happier and more energized at times because I'm reminded of my connections with my colleagues.

Certainly staying in touch with relatives and friends is key. So, for example, I have an adult son who lives in New York. So he's in the heart of the pandemic and we're really worried about him, so we have video chats in the evening with him. I'm also worried about other relatives who are in other places in Boston, or friends, some friends who I haven't seen in a long time, friends from college, or even friends from elementary school. And we've started connecting on video platforms. What I would recommend is that if you think about connecting, if you think to yourself, "Oh, I wonder how so-and-so is doing?" Act on that thought. Reach out. If it occurs to you, reach out. People are almost always thrilled to be contacted. So don't worry about intruding, if anything, err on the side of reaching out too much and connect whenever you think about it.

Sarah Alger: So not every relationship is a good one. How can people deal with relationships that are unhealthy or even abusive right now?

Dr. Robert Wald...: That is a key question. So we know that when we are under stress, more generally, the stress gets often funneled into our close relationships. So relationships that were difficult before, that were abusive or even violent, that those relationships are likely to get more abusive and more violent. What that means is that people who are in danger need to find a way to get to safety. There are hotlines. In fact, there was a good piece in the Boston Globe this morning about that, about people in physically abusive relationships and how they can call hotlines. And there are shelters that will even send a taxi for people who are in danger. So those dangers are still there and they may get worse, and the point is that help is out there. Hotlines, help lines, be sure to use them. The other thing is to take advantage of connections with friends at this time. Reach out to friends, tell them if you feel in danger. Get help. One of the maxims we use in mental health, and I think it applies here, is never worry alone. If you're worried about yourself, or your children, or a loved one who might be in danger, find someone you trust, contact them, tell them the problem, and brainstorm together about how to find a solution so that everybody stays safe.

Sarah Alger: So for the many people who are sheltering by themselves, what are the risks for them, and if you are alone, someone listening, what can you do if you find yourself struggling?

Dr. Robert Wald...: So the people who are sheltering alone are at more risk, both in terms of mental health and in terms of physical health. One in four people in the United States lives alone, so this is a big deal right now for many, many people. If you are living alone, remember that you may find yourself getting more frightened or more depressed, more demoralized. So one thing that you can do is reach out to others, let them know that you are on your own, let them know that it would help to check in. Find people you can check in with daily if possible. The other thing is that if you know people who are living alone, reach out to them, ask them how they're doing. Check in with them. It's the people who are alone, who are most vulnerable emotionally. In addition, people who are alone don't necessarily have others who can take care of them, who can remind them to eat well, remind them to take their temperature if they're having some symptoms of illness.

So those people may need someone to go in and help, or they may need to get to a place where others can help take care of them. So remember that those are the people who are more at risk. If you yourself are alone and you find yourself struggling, there are many hotlines, there are many helplines where people can help you with mental health issues and can help you sort out health issues. One of the things that happens when we're alone and we're not feeling well, is it's hard to judge when to seek help. Again, if you are worried, get in touch with somebody, don't worry alone, let someone help you sort these things out.

Sarah Alger: So if through some kind of divine providence, we could quickly muster the funding and the organization and the staff. What kind of things would you want to research about human lives during this pandemic?

Dr. Robert Wald...: Well fortunately there are people already putting together good studies to understand what's happening in the pandemic. Most of those, I believe, are in the realm of our biology and there are some mental health studies, but what I would be interested in and hope we would be able to study is certain big questions like who are the people who are most vulnerable in the face of a threat? So who going into this crisis is having the hardest time? Are there underlying personality traits or underlying conditions that leave some people more vulnerable than others to a large societal crisis like this? Because if we know who the most vulnerable people are, then we have a chance to prevent some of the worst effects of this, some of the worst psychological effects on our most vulnerable citizens.

Similarly, studying whose most resilient in the face of this kind of threat because the qualities of resilience change depending on the threat, depending on who individuals are, and so studying resilience in the face of a pandemic is going to give us a lot of important information about who might be able to be our strongest leaders and our strongest frontline workers in times of crises in the future. The other thing that we could study is our styles of coping. There are many different styles of coping with stress. We all have to cope with stress every day, but this is an unusual stress. So are some styles of coping working better than others? One of the things we're finding, for example, is that the people who are addicted to the news, people who are addicted to consuming media, are actually under more stress by and large than the people who know when to put media away and when to focus on other things, the things right in front of them. But what we really want to study more systematically is different coping styles and how they empower us or not in this kind of big societal stressor. So those are just a few of the questions that occur to me that I would love to study.

Sarah Alger: Oh, terrific. Some researchers have wondered if maybe we have a greater sense of purpose and social integration during a crisis. Do you think that's true? And if so, will the pandemic somehow bring people closer together?

Dr. Robert Wald...: This is such an interesting question. I think that there are forces working in both directions. So yes, that what we see around us are these tremendous acts of kindness and social solidarity, people singing to each other from balconies, the kinds of gestures that really remind us of how united we are and how our divisions really aren't that important, some of the things that we think are so important and divide us. And so all of that may serve to bring us more together and make us focus on what's really important as opposed to some of the more superficial differences.

But along with those forces that may unite us, there are these forces dividing us because social distancing is increasing isolation as we've said, and it can increase tension in our relationships as we've just discussed. And it involves less access to mental health care. All of that may pose a danger to our coming together. So we have forces working in both directions, forces, I think, bringing us together, uniting us, and forces that threaten to divide us. And so the big question I think for our society is how do we enhance those factors that are bringing us together and how do we minimize and mitigate those factors that are keeping us apart?

Sarah Alger: We should mention that you are also a teacher of Zen Buddhism. Are there any lessons from that tradition that would be helpful for those of us sheltering at home?

Dr. Robert Wald...: Yes. Buddhism teaches us some very basic things. I find that I'm taking two big lessons from this. One is the truth of impermanence. The truth that everything changes all the time. So six months ago, none of us would have dreamed that this is what we would be doing in April of 2020, right? Things change, our conditions change, our feelings change, we change. The other lesson besides impermanence is our profound interconnectedness. Buddhism teaches that we are completely interconnected, that nothing is truly separate from anything else. And the virus shows us that. How our connectedness unfortunately, can allow for the spread of a virus that lives on this interconnectedness, but also how our interconnectedness allows us to take care of each other, to support each other. So impermanence and interconnectedness are the two big lessons that are universal truths. They're basic truths, but they emerged so clearly in the time of this pandemic.

Sarah Alger: So at the end, whenever the end might be, when we have a vaccine and the fear is over, what will you hope we will all have learned?

Dr. Robert Wald...: I hope we will have learned lessons about what's really important and what's not. That taking care of each other is more important than almost anything else about being human in the world. And that many of the divisions that have been sort of foisted upon us, that have been talked about and inflamed, that our capacity to be divided from each other is just one mental quality that we can choose to de-emphasize. And my hope is that we will have learned that we can choose to be more connected and more united and that it is a choice.

Sarah Alger: What does a good life under quarantine look like?

Dr. Robert Wald...: A good life under quarantine starts with being kind. There's a quote that I really like. It was a minister in the 19th century, I think he was in Scotland who said this, but I think it's so important right now. He said to his congregation, "Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." And if you think about it, that's what we're always doing. Each of us is struggling just to be human and get through life every day, but now more than ever, we're struggling. And so the emphasis on kindness moment to moment when the person you live with annoys you, when something you hear on the news annoys you or anger is you, that default, make kindness your default setting. That's what I think underlies the good life in a time of quarantine.

Sarah Alger: Dr. Waldinger, thank you so much.

Dr. Robert Wald...: Well, it's been a pleasure. I've really enjoyed this conversation. Thank you for having me.

Sarah Alger: And listeners, thank you for tuning into the Proto podcast.

Dr. Robert Wald...: Today's podcast was produced by Emily Silber, Bradley Klein, and Jason Anthony.

Sarah Alger: Thanks also to our technical directors, Adam Kelly and Chelsea Andes. Subscribe to the Proto podcast on iTunes and Stitcher, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Stay safe everyone, and see you next time.