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Scroll To Top To psychologists, purpose is an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world. The goals that foster a sense of purpose are ones that can potentially change the lives of other people, like launching an organization, researching a disease, or teaching kids to read
Our sense of purpose will change over the course of our lifetime. As we grapple with our identity as teens, settle into the responsibilities of adulthood, and make the shift to retirement, the research finds that our sense of purpose will naturally wax and wane. Like happiness, purpose is not a destination, but a journey and a practice. That means it's
accessible at any age, if we're willing to explore what matters to us and what kind of person we want to be—and act to become that person. If we're able to revisit and renew our sense of purpose as we navigate milestones and transitions, suggests this research, then we can look forward to more satisfying, meaningful lives. Researchers have
discovered that a sense of purpose is linked to a number of good outcomes, across the lifespan, for both individuals and organizations. Youth who have a sense of purpose also report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction—which seems associated with better educational outcomes. One study looked at college students who wanted to help
others, create art, or achieve financial success. The researchers didn't find significant differences in positive outcomes among the groups. For young and old alike, the physical benefits of a sense of purpose are well-documented. For example, Eric Kim and his colleagues at
Harvard's School of Public Health have found that people who report less purpose at one point in time have objectively better physical agility four years later than those who report less purpose at one point in time have objectively better cognitive
functioning and greater longevity. They're more likely to floss their teeth, exercise, and get to the doctor. Why? Researchers suggest that people take better care of themselves when they feel like they have something to live for. Having a purpose also seems to be associated with lower stress levels, overall, which contributes to better health. Do some
purposes confer more benefits than others? The answer so far is yes—if you are older. One study found that young adults with a more "prosocial" purpose—one aimed at helping others—experienced greater personal growth, integrity, and health later in adulthood. This result was echoed by a 2019 study by Anne Colby and colleagues at Stanford
University. They surveyed almost 1,200 Americans in their midlife about their well-being and what goals were important to them. The researchers found significantly higher well-being among people who were involved in pursuing beyond-the-self goals, compared to those who were pursuing other types of goals. In other words, engaging in prosocial
goals had more impact on well-being than engaging in non-prosocial goals. Indeed, looking beyond individual lives, a sense of purpose appears to have evolved in humans so that we can cooperate and well-being of their employees by
helping them connect to a job-related higher purpose. The 2013 Core Beliefs and Culture Survey revealed that 91 percent of respondents who believe that their company has a strong sense of purpose also say it has a history of strong financial performance. Purpose is adaptive, in an evolutionary sense. It helps both individuals and the species to
survive and thrive. Purpose often grows from our connection to others, which is why a crisis of purpose is often a symptom of isolation. Once you find your path, you'll almost certainly find others traveling along with you, hoping to reach the same destination—a community. According to research by Kendall Cotton Bronk, finding one's purpose
requires four key components: dedicated commitment, personal meaningfulness, goal directedness, and a vision larger than one's self. Often, finding our purpose involves a combination of finding meaning in the experiences we've had, while assessing our values, skills, and hopes for a better world. It means taking time for personal reflection while
imagining our ideal future. Here are some exercises purpose researchers recommend for finding your purpose in life: The Magic Wand: Think about the world around you — your home, community, the world at large—and visualize what you
did and consider concrete steps you might take to move the world a little closer to that ideal. This exercise has been used to foster purpose in youth and young adults, in particular. Best Possible Self: Imagine yourself at some future age — like 10 or 20 years down the road—and think about what your life would be like if everything went as well as
possible. Then ask yourself these questions: What are you doing? What is important to you, affirming your values can help. Three
values surveys—the Valued Living Questionnaire, the Portrait Values Questionnaire, and the Personal Values Questionnaire—ask you to rank the importance of different values, something that can help you get clearer about your purpose. Recognize your strengths: To get a handle on your particular skills, try the VIA Character Strengths Survey to see
what it reveals about you. Or, you can contact people who know you—teachers, friends, family, colleagues, and mentors—and ask them what you're good at, what you seem to like to do, and how you might make your mark on the world. Sometimes an outsider's opinion can help clarify your personal strengths and help you figure out how best to apply
them. Volunteer: Finding purpose is aided by having a broad set of meaningful experiences that can point you in the right direction. Volunteering puts you in touch with people who have similar values, who may inspire you or point you
toward other opportunities for making a difference that you hadn't thought of before. Cultivate positive emotions: Positive emotions help us to broaden our outlook on the world and feel energized to take action for the greater good; so they can be useful for finding purpose. Gratitude and awe, in particular, help us care about others, build
relationships, and feel connected to something greater than ourselves, which is why they're tied to fostering purpose. You can try our website, Greater Good in Action, to find exercises that will help bolster your sense of purpose — and make you happier, too. Scroll To Top The results from our Purpose in Life quiz reveal how people of different ages
races, and political orientations pursue meaningful goals. By Emiliana R. Simon-Thomas | April 11, 2022 Do you feel like what you do and who you are in the world matters? Do you have a sense that your actions are meaningful, and contribute to or benefit something that you care about? That's your sense of purpose. According to research, having
purpose staves off stress and can help you channel challenges toward learning and growth. Purpose fuels hope and optimism, and purposeful people tend to have better health and longevity. Older adults who report more purpose in life experience less functional decline (like weakened grip strength), less cognitive and memory impairment, and a
lower risk of Alzheimer's disease. People with greater purpose make healthier life choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like choices, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like exercise and more nutritious eating, and engage in more nutritious eating, and engage in more preventative behaviors, like exercise and more nutritious eating and engage in more nutritious eating and engage in more nutritious eating and engage in more nutritions exercise and exercise
scientific definitions of what it means to be happy in life. To highlight the topic and give people a chance to explore their sense of purpose, the Greater Good Science Center (GGSC) created an online Purpose in Life quiz, drawing on self-report questionnaires from published psychological science research. Since it was posted in late February 2021,
just under 74,000 people have answered all 14 questions on this quiz. Here are some of the patterns of results. A first observation to note is that 74,000 is a much larger number of quiz takers than typical for a GGSC quiz. Perhaps people were spending more time online in 2021-2022—thanks to the pandemic—and thus were more likely to see and
willing to engage with an online quiz. It's also possible that people have been particularly drawn to reflect upon and recalibrate their sense of purpose over the past year, given the unprecedented upsets and uncertainties of COVID-19. The average score from everyone who completed the GGSC Purpose in Life quiz was 2.92/5, or 58%. This means
most people were choosing responses between the middle (usually "somewhat" or "sometimes") and the next higher endorsement (usually "very" or "frequently") to questions like "How excited are you about carrying out the plans that you set for yourself?" and "How often do you learn something new so that you can help others?" While folks may
have been modest in their responses, this number also suggests that GGSC quiz takers might be questioning their purpose anew given the disruption to established pre-pandemic routines and life trajectories, and they could benefit from increasing their sense of purpose. Thankfully, purpose scientists have offered some promising ways for attuning to
and strengthening our sense of purpose in life, including practices like Affirming Important Values, Best Possible Self, and Life Crafting—all of which are featured on our website Greater Good in Action. After the 14 questions for assessing Purpose in Life, the GGSC quiz has seven questions about the quiz takers themselves, like age and educational
attainment. While not diagnostic or causal (in other words, being a woman does not cause you to have more purpose in life. Women report more purpose in life
than men As tends to be the pattern with nearly every GGSC quiz, women scored higher than men (2.96 vs 2.87). People who identified as gender non-binary reported lower purpose in life, it's possible that other
differences are at play. For example, we also asked people about their jobs, and among our quiz takers, the proportion of women in occupations that are associated with lower ratings of purpose (such as sales/retail,
transportation services, and computer/information systems). Gender-based societal norms and other situational factors (e.g., martial status, parenthood, community engagement) could also play a role in the differences between women's and men's scores on this guiz. Purpose in life grows with time Confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—
and in agreement with several studies that have reported increasing purpose with age—GGSC quiz results showed persistent increases in purpose after 60, which may simply reflect a crisis of purpose after retirement. Studies suggest that
maintaining flexibility about our role, identity, and experiences later in life can keep that sense of purpose growing strong. While the GGSC does not usually analyze or report on responses from quiz takers under 18 years old, we include the mean scores from this group in this analysis because their average score is higher than the score from people
in their 20s. This raises the interesting question of why: What happens that flattens purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose among teens, the Purpose Challenge, and this data helps us understanding and fostering purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose among teens, the Purpose Challenge, and this data helps us understanding and fostering purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose in our 20s? The GGSC led an initiative that directly focused on understanding and fostering purpose among the formation of the 
purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background were smaller than differences associated with other factors that we analyzed, with all falling within one-tenth of a point on the scale. Scores from people who identified as white, Latino, and multiethnic were higher than those from people who identified as Asian, followed by people who identified as
African American and Middle Eastern. (There were too few people in the Native American ethnic group to make meaningful conclusions about their scores do not reflect innate potential or generalizable patterns of purpose in society. Rather, they
suggest a need to further examine whether the manner of asking about or assessing purpose in life aligns with multiple cultural ideals. For example, people from various cultures might not interpret this question the same way: "How excited are you about a self-
focused ideal is a very Western, individualistic frame of mind, and less likely to be highly endorsed by people with more collectivist ideals. Further, any observed differences in purpose scores by ethnic background would need to account for how systemic social and policy factors shape access to resources, as well as opportunities to consider, learn
about, and pursue what matters in life. More schooling, more purpose consistent with many studies about the importance of education in purpose in life, we found that purpose rose with education in purpose in life, we found that purpose rose with education in purpose in life. More schooling, more purpose in life, we found that purpose rose with education in purpose in life, we found that purpose rose with education in purpose in life, we found that purpose rose with education in purpose in life, we found that purpose rose with education in purpose rose 
sense of purpose in life. When it comes to acting in accordance with, and being recognized for, efforts that reflect and validate our sense of purpose in life, higher educational credentials allow us to "follow our passions." Neighborhood makes a small difference While the difference is small (less than one-tenth of a point), people who live in big cities
reported higher purpose than all other neighborhoods: small city, suburban, and rural. Some argue that people in large, metropolitan areas harbor extra self-importance compared to people in smaller cities or rural areas. Perhaps this mindset could bump up responses to questions like: "I know how I can use my talents to make a meaningful
contribution to the larger world," which might be more difficult to endorse for people who do not feel as much contact with "the larger world." This data point highlights a couple potential boundary conditions for purpose. The first is illusory: that purpose must be about playing a hugely influential role in a world-changing issue. In fact, purpose can be
local, proximal, and connected to tiny steps, like planting flowers or offering a kindness to someone in need. And while purpose is typically beneficial, we should be wary of pursuing purpose so single-mindedly that we end up making no room for spontaneity or unstructured experience, or getting drawn into purpose ful but harmful pursuits. There are
probably ways living in a big city does provide the context for purpose that could explain the slightly higher scores, but, like other factors described, it is not a requirement for having purpose. For people with less direct contact with the "larger world," practices that focus on core values and personal goals for the future can be helpful for
strengthening purpose. Strong political views are associated with stronger purpose in life than people with moderate group), they are easy to interpret. Since political views are
typically intertwined with people's values, identity, and even professional choices, it's not surprising to see higher purpose in people with age. People in some professions are more purposeful than others Perhaps not surprisingly, people who
work to help others tend to score higher in purpose than those in other professions. Again, while it is tempting to attribute this difference to the jobs themselves—and there are indeed ways that some professions can make purpose suggests that anyone can introduce greater
purpose into their life regardless of their occupation. Anyone—regardless of demographics, education, politics, and more—can connect what they do to a broader, worldly impact that transcends space and time. Greater Good wants to know: Do you think this article will influence your opinions or behavior? Victor Strecher, a behavioral scientist at the
University of Michigan's School of Public Health, lost his 19-year-old daughter to a sudden heart attack in 2010; she had been living with a rare heart condition for years. Her fragility and eventual death upended his thoughts on what life should be about and how to live it—and it moved him to write a book called Life on Purpose. The book is a
meditative, at times inspirational, exploration of the nature of purpose—it both considers how philosophers have long debated the relationship between purpose and happiness and also shares uplifting stories of individuals who have discovered their purpose. It includes Strecher's personal revelations as well as those of others who've found their
purpose and changed the trajectory of their lives. But the book is also a review of the science of purpose, which has blossomed in recent years. According to your values and goals, and striving to make a positive difference in the world—can be measured,
and it correlates highly with psychological wellness and even markers of physical health and longevity. For example, studies have found that for every one-point increase on a six-point scale measuring purpose in life, adults with heart disease have a 27 percent decreased risk of having a heart attack over a two-year period. For older adults, a one-point
difference in purpose can mean a 22 percent decreased risk of having a stroke. It's not clear how purpose in life would have these impacts; but it's possible that there is some kind of interaction with stress, which has already been shown to affect us at a cellular level. In one study, researchers looked at how meditation might impact gene health in
highly stressed mothers. The length of mothers' telomeres—the end caps on genes that tend to shorten with age—were measured before and after some of the modification retreat. Compared to a control group, women who'd received the meditation training did indeed have longer telomeres at the end of the retreat, suggesting
better health. But the researchers found that this effect was accounted for not by increases in a sense of life purpose, which, Strecher argues, should encourage us to consider promoting it in our schools and
workplaces. For example, students who are encouraged to consider education as relevant to their life purpose at the forefront tend to be more enjoyable places to work and more financially successful in the long run
than those who only pursue profit. In one study, researchers found that hospital workers were 45 percent more inclined to use good hand-washing hygiene if they were told it helped prevent patients from catching diseases than if they were told it helped prevent patients from catching diseases than if they were told it helped prevent patients from catching diseases than if they were told it helped them. Connecting their habits to a service-oriented purpose inspired better behavior. "Pointing
out to employees that their actions affect others can result in transcending behaviors—and save lives," Strecher says. Putting purpose into action Of course, giving lip service to having a purpose in life is not going to cut it. It has to be genuine and to truly reflect your goals and values. Also, there is a difference between finding your purpose and
acting upon it, says Strecher. "The dynamic process of aligning yourself with your life purpose requires energy and willpower are needed, writes Strecher,
and these can be boosted by making healthier lifestyle choices: sleeping and eating better, exercising, and being more present in your everyday life (e.g., through meditation or tai chi or other practices that increase your presence). The relationships between healthy lifestyle choices, energy, willpower, and purpose are all bidirectional—meaning they
influence each other, he writes. Therefore, it makes sense to both figure out your purpose and engage more in healthy behaviors, in order to have enough energy and willpower to pursue your purpose. Much of his book is devoted to suggesting just how to do that. Though studies found throughout the book lend some credence to Strecher's claims
about the benefits of purpose, they are relatively few in number and not always completely convincing. Even Strecher acknowledges that the science is still in its infancy. "We still don't know very much about interventions meant to increase purpose in life, let alone their results," he writes. Purpose may be more elusive than we realize—perhaps the
culmination of a lifetime of personal interactions and individual experiences—and may be next to impossible to foster in the general public. Still, it wouldn't hurt the world if we all started examining our lives in deeper ways and tried a bit harder to find our own purpose. After all, any efforts that increase our desire to help the world are probably
positive. And the consequences of not doing so could be dire. "If I were you, I wouldn't wait around for more research. I'd just get a purpose," writes Strecher. "The scientific evidence supporting the benefits of one is extremely promising, and, at the risk of sounding a bit alarmist, we need it." In recent years, studies have suggested that having a
sense of purpose helps you to live a longer and healthier life, even when looking across cultures and controlling for known predictors of longevity, like cigarette smoking. But these studies all had the same limitation: They focused on adults older than 60. A recent study published in the journal Psychological Science explored whether the positive
health effects of having a purpose in life also extend to younger adults. Researchers Patrick Hill and Nicholas Turiano examined the Midlife in the United States sample, a national study of health and well-being that started following over 7000 participants in 1994. The study periodically checked in with participants—who ranged in age from 20 to 75—
to see how they were doing and feeling. In order to measure purpose in life, Hill and Turiano looked at their answers in relation to other factors, like
having positive relations with others or how they generally feel—and then examined their mortality data from the National Death Index. In fact, during the data, the researchers found that having a sense of purpose was a critical factor in determining
Turiano found that the benefits of purpose are not conditional on retirement status. But perhaps most importantly, they found that maintaining a strong purpose can be as important to young adults as it is to older people. "These findings suggest the importance of establishing a direction for life as early as possible," they write. "Likewise, research has
demonstrated that increasing goal commitment during college can have effects on well-being into middle adulthood." Though the results of their study is indeed promising, Hill and Turiano warned that more research is needed, as the pathways through which purpose in life influences mortality, and whether those pathways in early adulthood versus
late adulthood are different, have not been elucidated. "As a purpose would," they write, "the current study should provide researchers with a direction in which to go rather than a final endpoint or conclusion." Purpose is the stuff of inspirational posters and motivational speeches. When we find our purpose, they say, we'll know what we are meant to
do in life. The path will be laid out before us, and our job will be to keep following that vision with unwavering commitment. But is this really what purpose across the lifespan, reaching back more than 30 years. Following people as they grapple with their identity as teens, settle
into the responsibilities of adulthood, and make the shift to retirement, this research paints a more complicated picture of purpose—but a hopeful one, too. Here's the upshot: We don't have to worry about finding our one true purpose—but a hopeful one, too. Here's the upshot: We don't have to worry about finding our one true purpose; we can find purpose in different areas of life. In fact, purpose isn't something we find at all. It's something we can
cultivate through deliberate action and reflection, and it will naturally wax and wane throughout our lives. Like happiness, purpose is not a destination, but a journey and a practice. That means it's accessible at any age, if we're willing to explore what matters to us and what kind of person we want to be—and act to become that person. This "is a
project that endures across the lifespan," as purpose expert Kendall Bronk and her colleagues write in a 2009 paper. If we're able to revisit and renew our sense of purpose as we navigate milestones and transitions, suggests this research, then we can look forward to more satisfying, meaningful lives. Teens: Seeking purpose as purpose in life is not
just any big goal that we pursue. According to researchers, purpose is a long-term aim that is meaningful to the self—but goes beyond the self, aiming to make a difference to the broader world. We might find purpose in fighting poverty, creating art, or making people's lives better through technology. That process begins when we're teens, as we
explore who we are, what we value, and what we want out of life, says Bronk, an associate professor at Claremont Graduate University. As they try different interests and activities, like a parent being diagnosed with
cancer or a shooting in their hometown, that spur them to work on particular causes. Others are inspired by role models who are leading purposeful lives, from parents to coaches. Mariah Jordan from Cleveland, one of the winners of the GGSC Purpose Challenge Scholarship Contest, often accompanied her grandmother to doctor's appointments as a
child. Over time, witnessing her grandmother's experiences, she began to see the racial inequalities that existed in health care. She went on to volunteer in a medical setting and conduct research on cancer in African Americans, working to eliminate health disparities and bring more cultural sensitivity to the field of medicine. William Damon, author
of The Path to Purpose and a professor at Stanford, has spent nearly 20 years studying how people develop purpose in work, family, and civic life. As he describes it, purpose is something of a chemical reaction that takes place when our skills meet the needs of the world. Young people must identify something in their environment that could be
improved, whether it's politics or modern jazz music, and recognize something in themselves that they can bring to bear on that problem—leadership skills, say, or creativity. Knowing purpose. In a 2011 study, high school and college students answered
surveys about their sense of purpose, as well as their sense of identity—how clear they were on the kinds of jobs, values, friendships, politics, religion, and sex roles they were. In turn, they were also happier and more hopeful for the future. A
2012 study by the same researchers had a similar finding, but in the opposite direction—with young people who felt purpose development are intertwined processes," write Patrick Hill of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Anthony Burrow of Cornell University
At this age, though, only about 20 percent of teens have a strong sense of purpose in life, at least according to Damon's work. Others have pie-in-the-sky dreams, or fun hobbies, or they're just trying to get through high school. More often, childhood and adolescence seem to be the time when the building blocks of purpose are established, but we're
still exploring what we want out of life. Adults: Busy with purpose According to Damon, most people who find purpose do so in their 20s and 30s. This is when we tend to start building a career and a family—both of which are major sources of purpose during adulthood, along with religion and volunteering. In the family realm, we may find a deep
sense of purpose from raising children, as well as taking care of aging parents. At work, we might feel fulfilled in supporting our coworkers, making a difference in the organization, or contributing to society, Damon writes. When education professional Paul LeBuffe found out that he was raising a special-needs child, it was a turning point for his
family and his career—and his sense of purpose. Since then, he has been working to promote resilience in children and adults, and within his own life, which helps give him a sense of balance. While finding purpose can feel like an exciting adventure for young
people, who might take gap years or try interesting electives in college, purpose becomes more urgent for adults. In a 2009 study, Bronk and her colleagues surveyed people of different age groups, including nearly 400 young people (in their teens and early 20s) and over 400 adults (around age 35). When they were searching for purpose, young
people were more satisfied with life—but this wasn't true of adults. In fact, the more they were still actively seeking purpose, the less satisfied they were. The researchers surmise that this comes down to cultural norms and the expectations adults have for themselves. "In our culture we expect young people to explore what matters most to them, but
by midlife, we expect them to have sorted this out," write Bronk and her colleagues. At some age, lacking in purpose becomes unpleasant—but Bronk points out that having purpose isn't always a picnic, either. Going after a big, long-term goal can be stressful and discouraging; as anyone who has raised a child knows, things that bring us meaning
don't always bring us day-to-day fun and good cheer. While there may be struggles, though, people who have that sense of direction and purpose do ultimately tend to have more satisfying, healthier, and even longer lives. Midlife and beyond: A crossroads of purpose While purpose tends to be highest in adulthood, old age can come with a diminishing
sense of purpose and direction. In one survey of people ages 50-92, only 30 percent reported feeling purposeful. The causes aren't too surprising. Two of the biggest sources of purpose for adults, work and family, take a major hit when we retire and when kids leave home. Suddenly, we wake up to days that aren't structured by meetings and
deadlines, by soccer games and homework help. It can feel like the things that defined us—our very identity—are slipping away. On top of all that, niggling health problems can make it physically harder to stay involved with activities and people that might keep us feeling engaged. Gerontologist and AgeWave founder Ken Dychtwald sees a pattern
where society doesn't recognize the value and wisdom of older people, writing them off as feeble or irrelevant, and elders don't always put in the work to learn new technology and connect with younger people. While society might be telling them to relax and enjoy their golden years, he says, many older adults just feel adrift. Not everyone has this
experience, of course. People who have strong relationships and a positive attitude toward aging tend to fare better. In one study, researchers interviewed people ages 61-70 and identified the ones who were able to maintain or increase their sense of purpose over the decade. Those individuals often turned their efforts inward to become better human
beings, learning new skills or tackling long-held emotional struggles. As Damon explains, the pause of retirement and an empty nest can be an invitation to introspection, in ways that truly matter. John Leland, a New York Times reporter, had the opportunity to follow six
New Yorkers over 85 for a year and get an intimate glimpse into their lives. They became his friends, he says, and their stories were featured in his book about happiness. He observes that the elders who held on to a sense of purpose thrived because of their flexibility. They rolled with the punches as their lives changed and evolved, and they
remained open to new experiences. "Those who are able to understand their roles as constantly changing, constantly evolving—it's a story that they're still writing—are able to deal with the ups and downs that we all confront better than people who see themselves as fixed in one point," he says. In many ways, the pursuit of purpose as an older adult
looks a lot like it does for teens. Marc Freedman, founder of the generation-connecting organization Encore.org, sees this parallel, too: Instead of internships, Encore.org offers fellowships where older people spend up to a year working in nonprofits, foundations, and other social sector organizations. The experience is designed to help them find an
"encore career," a purposeful activity that serves the greater good and contributes to the world they'll leave behind. Gary Maxworthy, who won Encore.org's Purpose Prize in 2007, was 56 when his wife died from cancer. After more than three decades in food distribution, he wanted to give back. He started volunteering at a food bank, where he
quickly noticed a big problem and a big opportunity: Growers were having to send lots of "imperfect" produce to landfills, because they couldn't sell it, and accepting fresh produce was too difficult for food banks. He created Farm to Family to solve that problem and ensure that fresh fruit and vegetables make it to families in need. Other Encore.org
fellows include retired doctors caring for underserved patients and retired tech company executives helping to improve online government services. Meanwhile, organizations like Stanford's Advanced Leadership Institute and the Modern Elder Academy offer college-like experiences for older adults looking for a fresh start. In Freedman's experience
very few of us will wake up one day with a totally new purpose in life. Instead, he observes people draw on the skills, knowledge, and values they've cultivated over a lifetime to start a new chapter. What's your purpose in life? It's a daunting question. But your answer may say a lot about your well-being. Studies link a sense of purpose to better
physical and mental health. But your purpose isn't just about you. According to researchers, a true purpose is one that is both personally meaningful and also makes a positive impact on the lives of other people—your family, friends, neighbors, city, country, or even the whole world. How strong is your sense of purpose? To find out—and discover
steps for strengthening it—take this quiz, which is primarily based on the Claremont Purpose Scale developed by psychologists Kendall Bronk, Brian Riches, and Susan Mangan. Please answer the questions below as honestly as possible; there are no right or wrong answers. The last seven questions are about you, and will be used to explore how
purpose relates to factors like age and gender. Individual responses to this quiz are anonymous and will not be shared with any organization
outside the Greater Good Science Center under any circumstances, ever. All responses are anonymized and only used in aggregate for evaluation purposes. Source: Do you have a sense of purpose, psychologists have studied how long-term, meaningful goals develop over the span of our lives. The goals that foster a sense of purpose are
ones that can potentially change the lives of other people, like launching an organization, researching disease, or teaching kids to read. Indeed, a sense of purpose appears to have evolved in humans so that we can accomplish big things together—which may be why it's associated with better physical and mental health. Purpose is adaptive, in an
evolutionary sense. It helps both individuals and the species to survive. Many seem to believe that purpose arises from your special gifts and sets you apart from other people—but that's only part of the truth. It also grows from our connection to others, which is why a crisis of purpose is often a symptom of isolation. Once you find your path, you'll
almost certainly find others traveling along with you, hoping to reach the same destination—a community. Here are six ways to overcome isolation and discover your purpose in life. 1. Read Reading connects us to people we'll never know, across time and space—an experience that research says is linked to a sense of meaning and purpose. (Note:
"Meaning" and "purpose" are related but separate social-scientific constructs. Purpose is a part of meaning; meaning is a much broader concept that usually also includes value, efficacy, and self-worth.) In a 2010 paper, for example, Leslie Francis studied a group of nearly 26,000 teenagers throughout England and Wales—and found that those who
read the Bible more tended to have a stronger sense of purpose. Secular reading seems to make a difference, as well. In a survey of empirical studies, Raymond A. Mar and colleagues found a link between reading poetry and fiction and a sense of purpose among adolescents. "Reading fiction might allow adolescents to reason about the whole lives of
characters, giving them specific insight into an entire lifespan without having to have fully lived most of their own lives. In this sense, purpose is an act of the imagination. Many people I interviewed for this article mentioned pivotal books or
ideas they found in books. The writing of historian W.E.B. Du Bois pushed social-justice activist Art McGee to embrace a specific vision of African-American identity and liberation. Journalist Michael Stoll found inspiration in the "social responsibility theory of journalism," which he read about at Stanford University. "Basically, reporters and editors
have not just the ability but also the duty to improve their community by being independent arbiters of problems that need solving," he says. "It's been my professional North Star ever since." Spurred by this idea, Michael went on to launch an award-winning nonprofit news agency called The San Francisco Public Press. So, if you're feeling a crisis of
purpose in your life, go to the bookstore or library or university. Find books that matter to you—and they might help you to see what matters in your own life. 2. Turn hurts into healing for others Of course, finding purpose is not just an intellectual pursuit; it's something we need to feel. That's why it can grow out of suffering, both our own and they might help you to see what matters in your own life. 2. Turn hurts into healing for others Of course, finding purpose is not just an intellectual pursuit; it's something we need to feel. That's why it can grow out of suffering, both our own and they might help you to see what matters in your own life. 2. Turn hurts into healing for others Of course, finding purpose is not just an intellectual pursuit; it's something we need to feel. That's why it can grow out of suffering, both our own and they might help you to see what matters in your own life. 2. Turn hurts into healing for others Of course, finding purpose is not just an intellectual pursuit; it's something we need to feel. That's why it can grow out of suffering healing for others of the purpose is not just an intellectual pursuit.
others'. Kezia Willingham was raised in poverty in Corvallis, Oregon, her family riven by domestic violence. "No one at school intervened or helped or supported my mother, myself, or my brother when I was growing up poor, ashamed, and sure that my existence was a mistake," she says. "I was running the streets, skipping school, having sex with
strangers, and abusing every drug I could get my hands on." When she was 16, Kezia enrolled at an alternative high school that "led me to believe I had options and a path out of poverty." She made her way to college and was especially "drawn to the kids with 'issues'"—kids like the one she had once been. She says: I want the kids out there who
grew up like me, to know they have futures ahead of them. I want them to know they are smart, even if they may not meet state academic standards. I want them to know that they are just as good and valuable as any other human who happens to be born into more privileged circumstances. Because they are smart, even if they may not meet state academic standards. I want them to know that they are just as good and valuable as any other human who happens to be born into more privileged circumstances.
telling them otherwise. Sometimes, another person's pain can lead us to purpose. When Christopher Pepper was a senior in high school, a "trembling, tearful friend" told him that she had been raped by a classmate. "I comforted as well as I could, and left that conversation vowing that I would do something to others," says
Christopher. He kept that promise by becoming a Peer Rape Educator in college—and then a sex educator in San Francisco public schools. Why do people like Kezia and Christopher seem to find purpose in suffering—while others are crushed by it? Part of the answer, as we'll see next, might have to do with the emotions and behaviors we cultivate in
ourselves. 3. Cultivate awe, gratitude, and altruism Certain emotions and behaviors that promote health and well-being can also foster a sense of purpose—specifically, awe, gratitude, and altruism. Several studies conducted by the Greater Good Science Center's Dacher Keltner have shown that the experience of awe makes us feel connected to
something larger than ourselves—and so can provide the emotional foundation for a sense of purpose. Of course, awe all by itself won't give you a purpose in life. It's not enough to just feel like you're a small part of something big; you also need to feel driven to make a positive impact on the world. That's where gratitude and generosity come into
play. "It may seem counterintuitive to foster purpose by cultivating a grateful mindset, but it works," writes psychologist Kendall Bronk, a leading expert on purpose. As research by William Damon, Robert Emmons, and others has found, children and adults who are able to count their blessings are much more likely to try to "contribute to the world
beyond themselves." This is probably because, if we can see how others make our world a better place, we'll be more motivated to give something back. Here we arrive at altruism. There's little question, at this point, that helping others is associated with a meaningful, purposeful life. In one study, for example, Daryl Van Tongeren and colleagues
found that people who engage in more altruistic behaviors, like volunteering or donating money, tend to have a greater sense of purpose in their lives. Interestingly, gratitude and altruism seem to work together to generate meaning and purpose in their lives. Interestingly, gratitude and altruism seem to work together to generate meaning and purpose in their lives.
—and those people later reported a stronger sense of purpose. More recent work by Christina Karns and colleagues found that altruism and gratitude are neurologically linked, activating the same reward circuits in the brain. 4. Listen to what other people appreciate about you Shawn Taylor with his family Giving thanks can help you find your
purpose. But you can also find purpose in what people thank you for. Like Kezia Willingham, Shawn Taylor had a tough childhood—and he was also drawn to working with kids who had severe behavioral problems. Unlike her, however, he often felt like the work was a dead-end. "I thought I sucked at my chosen profession," he says. Then, one day, a
girl he'd worked with five years before contacted him. "She detailed how I helped to change her life," says Shawn—and she asked him to walk her down the aisle when she got married. Shawn hadn't even thought about her, in all that time. "Something clicked and I knew this was my path. No specifics, but youth work was my purpose." The artists,
writers, and musicians I interviewed often described how appreciation from others fueled their work. Dani Burlison never lacked a sense of purpose, and she toiled for years as a writer and social-justice activist in Santa Rosa, California. But when wildfires swept through her community, Dani discovered that her strengths were needed in a new way:
"I've found that my networking and emergency response skills have been really helpful to my community, my students, and to firefighters!" Although there is no research that directly explores how being thanked might fuel a sense of purpose, as many
of these stories suggest. 5. Find and build community As we see in Dani's case, we can often find our sense of purpose in family. In tandem with his reading, Art McGee found purpose—working for social and racial justice—in "love and respect for my hardworking father," he says.
"Working people like him deserved so much better." Environmental and social-justice organizer Jodi Sugerman-Brozan feels driven "to leave the world, and their kids' world)," she says. It "definitely influences how I parent (wanting to raise anti-
racist, feminist, radical kids who will want to continue the fight and be leaders)." Of course, our kids may not embrace our purpose and community and community
fueled a strong sense of purpose in Amber: "To be a good Christian and role model. To be a blessing to other people more like them. When she came out as a lesbian at age 27, Amber's family and community swiftly and suddenly cast her out. This triggered a deep crisis of
purpose—one that she resolved by finding a new faith community "that helped shape me and gave me a sense of belonging," she says. Often, the nobility of our purpose reflects the company we keep. The purpose that came from Amber's parents was based on exclusion, as she discovered. There was no place—and no purpose—for her in that
community once she embraced an identity they couldn't accept. A new sense of purpose came with the new community and identity she helped to build, of gay and lesbian Christians. If you're having trouble remembering your purpose, take a look at the people around you. What do you have in common with them? What are they trying to be? What
impact do you see them having on the world? Is that impact a positive one? Can you join with them in making that impact? What do they need? Can you give it them? If the answers to those questions don't inspire you, then you might need to find a new community—and with that, a new purpose may come. 6. Tell your story Amber Cantorna Reading
can help you find your purpose—but so can writing, Purpose often arises from curiosity about your own life. What obstacles have you encountered? What strengths help make life better for others? "We all have the ability to make a narrative out of our own lives,
says Emily Esfahani Smith, author of the 2017 book The Power of Meaning. "It gives us clarity on our own lives, how to understand ourselves, and gives us a framework that goes beyond the day-to-day and basically helps us make sense of our experiences." That's why Amber Cantorna wrote her memoir, Refocusing My Family: Coming Out, Being Cast
Out, and Discovering the True Love of God. At first depressed after losing everyone she loved, Amber soon discovered new strengths in herself—and she is using her book to help build a nonprofit organization called Beyond to support gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians in their coming-out process. One 2008 study found that those who
see meaning and purpose in their lives are able to tell a story of change and growth, where they managed to overcome the obstacles they encountered. In other words, creating a narrative like Amber's can help us to see our sense of self-efficacy.
This is a valuable reflective process to all people, but Amber took it one step further, by publishing her autobiography and turning it into a tool for social change. Today, Amber's purpose is to help people like her feel less alone. "My sense of purpose has grown a lot with my desire to share my story—and the realization that so many other people have
shared my journey." Many of the people I know seem to have a deep sense of purpose. Whether working for racial justice, teaching children to read, making inspiring art, or collecting donations of masks and face shields for hospitals during the pandemic, they've found ways to blend their passion, talents, and care for the world in a way that infuses
their lives with meaning. Luckily for them, having a purpose in life is associated with all kinds of benefits. Research suggests that purpose is tied to having better health, longevity, and even economic success. It feels good to have a sense of purpose, knowing that you are using your skills to help others in a way that matters to you. But how do you go
about finding your purpose if it's not obvious to you? Is it something you develop naturally over the course of a lifetime? Or are there steps you can take to encourage more purpose in your life? Likely both, says Kendall Bronk, a researcher who directs the Adolescent Moral Development Lab at Claremont Graduate University. People can find a sense
of purpose organically—or through deliberate exercises and self-reflection. Sometimes, just having someone talk to you makes you think more intentionally about your life and your purpose, says Bronk. In her work with adolescents, she's found that some teens find purpose after experiencing hardship. Maybe a kid who has
experienced racism decides to become a civil rights advocate. Or one who's suffered severe illness are extremely hard to overcome without help from others. But Bronk's research suggests that having a supportive social network—caring family members, like-minded friends, or
mentors, for example—helps youth to reframe hardship as a challenge they can play a role in changing for the better. That might be true of adults, too. While hardship can lead to purpose, most people probably find purpose in a more meandering way, says Bronk—through a combination of education, experience, and self-reflection, often helped along
by encouragement from others. But finding your purpose can be jump-started, too, given the right tools. In a paper titled "Fostering Purpose Among Young Adults," she and her colleagues found that exercises aimed at uncovering your values, interests, and skills, as well as practicing positive emotions like gratitude, can help
purpose in life. Here are some of her recommendations based on her research on purpose. 1. Identify the things you care about Purpose is all about applying your skills toward contributing to the greater Good's Purpose Challenge, designed by
Bronk and her team, high school seniors were asked to think about the world around them—their homes, communities, the world at large—and visualize what they would do if they had a magic wand and could change anything they might take
to contribute toward moving the world a little closer to that ideal. A similar process is recommended for older adults by Jim Emerman of Encore.org, an organization that helps seniors find new purpose in life. Instead of envisioning an ideal future world, though, he suggests posing three questions to yourself: What are you good at? What have you
done that gave you a skill that can be used for a cause? What do you care about in your community? By reflecting on these questions, he says, older adults can brainstorm ideas for repurposing skills and pursuing interests developed over a lifetime toward helping the world. 2. Reflect on what matters most Sometimes it can be hard to single out one or
two things that matter most to you because your circle of care and concern is far-ranging. Understanding what you value most may help you narrow down your purpose in life to something manageable that also truly resonates with you. There are several good values surveys to choose from, including these three recommended by
Positive Psychology, com: the Valued Living Questionnaire, the Portrait Values Questionnaire, and the Personal Values Questionnaire, the Portrait Values of the Survey used in research studies and may be helpful to those who feel overwhelmed by all they want to change. Bronk found that helping people prioritize their values is useful for finding purpose. The survey used
in Greater Good's purpose challenge—where students were asked to look at common values and rank which were most important, least important, least important, and in between—has been shown to be effective in helping people clarify their purpose. Once you're clearer on your deepest values, Bronk recommends asking yourself: What do these values say about you
as a person? How do these values influence your daily life? How might they relate to what you want to do with the rest of your life? Doing this exercise can help you discover how you can put your values to use. frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen> 3. Recognize your
strengths and talents We all have strengths and skills that we've developed over our lifetimes, which help make up our unique personalities. Yet some of us may be unsure of what we have to offer. If we need help, a survey like the VIA Character Strengths Survey can be useful in identifying our personal strengths and embracing them more fully.
Then, you can take the results and think about how you can apply them toward something you really care about. But it can also be helpful to ask others—teachers, friends, family, colleagues, mentors—for input. In the Purpose Challenge, students were asked to send emails to five people who knew them well and to pose questions like: What do you
think I'm particularly good at? What do you think I really enjoy? How do you think I'll leave my mark on the world? Adults can do this if they need feedback, too—either formally in conversation with trusted others. People who know you well may be able to see things in you that you don't recognize in yourself, which can point you in
unexpected directions. On the other hand, there is no need to overly rely on that feedback if it doesn't resonate. Getting input is useful if it clarifies your strengths—not if it's way off base. 4. Try volunteering Finding purpose involves more than just self-reflection. According to Bronk, it's also about trying out new things and seeing how those activities
enable you to use your skills to make a meaningful difference in the world. Volunteering in a community organization focused on something of interest to you could provide you with some experience and do good at the same time. Working with an organization serving others can put you in touch with people who share your passions and inspire you. In
fact, it's easier to find and sustain purpose with others' support—and a do-gooder network can introduce you to opportunities and a community that shares your concern. Volunteer activities will lead to a sense of purpose. "Sometimes
volunteering can be deadening," Stanford University researcher Anne Colby. "It needs to be engaging. You have to feel you're accomplishing something." When you find a good match for you, volunteering will likely "feel right" in some way—not draining, but invigorating. 5. Imagine your best possible self This exercise if particularly useful in
conjunction with the magic-wand exercise described above. In Greater Good's Purpose Challenge, high school students were asked to imagine themselves at 40 years of age if everything had gone as well as it could have in their lives. Then, they answered questions, like: What are you doing? What is important to you? What do you really care about,
and why? The why part is particularly important, because purposes usually emerges from our reasons for caring, says Bronk, older folks may want to reflect back rather than look ahead. She suggests we think about what we've always wanted to do
but maybe couldn't because of other obligations (like raising kids or pursuing a career). There seems to be something about seeing what you truly want for yourself and the world that can help bring you get there. 6. Cultivate
positive emotions like gratitude and awe To find purpose, it helps to foster positive emotions, like awe and gratitude. That's because each of these emotions is tied to well-being, caring about others, and finding meaning in life, which all help us focus on how we can contribute to the world. In her study with young adults, Bronk found that practicing
gratitude was particularly helpful in pointing students toward purpose. Reflecting on the blessings of their lives often leads young people to "pay it forward" in some way, which is how gratitude can lead to purpose. There are many ways to cultivate awe and gratitude. Awe can be inspired by seeing the beauty in nature or recalling an inspirational
moment. Gratitude can be practiced by keeping a gratitude journal or writing a gratitude letter to someone who helped you in life. Whatever tools you use, developing gratitude and awe has the added benefit of being good for your emotional well-being, which can give you the energy and motivation you need to carry out your purposeful goals. 7. Look
to the people you admire Sometimes the people we admire most in life give us a clue to how we might want to contribute to a better world ourselves. Reading about the work of civil rights leaders or climate activists can give us a moral uplift that can serve as motivation for working toward the greater good. However, sometimes looking at these
larger-than-life examples can be too intimidating, says Bronk. If so, you can look for everyday people who are doing good in smaller ways. Maybe you have a friend who volunteers to collect food for the homeless or a colleague whose work in promoting social justice inspires you. You don't need fame to fulfill your purpose in life. You just need to look
to your inner compass—and start taking small steps in the direction that means the most to you. This article is part of a GGSC initiative on "Finding Purpose Across the Lifespan," supported by the John Templeton Foundation. In a series of articles, podcast episodes, and other resources, we'll be exploring why and how to deepen your sense of purpose
at different stages of life. A growing body of research suggests our social-psychological health matters when it comes to health and longevity. For example, studies have found that people who are more satisfied with life or have a stronger sense of purpose live longer than those who don't. But do those two factors matter so much for longevity when
you consider other ones, like your age or gender, or whether you're a smoker or drinker or have a chronic health condition? How much does life satisfaction and purpose in shaping human life. "Purpose in life remained significant in all of our analyses,
while life satisfaction didn't," says lead study author Frank Martela of Aalto University, Finland. "That suggests that purpose is the more reliable predictor of longevity." Purpose vs. satisfaction In this study, researchers drew on data from almost 6,000 adults who'd participated in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study between 1994 and
1996. These middle-aged participants had reported on their physical health, overall life satisfaction, relationships, and work status. They'd also provided information about their sense of purpose by saying how much they agreed with statements like "I live life".
one day at a time and do not really think about the future"; "I sometimes feel as if I have done all there is to do in life"; or "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them." By using national databases, the researchers knew that 1,857 participants had died before 2022. So, by looking at all participants' life-satisfaction and
purpose-in-life ratings, the researchers could run some analyses to see if higher purpose and satisfaction was not related directly to how long they lived. On the other hand, people who reported having a stronger purpose in
life were more likely to be alive in 2023 than people who didn't. For Martela, this meant having purpose in life could be more relevant for your longevity, while purpose
in life was," he says. How purpose might extend life To get at when purpose and life satisfaction may be relevant for influencing one's longevity, Martela and his colleagues ran several additional analyses. First, they considered a participant's demographics—a combination of their age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, marital status, and more, all
of which may affect mortality. For example, women and married people tend to live longer, while African Americans and less educated people tend to live shorter lives, in general. They found that people benefitted at all ages from both greater
purpose and life satisfaction, though the oldest participants tended to benefit slightly more than younger participants from having purpose. Next, his team considered a person's health risks. Here, they found that, even if a person was at risk for an early death (from being a smoker or suffering from a chronic illness, for example), they lived longer if
they had greater life satisfaction or purpose in life. The association was weaker, but still significant. When they considered people's own self-reported health, though, the relationship between having a purpose in life satisfaction may be
closely tied to how healthy you feel, says Martela. "It's hard to be satisfied with your life if you struggle with your health is good or bad can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life," he says. "However, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you are with your life, you can have a significant impact on how satisfied you have a si
colleagues tested how a person's life satisfaction affected the role of purpose on longevity, and vice versa. They found that purpose was still important, no matter one's life satisfaction—but life satisfaction for
extending one's life. Why would purpose in life affect longevity this way? Martela suggests that since purpose involves striving for something meaningful, it's more active than life satisfaction, which is more of a passive assessment of one's life.
through hard times better than life satisfaction. That doesn't mean having life satisfaction isn't important to longevity at all, he says. But their research suggests that its importance may depend on other things, like your general health, ethnicity, gender, or health risk factors. Purpose in life, on the other hand, may be less dependent on these things,
and so worth cultivating for its own sake. Fortunately, there are ways to deliberately find one's purpose at any age, says Martela. "We should not only focus on life satisfaction but also think about questions related to purpose when we
think about our lives," he says. "A life of purpose can energize and give hope even during those moments when the conditions of one's life leave one unsatisfied." Scroll To Top By Science of Happiness Podcast | May 22, 2025 Learn how poetry can help your brain handle stress, process feelings, and spark insight. By Science of Happiness Podcast |
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