

# Eckart von Hirschhausen / Tobias Esch

## THE BETTER HALF

### What to Look Forward to in the Middle of Life



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Backlist:



When we reach the halfway point in our lives, many of us sometimes start feeling tired and listless. Stress seems to be needling us from all sides, with our jobs, our kids and even our parents all taking their toll. Meanwhile, the first irrevocable signs of ageing start to mar our bodies. But is it all just downhill from 40? Emphatically not, say Eckart von Hirschhausen and Tobias Esch, two doctors who are convinced that the opposite is true! Most people feel better about themselves in the second half of their lives, they argue.

This book records an inspiring dialogue between two physicians that documents their search for the kind of happiness that grows with experience, maturity and wisdom. Along the way they talk about new role models and discuss the latest scientific thinking while linking back to their own (ample) life experience. The result is nothing less than a little miracle: readers of this book will start looking forward to getting older!

- In the top 3 of the SPIEGEL bestseller list for 8 consecutive weeks (and counting)!
- Almost **150,000 copies** sold!
- *Miracles Work Wonders* spent over 90 weeks on the SPIEGEL bestseller list and more than 560,000 copies were sold!
- Rights to Eckart von Hirschhausen's other titles were sold to 14 countries

**Dr. med. Eckart von Hirschhausen**, born in 1967, studied medicine and journalism. For fifteen years, he's been a fixture on German stages as a cabaret artist, speaker and author. He is known for his incisive wit coupled with thorough advice. Under the banner "Humour can heal" he founded the German Red Nose Day and helps arrange hospital visits by clowns. His bestselling titles *The Liver Grows with Its Tasks*, *Happiness Rarely Comes Alone* and *Miracles Work Wonders* sold more than 5 million copies, making him one of the most successful authors in Germany.

**Prof. Dr. med. Tobias Esch** was born in 1969. He was a pioneer figure in holistic medicine and an expert in the neurobiology of happiness. During his career he made vital contributions to integrative approaches to preventive health care and is a guest professor at Harvard Medical School as well as an associate researcher in neuroscience at the State University of New York. Since 2016, he worked as a lecturer and researcher at the University of Witten/Herdecke. His most recent book was *The Self-Healing Code*.

**Eckart von Hirschhausen & Tobias Esch**  
**The Better Half**  
**English sample translation by Jamie Lee Searle**

**Chapter One**

- Where ageing gets its bad reputation -
  
- Why it's worth freeing ourselves from self-hypnosis -
  
- And: Why surrounding ourselves with old things makes us younger -

**Walking Sticks and Baseball Caps**

*"Will I still be young when I'm older?"*

Konstantin Wecker

Tobias, I have glasses now, and they're taking some getting used to.

*Well, at least you're wearing them.*

I have to, otherwise I won't be able to read the small print in your studies. I always thought I had the eyes of an eagle, then the guy in the opticians starts telling me about these "tension-alleviating glasses". It was actually kind of funny, how he was trying his darndest to avoid the term "varifocals". He probably thought that getting varifocals sounds synonymous with surrendering to old age. He was a good salesman; he could probably have sold a refrigerator to an Eskimo – even before global warming. But my question to you, my old four-eyed friend, is this: Are these glasses my shot across the bow, do they mean it's downhill from hereon in?

*First of all: Welcome to the club! I actually had the exact opposite experience with my optician. A year and a half ago, I wanted some new glasses, and he said to me: "You really need varifocal lenses". In my opinion I was doing fine without them, so I said: "I only need glasses from time to time in my everyday life, like when I'm driving, and I can still read well without them." But he insisted: "You need varifocals, and I'll prove it to you." Then he*

*measured my vision and, to emphasize his point, added: "You definitely need them, and anyway, Mr Esch, the human lens isn't designed to last past 40!"*

*Essentially, what he was suggesting is that from 40 onwards you're in free fall, that from then on the best you can do is maintain the status quo and delay the inevitable with spare parts and accessories. It's a really peculiar view of getting older. What about maturing, growing, and living life to the full? There was no word of that, only the message: After your 40th year, you've reached the end biologically – you've passed your expiry date.*

Then all you have to look forward to are... infirmity, stair lifts, and waterproof mattresses. So what did you say to the salesman?

*I gave him the friendly advice that he should work on his word choice, because his communication style was far from motivational. I told him about my time at Harvard University in the USA, where my bosses and colleagues were still working at 75 and 80 years of age, and still as sharp as a tack, fully alert and cheerful. If I had told them that they'd passed their peak at 40, and that the best they could hope for now was to manage their deficiencies, they would have given me the finger.*

*What does it do to a person, and also to society itself, if we have it hammered into us that from 40 onwards all we're fit for is retirement, that we have to start preparing everything for our demise? No credit, no big projects, because it's no longer worth starting something new, and perhaps we might not live to see it to its conclusion. With that kind of outlook, I might as well leave the opticians on a walking stick.*

The image your optician has of life is actually very prevalent. It throws the period briefly before death and the long life phase preceding that into one pot. The final stage, of course, always involves physical decline and the loss of faculties, and this image overshadows all the good years. But in actual fact, we are now able to live much longer and healthier lives than every generation before us. We are staying young for longer than ever, and this trend is unbroken. Mental capacity amongst people in their nineties today is higher than it was amongst those in their nineties 20 years ago. And of course the current ninety-somethings are much fitter than the ninety-somethings we knew in our childhood. But our perceptions of what constitutes an old person are, quite simply, formed at a very early age. It's a misapprehension. Today, ageing is really a very different matter. As is "retirement age". The average 65-year-old's state of health today roughly corresponds to that of a 55-year-old 20 years ago! When you look at it in this way, the retirement age hasn't sunk to 63, but to a biological 55 years! That's great news! But in Germany, we have these gloomy discussions about "demographic change", about the "Methuselah Conspiracy", about the "ageing population". But the fact that we're getting older isn't terrible in itself. What would be the alternative? Dying younger? I mean, no one wants that.

Why do so few people speak openly not only about how to breathe more years into life, but also more life into the years? What kind of qualities can we build across the arc of our lives? This part of the story is absent from our collective consciousness. I'm a great fan of Paul Watzlawick, whose book "The Pursuit of Unhappiness" I consider to be one of the funniest self-help titles ever written. He explained, in a way that no one else can, how we are constantly creating the reality that we are actually afraid of. For example, if you spread the news across town that gas is becoming scarce, everyone heads off to fill up their tanks – and then there really will be a gas shortage. Your glasses story also sounds to me very like this kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Is there a kind of self-hypnosis into infirmity?

*Yes, there does seem to be. A colleague of mine, the psychologist Ellen Langer in Boston, researched how people behave differently according to their surroundings. She called it the "Counterclockwise Study". Using furniture, wallpaper and music, she transported men of around 80 years of age back to the era of their youth – into an atmosphere of the late 1950s to early 1960s. And many of the older people genuinely did thrive, becoming more active and agile. Even their immune systems, hearing and memory improved. The men began to walk with a more upright posture, and independent observers estimated them to be much younger than their years. But above all, this new zest for life had an impact on their mood: the men were simply more cheerful.*

And how long does this effect last?

*There haven't yet been long-term tests. But that's not actually a critical factor for our topic: rather, what the experiment shows is that we can use external factors to prompt the brain to influence the ageing process. Of course the goal is not to dwell solely in the past and trick ourselves that we're re-living our youths. But the thrilling thing is that it's theoretically possible.*

So do I now have to spend the rest of my life playing German New Wave music? I doubt it would be good for my long-term wellbeing, to listen to that "Da Da Da" song on repeat. But it's true: when I think back to the music, the parties and dance styles of my youth, the memories all come rushing back. – Tell me, does it work in the other direction too? There must be some people who are made to feel older than they are – perhaps when they have varifocals foisted upon them?

*It's enough to be put in an environment with no stimuli, somewhere boring and bleak, like so many hospitals and care institutions. That would automatically push you to the edge.*

... or at the very least, onto a walking stick. And then you start thinking things like: Oh, it's not worth buying a long-play record. Or signing a new cell phone contract.

*Exactly, that was my point in the conversation with the varifocals salesman: How you see yourself and the second half of life has on impact on you. If you have a negative outlook, where will you find the energy to take on a new project, to build yourself a little house somewhere, to go on a round-the-world trip, or learn Italian?*

I'm planning something too: I'd like to read all the books about modern-day gerontology which I've ordered in preparation for our project, and which are towering up on my desk. There's been a huge amount of research in this field in recent years. But first let's finish writing our book...

*There's a good chance you'll get around to reading them. We're all living much longer nowadays, at least statistically speaking: The current figures on life expectancy in Germany were recently published, and they've risen once again. For newborn boys, life expectancy is now 78 years and 4 months, and for newborn girls, 83 years and 2 months. A woman who is 50 years old today will, on average, live beyond 80 years of age! So there's a great deal to come after 40! And that also applies to the things we can accomplish. For many of us, the years that lie before us are, thank God, valuable and important ones. That doesn't apply to everyone, of course. But getting older can clearly also be a wonderful thing, something to be looked forward to and which can include many positive aspects – amidst any suffering and in spite of all the limitations. At least that's what the data from our studies and the many interviews we've been conducting tells us.*

And presumably these aren't the older people who are complaining behind their curtains, or out on the street brandishing their walking sticks in the air and cursing the younger generations?

*No, age can also mean abundance, knowledge, wisdom, experience, dignity and beauty! And it's objectively healthy to emphasize and live these positive sides. Right down to the genetic level. A recent study analyzed people who, genetically speaking, had a significantly higher risk of developing Alzheimer's. But whether it came to the onset of the illness or not was decided predominantly by fears and expectations, not genes. This means that even though our "factory settings" bring genuine risks, we can still influence significant parts of it ourselves. And this begins with our cultural ideas about ageing: are they more positive or negative?*

So what kind of culture would have a positive influence on our mental functions?

*Becca Levy, the author of the study, highlights the feeling of being needed, as well as the respect and kindness shown to older people. If you encounter people who handle stress and*

*strain successfully, you can benefit from that yourself. They demonstrate that ageing can be a challenge, but not necessarily a burden. If the fear of ageing takes hold, however, the ageing process itself accelerates.*

That's another big topic: Respect your elders. It's a well worn phrase, but one that's backed up by hard facts.

*Yes, being respected reduces stress too, along with all its negative repercussions. People who are chronically stressed die younger.*

Respect also strengthens the sense of connection between the generations. Let me tell you about an encounter I recently had while filming in a prison: So this guy in his mid twenties is doing time for drug-related offences, and he likes to do intensive weight training. I interview him, and we even train a little together, which amuses him no end. Because his parole is coming up, I ask whether I need to be afraid should I meet him in a dark alley. He laughs and says: "Nah, I don't hit old people."

That was a slap in the face. But perhaps it was also his way of showing me respect. That's what I choose to believe, anyway.

*Then I won't take that illusion away from you. But what I experienced when I bought my glasses was how, through lack of respect, a person can be reduced to their deficiencies. In moments like those, all the knowledge older people have to offer isn't even seen, let alone respected. Deficiency comes to the fore, and the chance for connection and mutual learning is wasted.*

And less glasses get sold... Another reason for the bad image which ageing has in this country could be that older people remind the younger ones of their own mortality – and that certainly doesn't make them popular. Societies with a larger number of old people often have a more negative view of ageing. The age researcher Anna Cornett says: If age is not equated with fragility, but instead given positive connotations, a person prepares better for ageing, even financially. This, in turn, eases the burden on the younger members of society. After all, who would be enthusiastic about saving money when their own demise is looming right in front of them?

*And that doesn't mean that the old have to be like the young...*

You know what I find really tragic? When people think they have to wear youthful fashion in order to conceal how old they are. Because they don't look younger in them, on the contrary: it only highlights that a baseball cap doesn't go with a wrinkled face, or a hoodie with a

hunched posture – although, to be honest, I like wearing them and think to myself: there, you almost look like you could still be a student.

*Well, in the sense of lifelong learning, you are.*

But do I have to start spending my nights out partying again, or drinking bad wine?

*I think our concept of happiness changes over the course of our lives. That includes learning to let go, to not fight over every single thing, to no longer hold on to everything so tightly – neither youth itself nor baseball caps. Our brain's ability to morph and save new information and react flexibly may reduce, statistically speaking, over our lifetime, but it's not so much fateful as it is a long-held assumption. You no longer have to go out to a club or drink cheap alcohol to feel young. Even just the memory of how things used to be makes you younger – for example, when you think back to your first kiss, your first party or the first time you got drunk...*

The Danish philosopher, the one whose name starts with 'Kierke', and I never know how the second half of it is written or pronounced, but you know the one I mean, he said: "Life can only be lived forwards, and only understood backwards." Remembering and experiencing are not the same thing. Memory is a prerequisite for learning. Come on, give me a little spark of hope – tell me something I'll understand better when I'm older.

*Older people have more foresight, and are better at seeing the overview of a situation! If, for example, you show them a sequence of letters, like in Scrabble, they'll discover a hidden word much more quickly than younger people. With experience, we develop something akin to intuition, and the ability to recognize patterns. The older person may not always be able to explain exactly how they came to a solution, or deduce it rationally, but they are often quicker and, what's more, right. In terms of the biology of the brain, this is because even though the factual memory slows with age and can lose precision, the stock of wisdom and competence – some call this crystallized intelligence – can preserve itself and even grow. We are more able to identify rules, find the needle in the haystack or see the wood in spite of the many trees.*

So is it also easier to recognize the patterns in our own lives? Behavioral patterns?

*Yes, these too. For a long time, developmental psychology ended with adolescence, because it was assumed that our personal development was finalized by then. We now know that significant steps follow with every additional decade – ones which are perhaps less obvious than the external changes of puberty.*

Well, I certainly don't fancy getting spots again! Until relatively recently, psychoanalysis stressed that we spend a lifetime processing the way in which our first years of life played out. That these years unavoidably shape everything that follows is, however, now largely refuted. And thank God for that. To put it crudely: It's never too late to have a happy childhood. Of course the first years of life are important. But the way you feel and act today is much more dependent on what you've thought and done in the last five years of your life than it is on your first five.

*That's true, development goes on and on. And in contrast to the volatility and restlessness of youth, other values take center stage: contentment, inner peace and calm.*

To be honest I'm still waiting for those! But I am starting to feel that I no longer have to join in with every trend and every fashion. I'm also noticing, however, that those little aches and pains no longer go away as easily as they used to. During my live performances, I love making the audience ponder the question: Imagine your body were a used car – would you buy it? Most people think first about external flaws, scratches to the paintwork, signs of use. And some men considering themselves to be particularly smart, immediately think: Which of my flaws would I prefer not to mention to a potential buyer? And yet our body isn't for sale on eBay, we only have the one.

At the moment, I feel as though my market value is dropping, but that I have to keep chugging along for a while longer, in order to become interesting as a vintage model and accrue new value.

*If you don't reduce yourself to youthful concepts of growth, expansion and corporality, you'll find it easier. Beauty and experience can be found even in the little flaws and wrinkles. Something different matures into being which is valuable in its own right – and which is worth being experienced. A culture which demonstrates this, instead of keeping its old people tucked away out of sight, would help all of us to value this phase of life when confronted with it, and to want to experience it for ourselves.*

Then let's unite our perspectives, our knowledge banks and knowledge gaps, because together we have 99 years of life experience! We'll turn what Udo Jürgens said upside down, for he sang: "Life begins at 66."

*Udo Jürgens was sure to have experienced both the sides we just discussed. He was probably someone who enjoyed and loved life, yet perhaps so much that he didn't want to let it go. "Life begins at 66" – that of course contains a desire for awakening and new beginnings, but perhaps also a sense of clinging onto youth. Udo Jürgens' lyrics were also very melancholic: that in the end what counts is the connection between human beings, the small*

*encounters, the goodbyes – all of this, after all, is especially relevant for the later phases of life.*

In one of his final songs, he describes how he doesn't long for New York or San Francisco anymore, but for a home. And he notices after a gig how alone he is and that he wants to take a step back, put his feet up at last. So, old man – onwards and upwards, let's make sure we get this book done before we're past it.

*Who are you calling old man? You're the older one here! By two years!*

Okay, old boy.

### Chapter Three

- How we often only find something when we look for it. -
- Why we can get sicker and happier at the same time. -
- And why the difference between theory and practice is roughly as great as the difference between shopping lists and sales slips. -

#### From the U-curve to the ABC of joie de vivre.

*"The future was better in the old days too."*

Karl Valentin

My dear Tobias, fellow prisoner in the valley of tears, we middle-aged people have our happy moments too! Don't make us out to be older and drearier than we are. Hopefully I don't have to wait for retirement and the wisdom of old age to be in my element and experience flow, do I?

*Then I'll call us the "content oldies to-be". There are moments of happiness and contentment at every age. You yourself just mentioned "flow": the phenomenon when our consciousness, all of our attention, is entirely connected with the present moment. The ego dissipates, external or internal cease to exist, for there is no longer any conflict between them. It's an exhilarating sensation. We find ourselves on a cloud of consciousness in the Now, completely present and authentic within our experience, in tune with what's happening in that moment; everything seems to occur of its own accord.*

I experience that kind of engagement with the present moment when I go on stage: I'm in my element there. Different forms of happiness come together in close succession: Beforehand, even though it's sometimes stressful, I look forward to arriving punctually and being on form. Once the show kicks off, and the people give me feedback by laughing, by listening, then for me it's like a kind of magic. I know few things more wonderful. And afterwards there's this deep contentment and pleasurable exhaustion.

*What you're doing is enjoying the youthful sensation of captivating your audience, and the rush you get when everything goes well and you can surf the wave. I've known you for a long time, remember, and I see how your performance energy has changed over the years. Nowadays, you don't tend to seek the quick laughs as often, and you dare to address less pleasant topics: like the shortage of medical staff, climate change, or the political swing to the right.*

That's true! I'm more content nowadays when I feel I've used the attention for important subjects, and when the audience laugh regardless. And I also enjoy fooling around in the midst of it all, with music or improvisation. Nowadays, the best moments for me are no longer the loud ones, but the quiet ones. When I notice that 2000 people have suddenly fallen silent, and are allowing themselves to be moved by something, then in that moment I feel something like flow and inner peace.

*Comedy, after all, lives in the rhythm between tension and release.*

Kant expressed it very aptly: Laughter is the affect that arises when tense expectation is suddenly transformed into nothing.

*That almost sounds Zen Buddhist! Everything and nothing and you in the midst of it all. In this context, I always like using the image of yin and yang, the famous circular symbol with a white side and a black side, an organically curved line between the two and a dot of black in the white, and vice versa. There's the happiness of youth, and there's the quieter contentment in life's later phases. Of course, we need the belief that one of them is already incorporated within the other. That fundamentally, at any time within the upheaval, the growth, the process of becoming and conquering the world, there can also be moments of inner peace. It's kind of magical when different aspects of happiness come together in one place, when all our "happiness needs" are satisfied almost simultaneously – from anticipation to tension to fulfillment. That is the "happiness of abundance", and you don't have to be 65 to experience it.*

Do you remember that we once experienced one of those moments together? We were at a Nils Landgren concert in the Bavarian Alps, in front of a wonderful panorama. There was this moment in which everything just felt right, and I experienced a sense of deep contentment and gratitude. A magical flow. That's the kind of feeling you just can't buy. So how important are physical satisfaction and sensuality for contentment?

*The compositions of happiness are wonderfully attuned to one another in a neurobiological sense. Being in love, sexual activity, lust: it's all biology, and immensely important. The more*

*anticipation there is, the more thrill and adventure, then the more contentment follows afterwards: flow during sex is paired with the blissful sensation that follows it.*

And how can that be explained?

*The neurotransmitters which generate anticipation are converted at a molecular level into ones which create feelings of bliss. Each one is connected to the other. The more sex there is, the more contentment results.*

One always assumes that sexual activity goes downhill after youth. Is that not actually the case?

*If we believe the studies which address sexuality, there are an astonishing number of older people who are still sexually active – many more than one might think. But the data is a little shaky, because we're reliant on people's self-declarations, which are often very distorted. And besides, sexuality isn't just intercourse, and that applies when it comes to older people too.*

The definition of being "good in bed" changes. After a certain point it means: "Doesn't steal the duvet or snore". And the loveliest thing is being able to sleep peacefully together, like spoons!

*Getting older doesn't automatically mean the end of sexual activity. Statistically, the importance of actual sexual intercourse decreases, and other forms of sexuality come to the fore: like touch and emotional intimacy.*

There's a point when you notice that your sexual drive and urges no longer take center stage in your brain and elsewhere. In addition, physical performance, muscle strength and stamina also reduce. There's a wonderful saying: the young can run quicker, but the old know the shortcuts. Unfortunately, sometimes there are no shortcuts. For the 100 meter sprint, you either run or you don't. And so many from the older generation feel left behind, in the truest sense of the word. So exhausted that their tongues are hanging from their mouths. But you're saying they can be content regardless? So, objectively speaking, the body has its quirks, but the mind emancipates itself from it, no longer regarding it as a source of happiness. What's happening there?

*We call this phenomenon the Contentment Paradox. It means that an objective deterioration in a person's living situation doesn't necessarily impact upon their subjective appraisal of this situation – in other words, on a person's joie de vivre. Yes, it's true that the body becomes slower and more fragile with advancing age. But statistically speaking, this is by no means as*

*fatefully predetermined or as early as many people think. At some point the aches and pains and minor ailments will come, of course – the two of us are already familiar with them. Yet the surprising thing is this: Studies have shown that contentment often increases regardless! At first that seems paradoxical. But contentment can also be translated as expectation management, meaning that I adjust my expectations to the circumstances: If I know I can no longer sprint with my dodgy knee, then I no longer expect that from myself, and can still enjoy being able to go for a long walk with friends. As we get older, striving for physical perfection takes a back seat, and contentment takes its place. Research has shown that living life to the full helps significantly with this: If a person has done something with their life, and can look at something that fills them with pride, then stability, serenity and gratitude increase. One is the reward for the other.*

I'll do a brief summary. Happiness and contentment are dynamic. When we age, contentment becomes increasingly independent from our physical health. The human being is, therefore, designed to grow and mature. So what phases are there, according to your model for the development of happiness and contentment?

*Three types of happiness have emerged, and we progress through each of them during our lifespan: Happiness A, B and C – and they originate from the reward system of the brain. First of all, there is youthful happiness. We call it Type A, the "Happiness of Aspiration". It's the motivation to achieve something, the appetite and the anticipation of something, the lust for adventure. Desire and satisfaction are part of it too – as the Rolling Stones pointed out.*

Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll?

*Yes, ecstasy is part of it. As are learning and creativity, problems and tasks, and identifying challenges, finding solutions. Type A Happiness is also sometimes referred to as High Moment, Peak Moment or Mastery Moment Happiness. It's very intense and strong. Most people experience it when they have just fallen in love and feel as though their heart might burst out of their chest. But this kind of happiness is transitory. It's not designed to be a permanent state.*

Shame. Why not? I'd like more of it.

*This kind of happiness also contains the motivation to add to one's knowledge.*

That's true, if I think I've already reached my peak, that it doesn't get any better than this – then why would I want to learn anything else?

*I'm supposed to grow, I'm supposed to surpass myself, I'm supposed to experience freedom and autonomy, to encounter challenging situations, and, of course, successfully overcome them, but then – and this is the decisive point – find them to be "noteworthy" and commit the experience to memory. This is how "the story of my life" comes into being, my very personal history. Our experience is a treasure trove which lies deep within us, and it can be brought back to life via feelings of happiness. Happy moments need a beginning and an end, so that we can dedicate ourselves to the next task, the next level. And so with Type A, we swing from bough to bough.*

Oh, so that's why it feels so apish after a while, swinging from thrill to thrill with youthful abandon.

*Aha. I can tell you were young once too!*

I still am! But I've learnt a few things by now, and in particular I've learnt from experiences that I don't need to repeat... That's taken care of by dopamine, which is responsible for the thrill as well as the learning. Happiness has to be biodegradable in order to make space for new happiness and new experiences – because today's solutions are tomorrow's problems and obstacles to development.

*Exactly. When we experience Type A Happiness, we get the signal: I have to remember this experience, along with the concrete path which led to it. The hippocampus is the area of the brain which plays a key role in this kind of learning experience. But it's equally important for it to relax again at some point. If it didn't, our brain would be overloaded by an unrelenting succession of new experiences. If the experience weren't transient, there would also be no phases of beginning, of situational learning – and of processing. Whatever has just been learnt would be immediately erased again; we wouldn't be able to hold on to anything, nor have a life story to tell.*

This means that as the happiness ebbs away, we hold on to what we've experienced and what moves us – and by doing so we learn what does us good and what doesn't. Mark Twain once put it like this: "When I was younger, I could remember everything, regardless of whether it had really happened or not. But now I'm getting old, and soon I will only be able to remember the latter."

*We store entire situations in our brains. This includes the concrete emotions themselves, but also the emotional context, in other words, everything connected with it: Who did I experience this situation with, what did he/she/it look like, how did it smell, what did it feel like? That's one form of happiness: the youthful emergence.*

When I was 17, I excitedly went inter-railing around Europe and spent whole days and nights on trains. Firstly in order to save money on overnight accommodation, and secondly because I thought it was cool to be on the road, to hold my head out of the window and feel the fresh wind rushing towards me. I once went from Portugal to Scotland by train, just like that, on the spur of the moment, purely because I had a train pass that covered it. Today I prefer being in one place, but *really* being there. So is that maturity or laziness?

*I would say your thirst for adventure isn't as great – you've already quenched a lot of it.*

That sounds good. Back to A, B, C. We've now spoken at length about Type A – but what about Type B?

*Type B is practically the exact opposite of Type A. While with A, I open myself up to something, move towards something, with Type B Happiness I'd prefer to run away. I find myself in a situation which is unpleasant, painful or distressing. That could be an illness, a relationship crisis or work-related stress.*

But that doesn't sound like happiness...

*The definition of Type B Happiness is taking a deep breath, the sigh of relief when pain, suffering or stress ease for a while. When I finally get home after a challenging day – perhaps someone is waiting for me – and I shut the door behind me and have the feeling: Here I can simply be – "my home is my castle". The moment of happiness in this case is the movement away from something that I don't like. Biologically, it's about escaping. Happiness doesn't come in the form of ecstasy here, but rather relief: How wonderful that I survived!*

Perhaps that's why some people occasionally wear clothes that are too tight or overly high heels. They're guaranteeing that moment of happiness at the end of the day – when they close the door behind them and can peel everything off again. At an advanced age, you could even create this moment of happiness with compression socks. So pain that subsides is better than no feeling at all?

*Yes, for this Type B Happiness the stress centers play a key role. But other neurotransmitters and other parts of the brain are involved too. One of these is the so-called amygdala, our fear center. This involves real survival mechanisms, primal aspects of fight and flight, of alarm and adrenaline.*

So how can I tell that I'm shifting from Type A to Type B? Does it happen abruptly? Is it obvious? After all, old people can vary greatly in how active they are. While one person might

remain a daredevil their whole lives, another was perhaps never that wild in the first place, and had a private pension plan even before they went to their first gig.

*You can tell by the motives: Having an appetite or feeling aversion. Towards or away from. 'A' wants to move towards something. 'B' wants to get away from something.*

What do you think the different types of happiness are actually useful for?

*You need the anticipation – Type A – in order to open yourself up, to feel the motivation to want to overcome challenges. The greater the task is that you've taken on, the greater the stress connected with it – and this is where Type B comes into play. The stress hormones, for example, help us to overcome the unknown. The need for autonomy and growth on the one hand, and on the other, survival and safeguarding. Feelings of being integrated and protected play a role here too. So these are phases which merge into one another, not completely separate categories.*

In child and adolescent psychiatry, I encountered boys in late puberty who had done train surfing as a test of courage: throwing the door open at full speed before tunnels and bridge piers and stretching their heads out. Not a particularly good idea, but associated with thrill-seeking and therefore attractive for Type A. But that's something you grow out of naturally. You don't see people in their fifties train surfing. At that age you're just happy to get a seat. So who says A must also say B. Or realize that A was wrong. Or that it no longer fits. And what happens after B, what do I have to look forward to in midlife?

*A great deal, but neuroscience has only recently realized that. Because this is where the third form of happiness comes into play: Type C Happiness. It's the sensation of being just right, in the right place, exactly where I want to be. In that state I neither hunger nor long for something, nor do I have fear, aversion, or the desire to avoid something. I don't want anything – but not in the sense of boredom or lethargy, it's more an inner peace, a feeling of contentment and joy, because everything fits.*

That sounds a little like enlightenment and meditation. Do all people experience this C variant of happiness, or only certain ones?

*The orientation to Type C, to contentment, is within all of us biologically. It's the path which is foreseen by evolution. But we're not supposed to come into the harbor too early. Just imagine that in our youth, when everything is about beginnings and autonomy and freedom, we are already satisfied and content. Who would make plans, who would save the world, who would contemplate how we human beings can reach Mars? Everything comes in its own time: first we plough the fields, then we sow the seeds, then we reap the harvest.*

Being on the stage is my “harvest”. It took me 25 years of hard work. I often think back to the time when I performed on the street, and after that at late-night shows in front of people who would have preferred to see anything other than a man in a suit doing funny magic tricks. But the success I have today wouldn't have come without the hard slog that preceded it. And that makes me feel really happy and free, the knowledge that I did all that without subsidies or advertising campaigns, all off my own back and with my own ideas. But I wouldn't say I've completely reached Type C yet either.

*It would be too early if you had. It's good that you're still on stage, doing the shows we love so much. When you arrive at Phase C, you become more of a silent observer, your own audience, as it were. It's a good thing that it can't be forced. And nor should it be. The work towards it is life itself: the different phases of life have to be lived through, step-by-step. Unfortunately, however, there's no guarantee that it will really come. You can make your own contribution to ensuring you stay on track, but luck is also a part of it – good friends, family, health and medical practitioners or other therapists who help you to not deviate from the path. Life isn't a sure-fire success.*

In Phase B, after all, life goes quicker than you can keep up with. So in order to arrive at C, instead of continuing to pedal hard, you have to let go. What's the story behind this stage of development?

*Perhaps you remember cramming up on biochemistry during your medical studies too, without someone really explaining why it mattered? So there's something of a sensation concealed within the chemical relationship between the happiness neurotransmitters. They emerged out of one another during evolution, and can be converted into one or the other type. So dopamine, which is responsible for Type A Happiness, anticipation, creativity and learning processes, is also a building block for your body's own morphine. This, in turn, is significant for Type C Happiness. It indicates contentment and tranquility, and is biologically responsible for shutting down after activating phases. Morphine, for example, regulates processes in the immune system, reducing them after they've been stirred up by stress.*

So that means thrill and relaxation use very similar molecules? That's crazy considering that, whether we're buying drugs on the street or stocking up on medicines in the pharmacy, the decision is always between those that stimulate and those that sedate. To our brains, it seems that the difference between legal and illegal is completely irrelevant.

*For almost 20 years now, I've been part of a neuroscientific working group started by my friend and colleague George Stefano in New York. He researched how certain neurotransmitters appear early on in the development history of the living organism. You find*

*morphine even in simple plants, in mussels and snails. And where morphine is produced, dopamine or adrenaline appear as precursors. During the progression to higher vertebrates and mammals – and lastly to us human beings – nature took these component parts and gave them new roles, new signals. Happiness and stress, for example. And so these well-known building blocks in the evolutionary process became modern neurotransmitters.*

Nature works very efficiently and recycles whatever it can. We'll never know what "happiness" and "contentment" feel like for a mussel. It probably can't really feel pleased about having a pearl; it's more likely to be an irritation. But I like the imagery. It's a very meaningful recycling of material!

*It's crazy, isn't it? This is how the types of happiness are dependent on one another – in their influence as well as in biochemistry. Everything is biologically interwoven: if we had a lot of youthful Type A Happiness in connection with a lot of Type B Stress, the chance is even greater, that later in life, there will be more Type C.*

So these are mechanisms that appear in all people to the same extent? I often feel as though some people live more intensively than others, that their swings go higher, but also much lower. How different are people in this respect? I mean, even the two of us are very different.

*In biology, there's always a predetermined tendency. It's kind of like our factory setting, something we have from the cradle onwards. It is also connected to our genes; even these alone make us different. Then there are our living conditions, culture, our relationships and the families we are born into. So in total, perhaps half of our life contentment is predetermined, or in other words predestined.*

So are there people who are born as phlegmatics or go-getters, and stay that way?

*Yes there are. No doubt about it. Essentially, when it comes to happiness: One component is what happens to us. The other is the instruments we have to react to it. The latter is the area which we can influence ourselves: What can I learn from a negative experience? Can I perhaps do something different next time, try out something new? Do I push myself to learn something? The requirement for that is that we force ourselves up off the sofa, offer our reward system something that it can find good or bad. This brings movement back into play – motivation. Leo Tolstoy once said that happiness doesn't depend on external circumstances, but the way in which we look at them.*

Someone who has experienced a lot will reap the benefits later. That's also what I admire about people who have become the "cool" older people. They have a great deal of this Type C bliss and know how to let go. After the day's work is done, and I've poured myself a glass of

red wine in the evening, I have a better sense of what you might mean by that. But what are the obstacles, what are the hurdles when it comes to reaching this state?

*Each kind of happiness brings with it certain risks and side effects. There may be an inner maturing process behind the forms of happiness, but every phase also holds the potential for taking a wrong turn. The first hurdle comes early, in the phase of youth: a person can overestimate him- or herself, endanger themselves or others, take risks that are too great and suffer accidents as a result.*

That reminds me of the musicians of the famous “27 Club”: Amy Winehouse, Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin and so on. None of them lived beyond the age of 27, but until then they made incredible music and inspired others, perhaps precisely because they burned the candle of life at both ends. At least they burned for something!

*A recent case is the Swedish DJ Avicii, who died at the age of 28. That had quite an impact on my children. Everything seems to repeat itself, from generation to generation. There's no question that this phase of life is dangerous. Then, in the middle phase, comes the risk of burnout. When stress dominates and relief happiness is absent, burnout arises. If it's very acute, when there's far too much stress present, it can even lead to blackout: the person becomes frozen to the spot, going neither forwards nor backwards. And even in the Type C phase there are hurdles, for example when the contentment is so great and all-encompassing that it tips over into indifference, laziness and self-neglect, because the person has the feeling that nothing matters anyway.*

Dope smokers reach this state a great deal earlier in life. In adolescent psychiatry, I also encountered young people who had smoked away their motivation. That was anything but cool.

*Yes, that's another potential hurdle – not progressing through the phases in the way they are biologically intended. Cannabis incorporates yet another group of neurotransmitters which, in their effect, are related to morphine. You can either introduce them from outside or form them yourself in the brain.*

Youth could be such a wonderful time if it came later in life! It maddens me when I have to watch how much time young people dawdle away – they have no idea that they'll never get it back. And when you try to tell them that, all they say is: Chill out!

*People in the Type B phase feel that they have to constantly defend themselves: In your youth, you invest a lot of energy and time into growth, self-development and learning. Society has made an investment too; protecting you during your childhood, educating you – and*

*consequently has a right to demand that you defend what you've achieved. And that again leads to stress, which Type A finds very uncool.*

When I look for images of how the ABC model can be illustrated, then Type A is like the operational setting of our brain: starting out and learning. Type B is about taking responsibility and Type C is about passing on culture. In that phase, we pass something on to the next generation, and the one after that, and give advice, rather than still being actively responsible ourselves. One could also say that we start as an egoist, as an "I". Then the "I" is joined by a "You", but for the time being no one else. Like lovers looking into one another's eyes and forgetting the world, you know, the ones who really aggravate everyone else. Then comes the "We", as the family.

*... but still with a wall around the house, to protect the fortress, or in other words the family.*

And then there are people who even open their hearts to people outside their own fortress. Who aren't just there for the inner circle of their nuclear family, but also for the world, for refugees, for those who are discriminated against by society, for the greater "We".

*Yes, this last phase of happiness opens the "We" out into a larger, superordinate space. That's where our focus is everyone. Type C Happiness, therefore, also consists of benevolence, community, responsibility and connectivity in a generation-spanning sense.*

The thing I find encouraging about that is: There's a biological *and* a cultural purpose to the ageing process. The fact that we first have to learn to walk in life is clear. Then we run for a while, in pursuit of time, fate, career – and children. To begin with you can keep up, but after a while they outrun you. And if we take the right approach, at a certain point we are able to let go of them and the other things.

*And then we say: It's running along of its own accord.*

In the sense that it's enough for others to do the hustling, I'll let things go. And when I say that, I'm not talking about incontinence. Speaking of which, do you know the evening prayer of the 80-year-old? "A clear mind and a dry behind, that's all I ask, if you'd be so kind."

*Try some pelvic floor exercises.*

Thanks, I'm okay for the moment. When I say "let it go", I mean that at a certain point you realize: if I can't hold onto anything anyway, I might as well be more generous. I like the idea that, after dashing through the middle phase of life like a headless chicken, I have a destination to head towards. If the grandparents are good role models, you'll know it's worth

becoming a contented person yourself. Of course the grandparents have to depart at some point, in order to make room for those who come after, but first of all they have to offer their guidance. And that lives on. In my family, admittedly, I also had experience of grandparents who became more bitter with age. What's that down to?

*Oh yes, I see that amongst my patients too. You can give them the exact same diagnosis, and some of them become angry and lash out, while the others accept it. Or optimistically fight. Of course you can't simply put on rose-tinted glasses and say: "Everything's fine!" Getting old requires courage and the ability to bear the things that can't be changed. Ageing doesn't just involve physical ailments, but also being left, the loss of independence – and the loss of specific people, whether it's a partner or one's friends. And that's hard.*

That's how it was with one of my grandmothers, when she was widowed for the second time and felt doubly excluded because her hearing worsened at the same time. So that means not all people become happier with age?

*No, not all, but most. There's no guarantee of a rising happiness curve, and it's no one's fault if that isn't the case. If a person is very ill, then recriminations are the last thing they need, and they certainly won't make them healthy again.*

Yes. That would be very harsh.

*We often have images in our minds of people who are suffering. This also relates to our ability to feel empathy. But older people who are suffering aren't the rule. In our study, we asked 3000 people to evaluate the course of their lives. The results showed that the number of people over 60 who were relatively content with their lives overall was quite large compared to those who were relatively discontent. What would you guess the numbers to be?*

Fifty-fifty?

*No, the chances of being more content in old age are, according to our survey, around ten to one. In other studies, like the representative age study conducted in 2017 by the Allensbach Institute, over two thirds of seniors – aged between 65 and 85 – are completely content with their lives. This is a very positive image of age and ageing, I think, which interestingly is particularly prevalent in the state of Schleswig-Holstein. Not everyone finds their way onto the happy path, but there are an astonishing number who are content. Isn't that good news?*

Right, we're off to Schleswig-Holstein! But perhaps they included a few happy cows in the survey by accident. I'll summarise: If we look at the happiness curve over the course of life,

then it has two pillars on the two shores – youth and old age – and in between there's a suspension bridge, the impasse of midlife.

*Yes, that's a fitting description. But it's even better than that: Statistically, the pillar on the shore of old age is higher than the one on the shore of youth.*

You mean that at 65 I'll be even happier than at 15 or 35?

*Wait and see. The chances are good. Grandchildren and grandparents – from the perspective of contentment – are the ones who carry society. They are the departure point and destination of the “U-curve of Happiness”. While the middle generation is working and building houses, the other two support the pillars of the life curve. In the mid-life phase, many are in the valley of tears, that's the lowest point of the “U”: The children have to get to day care or school on time, everything has to go off without a hitch, but you're stuck in traffic or a packed metro carriage, work is annoying you, too many emails, too little time for eating or exercise, and at the end of the day you still have to go to the busy supermarket, while your in-laws are on the phone telling you about the day's doctor's appointment...*

*But at a certain point, the phase has to come where you can bring the protective shields back down, and the next generation goes to the starting line. If you don't manage to do that, and keep spinning around on the hamster wheel instead of coming into the harbor, then stress-related illnesses arise.*

I have this quote on the wall in my office that always makes me laugh: "The hamster thinks his wheel is a career ladder." He's constantly spinning around in the wheel, quite literally, and doesn't understand why he isn't making any progress. He has to get off; otherwise there'll come a point where he drops dead. And then he'll probably do another quarter turn even afterwards. Do you know which animal rotates 360 degrees after it dies?

*No, no idea...*

The rotisserie chicken!

*I'm sure there are plenty of other species turning in their graves at your bad jokes. But you're right, we're more able to recognize the futility of other people's eternal efforts than we are our own. Learning to let go is hard.*

After all, it's the exact opposite of what we're conditioned to do. Quicker, higher, further...

*For the ascending part of the U-curve, I have to be prepared to relinquish the need to always take control of everything, to always be the active and defining component. The essential*

*exercise of our life's path is to find our way from the beginning, through the building and safeguarding, onto the path that leads to letting go and coming to terms with things – ideally in connection with other people, with my supporting network.*

That sounds nicer than a hamster wheel and sharp elbows on the daily commute.

*We all know people who find it difficult to age, to look in the mirror and simply accept what they are. That can be very tragic for the person in question, but especially for those around them. I still remember patients who were seriously ill and eventually died still kicking out against the inevitable. In that kind of situation, there is simply no space for saying goodbye, and it's oppressive for everyone concerned. I'm not suggesting, of course, that dying has to be a nice thing. By no means. It's always difficult, and leaves behind grief, pain and suffering. But it's simply part of life! And biology helps us if we practice letting go while we're still alive, if we train for it during the Type C phase – and for that we are rewarded with contentment.*

That's your theory, the ABC curve of growth. But does it only apply for scientists and the figments of their imagination, or also for a large number of people? That's what I want to know. What happens when Esch's ABC model meets reality? Are you prepared?

*Yes, but that's a whole other chapter!*