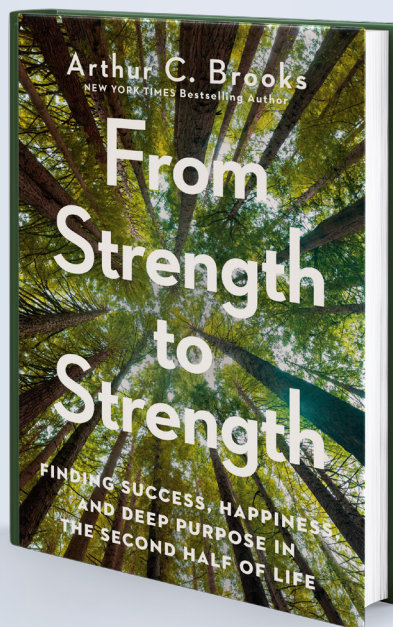


# BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



## From Strength to Strength Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life

By Arthur C. Brooks

Arthur C. Brooks is an American social scientist, the William Henry Bloomberg Professor of the Practice of Public Leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, and Professor of Management Practice at the Harvard Business School. Prior, he was the president of the American Enterprise Institute for ten years, where he held the Beth and Ravenel Curry Chair in Free Enterprise. He has authored eleven books.

## Finding Purpose and Success As We Age

Many very successful people have gotten that way through hard work and an undying commitment to success. These traits can lead people to the top of their organizations, something many people strive for as they place being special over being happy. As Arthur C. Brooks posits in his book *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life*, this ceaseless striving for perfection and excellence can begin to produce diminishing results as people age. This is because, without exception, people's fluid intelligence peaks at some point relatively early on in life, giving younger professionals advantages that no amount of hard work in older adults can match. While this changes the playing field, it does not have to mean the end of productivity and purpose as a person ages if they change their trajectory and start focusing on tasks that utilize their crystallized intelligence, a type of intelligence that increases as a person ages. Brooks sets out to help people make this change with his book.

### Inevitable Decline

Brooks started his journey towards discovering meaning when he encountered a man on a plane who most people would recognize as being incredibly accomplished in life. While he avoids naming the man specifically, he tells the story of how this man told his wife that he would be better off dead. Brooks started to wonder what it was that leads hugely successful people to feel so unfulfilled in the later years of their lives. He discovered what he calls the striver's curse. He defines this as the tendency of people who strive for greatness during their peak years to feel terrified as they face their own physical and cognitive decline. These same people begin to feel unsatisfied with both their current successes and their current relationships.

Most people are familiar with the inevitable decline of professional athletes. Brooks states that it is not just athletes who decline in professional ability as they age; rather it is all of us. In fact, he says, "in practically every high-skill profession, decline sets in sometimes between one's late thirties and early fifties...the more accomplished one is at the peak of one's career, the more pronounced decline seems once it sets in." Unlike professional athletes who generally seem cognizant of their impending and eventual decline, many knowledge workers avoid facing such a

fact and expect a decline in their performance to not happen until they are in their seventies. This does not match with reality as Brooks understands it. He quotes a study by Benjamin Jones that shows that with Nobel Prize winners, the chances of great discoveries increases in a person's twenties and thirties and then "declines dramatically through one's forties, fifties, and sixties."

While statistics vary by field, many people peak sometime in their forties. For creative careers, Brooks says a person's peak often occurs twenty years into their career. The reason for this decline is likely due to changes in the brain. The last part of the brain to develop is the prefrontal cortex, and this is also the first part of the brain to decline. It is responsible for multitasking, memory, and executive functioning among other things.

While this decline is inevitable, it does not always psychologically affect people equally. Some people suffer especially when they have lost esteem in the eyes of people who once looked up to them. This can lead people to feel irrelevant and useless. Studies show that people who feel useless are more likely to experience a disability or even to die. People who have been strongly driven by success and achievement are likely to feel the least happy after retirement as "high accomplishment affects people negatively when it finishes." This matches Brooks's "principle of psychoprofessional gravitation" in which he states that "the agony of decline is directly related to prestige previously achieved, and to one's emotional attachment to that prestige." Unfortunately, the glories of past achievements are not likely to provide people with solace once those achievements are gone. While Brooks clearly lays out the inevitability of decline, he does not end here. In his next chapters he goes on to show the areas in which people improve with age and helps lay out a plan for helping his readers embrace what it is they will begin to excel at in later years.

## The Second Curve

Earlier in the book, Brooks provides his readers with a curve of achievement and shows when they are likely to reach their peak. Working harder will not help a person stay at their peak longer. The most fulfilled people are those who are able to let this first peak, the peak of fluid intelligence, go and move on to the next curve, that of crystallized intelligence. While people's skills decline in some areas, their skills in others increase. For example, people's vocabulary increases, they get better at sharing ideas with others, and they get better at synthesizing ideas as they age. While fluid intelligence, "the ability to reason, think flexibly, and solve problems" diminishes, crystallized intelligence, "the ability to use a stock of knowledge learned in the past" grows. Crystallized intelligence continues to grow in a person's later years and may not possibly ever reach a peak. This crystallized intelligence is often what people refer to as wisdom. While some careers naturally lend themselves to crystallized intelligence, Brooks claims that many careers can be altered to better suit the intelligence a person has later in life. Brooks refers to first century BC Cicero who believed that older age is about service, wisdom, and counsel. Brooks believes that while people may not amass as much riches or fame when they center their lives around crystallized intelligence, what they do earn is often more valuable. He urges his reader to get off the fluid intelligence curve in which people

will inevitably face age-related decline and jump on to the crystallized intelligence curve which will allow for continued growth and productivity, just in a different way.

## Chipping Away

Brooks goes on to describe the different ways that Eastern and Western people see art. He says that for many Westerners, art is about adding something to a blank canvas. For Eastern people, however, art is more about taking away what does not belong such as when a sculpture chips away at a block of jade to create a sculpture out of what is left behind. In a similar way, Brooks says, people in mid-life and beyond ought to start chipping away at what is unnecessary in life in order to leave behind what makes life meaningful. Many people, he says, pursue "money, power, pleasure, and honor" as well as their cousins, prestige and admiration. He does not believe that these are worthy pursuits after mid-life and that said pursuits will not lead people to what they most desire.

Unfortunately, success cannot make a person happy because, just as with addictive drugs, people need bigger and bigger successes in order to feel a satisfaction that is fleeting. Some choose to work harder as they get older to overcome their inevitable decline, but this leaves them running on a treadmill because they keep chasing after ever bigger successes as their ability to compete is declining. This leads many to dissatisfaction in older age. In order to overcome this, Brooks suggests that a person needs to temper their wants; this will allow them to be more happy with what they already have. Brooks gives multiple strategies for chipping away, and one of them is to begin to focus on smaller things rather than chasing larger things. Watching a flower can bring about a satisfaction that can be relived in the future in a way that an outward success cannot.

Many people, Brooks posits, are afraid of death, and for people who base their identity around their professional achievements, this fear of death can manifest itself in a fear of decline when a person cannot compete on the same level they could at a prior age. People cannot move to their second curve, their crystallized intelligence curve, until they have accepted the decline in their fluid intelligence. Acceptance of this decline is key. One step that Brooks thinks people need to take is to move from acquiring resume skills to acquiring eulogy skills. Resume skills are those that can help a person get ahead professionally but are never really considered by loved ones at the end of one's life. Eulogy skills, on the other hand, are the exact opposite. These are the attributes that people want others to remember about them at the end of their lives, and these are worth developing.

## Relationships

Many people who pursue success single-mindedly let their relationships suffer in the meantime. This can make decline even more painful as they have to experience it alone. People, Brooks states, are inherently connected "biologically, emotionally, psychologically, intellectually, and spiritually." People ignore this at their own peril as the secret to satisfaction after the inevitable cognitive decline resides in the interconnected nature of all



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people. Brooks quotes George Vaillant as saying “happiness is love.” Those who find themselves at the top of the leadership chain tend to be lonely because the position does not allow for community with those underneath them. This is a true source of suffering for people at the top of the hierarchical chain.

Romantic partnerships and friendships are often the most important relationships in a person’s life, but falling in love is not what makes people happy. Rather it is the companionate love that persists after the strong rush of romance wears off that gives people what they truly crave. Romantic partners who see their spouse as their best friend have the best outcomes, but that does not mean that single people cannot achieve happiness and that those who are married cannot expect their romantic partnership to fully sustain them. Friendships are key. True friendships, Brooks claims, are easier for women than for men. All relationships require time and effort, but Brooks maintains that they are crucial for satisfaction later in life.

### Vanaprastha

Brooks explains the Hindu teaching of ashrama which are four distinct periods in a person’s life that last approximately 25 years each. The first of these 25 years is spent learning, and in the second stage a person “builds a career, accumulates wealth, and maintains a family.” The third stage is the one Brooks is most focused on, and this is called Vanaprastha. In this stage, a person begins to step back from “personal and professional duties, becoming more and more devoted to spirituality and deep wisdom.” In short, they start to rely on crystallized intelligence. This requires a readjustment of goals. This stage prepares the way for the final stage where a person is focused on enlightenment. People search for spiritual growth as they age, and if they skip out on vanaprastha, they will suffer in the final stage because they will not be prepared for enlightenment.

One problem Brooks says that strivers experience at this point is that they previously may have shunned faith and have relied on their own abilities instead. This can make a journey back to faith feel humiliating for a person. This return to faith is normal, he says, and people are best off if they do not fight it even though it can cause significant changes in self-concept. To help overcome this discomfort, he urges his readers to realize that some of their earlier beliefs about religion may have been childish and that they leave those behind in search of a faith that is more mature and meaningful. As with relationships, the development of faith takes a consistent dedication of time.

Brooks aims his book at people who have achieved significant professional success in life, but it can be meaningful to a much larger swath of people than just the professional elite. The

decline Brooks talks about happens to all people; it is just those who come from positions of great power who might experience its effects more acutely. Brooks ends *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life* talking about vulnerability, something that people who have strived for greatness often shun. Brooks relies in part on the work of Brene Brown to explain that vulnerability and admitting one’s weaknesses is not something that needs to be shunned because it is often through a person’s weaknesses that others become more willing to approach them.

One benefit that people can glean from celebrating weaknesses is that they can finally relax. For a person who has spent their entire life trying to be the best, this can be a scary concept, but it can also be a liberating one. By admitting weakness, a person no longer has to pretend to be what they are not and can grow in true relationship with others. This is a worthy aspiration from Brooks’s perspective as it is relationships and faith that make much of a person’s later years meaningful.

While Brooks starts out his book stating that a person’s professional decline likely comes much earlier than they expect and that the decline is inevitable and cannot be overcome, he maintains that this does not need to be the tragedy that some would see it to be. Rather, it can be an impetus to jump on a different path in life. This path can lead to happiness, contentment, and satisfaction throughout the second half of life. It is a path that can last a person many years as decline is not inevitable, and if it does come, it is much later in life. There is hope for much satisfaction in the later years of life, and Brooks provides his reader with ample ideas to consider as they map out these years of their lives.

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