

Pillemer, Karl. *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans*. New York: Hudson Street Press, 2011.

Karl Pillemer, Ph.D., is a gerontologist who teaches at Cornell University in human development. Dr. Pillemer is a driving force behind The Legacy Project, which seeks to learn and disseminate the wisdom of American elders.

1. **Who Are the Wisest Americans and What Can They Tell Us?** We all wish for guidance that will help us marry happily, bring up children well, find a great career, age well, avoid big errors, find fulfillment, and face death calmly. Older people live better, which makes them experts. What is their advice? To get the answer to his question “What life lessons have you learned?” gerontologist Pillemer gathered information from more than 1,000 adults over sixty-five years of age. The resulting answers fell into six categories, from which he culled five lessons each.
2. **Great Together: Lessons for a Happy Marriage.** Marry someone with whom you share core values, and who is very similar to you. Romance is enjoyable, but focus on friendship with your spouse. Be willing to give more than you get from your spouse. Don’t keep track; it will only create resentments. Talk through experiences and problems with your spouse. If talking proves difficult, change settings, take time to let your emotions settle, avoid hurtful teasing, and actively listen to your partner’s point of view. Commit to marriage itself, not just your partner. Do not let disputes linger. If talking a problem through must be delayed, be specific about when the conversation will resume.
3. **Glad to Get Up in the Morning: Lessons for a Successful and Fulfilling Career.** Freud believed that persistent happiness begins with loving others and a meaningful vocation. Elders believe that one should choose a job because one enjoys the work, not because of its financial parameters. We spend too much time working to be unhappy while doing so. If you have a job about which you have reservations, continue looking for another job while you do the one you have. Even bad jobs contain lessons. Learn those. Become excellent at your bad job. Learn from the bad examples of others. Gather knowledge to help you understand others in the future. All jobs are about working with others. Develop your interpersonal skills. Embrace people until they give you a firm reason not to. Stay humble. Laugh at yourself. Find a job that gives you flexibility and autonomy. You will be happier.
4. **Nobody’s Perfect: Lessons for a Lifetime of Parenting.** To build a great relationship with your children, spend more time with them. Make the sacrifices necessary to acquire that time. In your shared time, follow your children’s interests, even if they bore you. By spending time with your children, you will notice when problems are emerging. You will have favorites among your children; that is natural. But never show your preferences; such revelations will create behavior problems in children, and sibling rivalries between them. Do not discipline your children physically. Set boundaries, be assertive, teach morals. But don’t hit. Avoid relational ruptures with your children. If a rift happens, act swiftly to heal it. Expect, as a parent, to do most of the compromising. Except in cases of physical or emotional violence, the subject of a rift is never important enough to risk permanent demolition of your parent-child relationship. Take the long view with your children. You will spend forty years being their friends after the twenty you spend raising them. Avoid pursuing perfection in your children or yourselves as parents. It never happens. Be people together, loving and providing support and help. Be good enough parents. Allow your children to fail. Admit and work on your own failures. Emphasize learning from failures.
5. **Find the Magic: Lessons for Aging Fearlessly and Well.** Most Americans fear aging. Older persons tell us old age is better than it seems. Don’t worry about it. Many elders find serenity in smaller lives, and clarity about what is and is not important. They are able to leave responsibility for the future to younger persons, and achieve contentment. Old age is a new territory, one to be explored. Previous generations experienced shorter old ages. Ours is longer. Maintain your

body; you will need it for a century. Chronic disease, not aging, is the nemesis. Do nothing to your body that encourages chronic illness. Older people have less fear of death than younger ones. Most accept death, and some welcome it without fear. Most older people want to plan their deaths: their legal documents, dealing with their possessions, arranging for disposal of their body. Elders suffer the risk of growing socially isolated as loved family and friends die or move. Remaining connected promotes health; social isolation is a harbinger of death. Stay engaged. Build new relationships. Focus on learning new things with others. Set a schedule; put making relationships and staying involved on the calendar. Plan your late years. At some point, many older people learn that they can no longer live well on their own. Senior care opens doors for elders, keeps them connected, and increases their independence. It may lengthen life.

6. **I Can Look Everyone in the Eye: Lessons for Living a Life without Regrets.** Avoid doing foolish things you will regret. Such events can become intractable emotional obstacles. To avoid regrets: a) be honest with everyone always, b) welcome new opportunities, and say Yes as often as possible, c) travel more while you are young and well enough to enjoy it, d) choose mates with great care. When in doubt, wait. e) When you need to say something to someone, do it now. Do not wait. You may lose the opportunity. Finally, when you have regrets, forgive yourself and move on in life.
7. **Choose Happiness: Lessons for Living like an Expert.** After a thousand interviews, Pillemer concludes that elders share a worldview that underpins their wisdom. Components of that world view are: a) time matters. One's lifespan is limited. Optimizing it means using one's time well. And in the view from life's end, life is short. Each day is a gift; spend it wisely. Intimate connections with loved ones are what matter. All else is distraction. b) One chooses to be happy. Root out anger, fear, and anxiety. Elect happiness, in the face of difficulties. Circumstantial changes produce fleeting happiness only. Make a habit of focusing on the positive, even in the midst of loss and pain. c) Avoid worry. It wastes energy and time. Worry is the futile attempt to control uncontrollable contingencies. One evades worry by focusing on today, not the long term future. If a situation makes you anxious, prepare for it. Actively pursue accepting circumstances you fear. Worry happens when there is nothing concrete to worry about. It is sweating what might be (but isn't). d) Focus on life's small pleasures in the present moment. Savor small things. Life obstacles make one more able, not less able, to focus on small pleasures. Look for the delightful in the midst of the humdrum. Savor joys. Do not let future-orientation cause you to miss this moment right now. e) A transcendental faith of some sort helps make one's life happier. Most elders believe one should practice his or her faith in the company of others. Many value the life of community more than individual spiritual experience. Toleration for the faith of others is part of faith. One's faith should be deep, but accepting. Many wise elders summed their rules for life in the Golden Rule. In essence, the Golden Rule calls on us to empathize with others, and exercise compassion for them. Happiness lies in knowing and caring about others.
8. **The Last Lesson.** Pillemer ruminates on the pleasures of the interviews that underlie the project of this book. He enjoyed the stories, the unexpected divergences, the accents, the diversity, and the people themselves. The elders expressed enthusiasm about being interviewed, but doubt about whether anyone is listening. Life has become age-stratified. Pillemer encourages readers to ask the wisdom of elders and listen. Wisdom passes from one generation to the next through such listening and learning.

Ten Questions to Ask the Experts in Your Life. Ask your elders their important life lessons and guidance regarding: getting and staying married, raising children, careers, facing difficulties, embracing life changes, life-long learning, core values and principles, health, aging, and dying.

Appendix: How the Study Was Done. The book project had several parts: 1) pilot interviews, 2) national random-sample survey, and 3) interviews at length in person with peer-nominated elders. 1,200 elders were questioned. The resulting book is not social science, but the results of a personal quest to hear and record the wisdom of elders.