

I recently gave a talk to seniors about maintaining intimate relationships as we age. I began by asking them if they would be satisfied if at the end of the lecture they would know how to be happy in a close relationship. They all raised their hands. Then I asked if they would be satisfied if at the end of the lecture they would know how to be happy whether they were in a close relationship or not. Of course they all raise their hands again.

So what were these seniors looking for? Pretty much the same thing all other humans look for; happiness, security, perhaps the opportunity to love and be loved, and to live a life that feels meaningful.

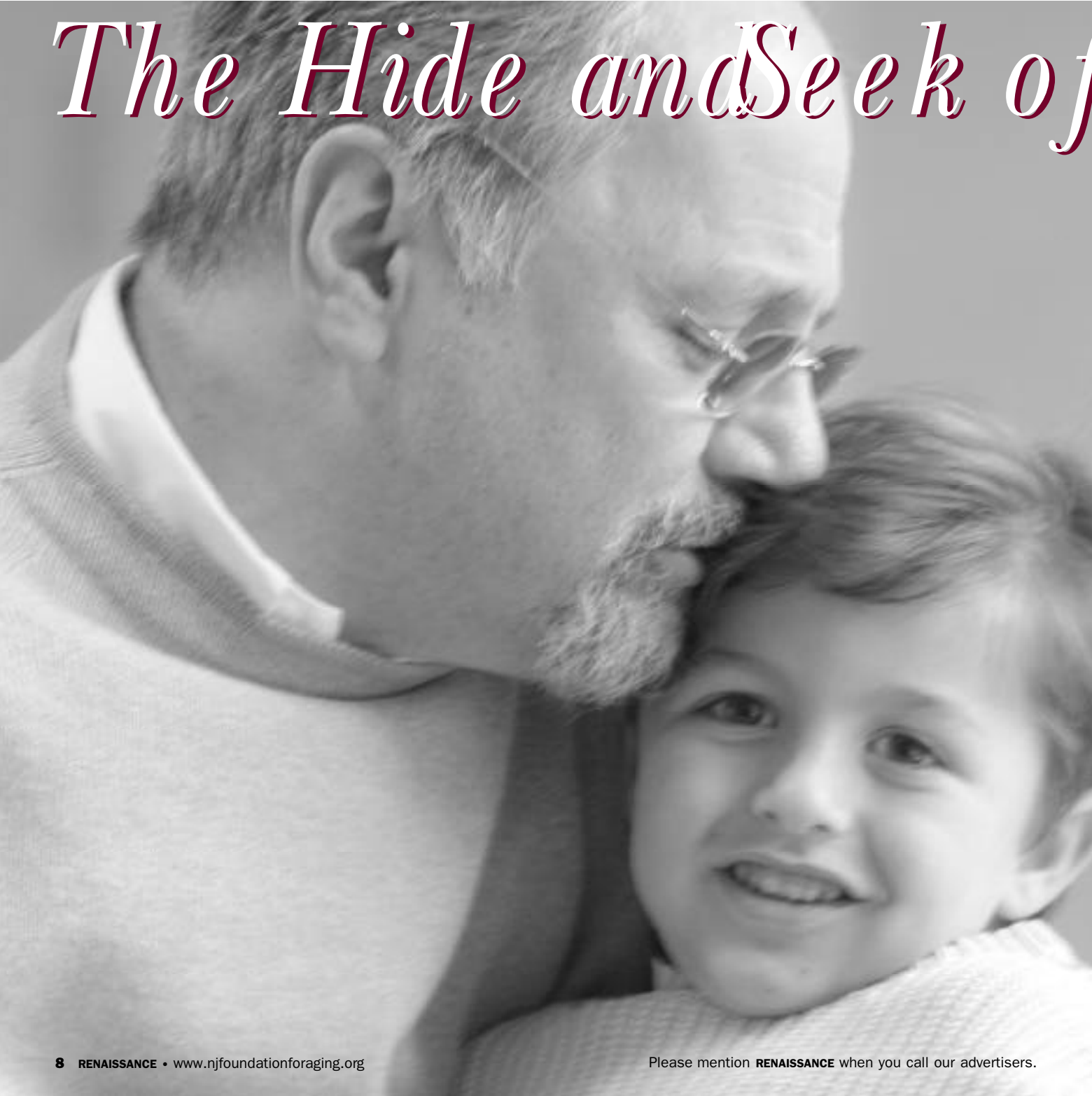
People who came to the lecture assumed that one needed to be in an intimate relationship to be happy. Not true. My mother used to tell me that as long as I had my health, I had my happiness. And we know from the millions of people who are happy despite disability or chronic illness that maxim is not true either.

What is this business called happiness? Every generation looks for it from birth until death.

For young people, happiness might mean being popular or attractive. As we age, happiness might mean companionship or having meaning in your life.

Dan Gilbert, in his best-selling book, *Stumbling on*

The Hide and Seek of



Happiness, suggests that all of our decisions are about making our future selves happy. Think about it. We get married because we think it will make us happier. We get divorced for the same reason. When we're lonely some of us call a friend, and some of us go to bed. But the goal is the same. Some of us eat great volumes of food because we think it will make us happy (or at least less depressed). Meanwhile, some people deprive themselves of food for the same reason.

And when we think back, many of our choices about making our selves happy have been wrong. We work hard to get that new house and how happy are we a year later?

Happiness

By Dan Gottlieb, Ph.D

Or the young person who works as hard as they can to get into the best college they can only to find themselves miserable. Then they find happiness in a less prestigious school.

According to Gilbert, the opposite is true also. What we think will make us miserable, often makes us happy. How many people have reported their lives changed for the better after a trauma?

So here are some of the things we do know about happiness. The pursuit of happiness will make us self-absorbed, isolated and miserable. Happiness is an emotion, rarely a permanent one, and it is a byproduct of a life well lived. Because we are social animals, the more people we are connected with, in any capacity, the more likely we are to feel secure and good about our lives. Some people think happiness is more elusive as we age. Not true. Studies of centenarians have shown that for these people, happiness correlates with generosity of spirit. They always seem to have time and genuinely care about other people. Many seniors have told me they are not afraid of death; they are afraid of becoming ill or disabled. They fear disability because they assume if they lose independence, their lives will no longer have meaning. Another great falsehood!

Developmental psychologists tell us that this stage of life is called "consolidation", a time when we look back and integrate what we've learned. Both the old and new testament referred to an "ethical will" in which we are ethically and morally responsible to teach our children and grandchildren what we've learned and how we've learned it.

Nobody wants to read about what we think someone else should do, but our progeny does want to hear the stories of our lives and those of our parents and grandparents. They want to know about our successes and failures and how we have become who we are. They want to know how we feel about life – and death. My new book, *Letters to Sam*, is considered by many to be an ethical will.

Writing this document provides two things, it will contribute to the meaning of your life as you reflect and share. But more important, this document is an act of love to your family. And that is the most important thing we know about happiness. The more people you love, and the more generously you love them, the happier you will be.

Want to be happy?

Love everybody you love, only do it a little better every day.

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