



Purpose in Life

MIDUS

Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

MIDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES: A NATIONAL STUDY OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

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What Does It Mean to Have Purpose?



People with purpose have goals that they feel make their life worth living.



They have beliefs about what matters that provide directions for how to live.



Purpose gives meaning, not only to their present, but also to their past and future.

The Benefits of a Purposeful Life

Viktor Frankl was one of the first to write about the importance of purpose in our lives. He published "Man's Search for Meaning" in 1946, which described his 3-year ordeal in Nazi concentration camps. The book went on to be read by millions of people all over the world.

Trained as a psychiatrist, Frankl detailed how he kept himself strong by focusing on beautiful things from his past, such as how much he loved his wife, as well as on envisioning a future in which he would talk with others about what mattered in his survival. Central to his insights was the realization that although he could not control what was happening to him, he could choose his response to it, which was to try to find meaning in the experience. Frankl went on to create logotherapy – an approach to treating emotional distress by helping people find or create purpose and meaning from their adverse experiences.

A half century later, the benefits of purposeful life engagement have entered health research in a dramatic way. We highlight here some findings from multiple studies, including MIDUS, that have documented the health benefits of perceiving that one's life has purpose and meaning. **We are sending you this newsletter with our thanks, as a way of showing how you are making a meaningful difference in our research by participating in the MIDUS study.**

Sincerely,

Carol D. Ryff, Director
MIDUS National Study of Health & Well-Being

Thank You!

What Happens to Purpose in Life as People Age?

- MIDUS findings from the first national survey, as well as from subsequent follow-up surveys, showed that purpose in life declines for some people as they grow older.
- However, data also showed a lot of variation among older participants, meaning that some are able to maintain high levels of purposeful engagement even into old age. [Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Kim, 2020]



Importantly, those who maintain a sense of purpose are reaping significant health benefits, including living longer.

Purpose is Associated with Living Longer

- Data from MIDUS collected over a 14-year period showed that those with a higher sense of purpose were less likely to die than those with a lower sense of purpose (after adjusting for other factors).
- This was true for people in all age groups, showing the importance of establishing a direction early in life and maintaining or deepening it thereafter.
- A large meta-analysis combined data from ten studies (including MIDUS) and also found that people with higher purpose lived longer, even after adjusting for factors such as chronic disease, body weight, and smoking.

[Hill, 2014; Cohen, 2016]

Purpose is Associated with Better Health

Healthier Hearts:

- The above meta-analysis also showed that people with higher purpose had lower risk of heart attacks and stroke.

Substantially Reduced Risk of Alzheimer's:



- A community-based study of older adults showed that those with higher purpose were 2.4 times more likely to be free of Alzheimer's disease (AD) seven years later, compared to those with lower purpose.
- Higher purpose was also associated with reduced risk of mild cognitive impairment (a pre-cursor to AD).

Less Inflammation with Chronic Disease:

- MIDUS findings show that having multiple chronic conditions (arthritis, diabetes, back pain) did not prevent some older persons from experiencing a strong sense of purpose.
- Those with such conditions and higher purpose showed lower levels of the inflammation that often occur with chronic illness (measured by IL-6 & CRP), which may reduce symptom severity. [Cohen, 2016; Friedman & Ryff, 2012]

Why Does Purpose Improve Health?

Research on *why* purpose benefits health continues to unfold. MIDUS studies suggest the mechanisms below may help explain the reduced risk of disease:

- **Lower Allostatic Load:** Those with higher purpose have lower allostatic load, which measures wear and tear on multiple systems within the body (e.g., cardiovascular, immune, metabolic). Dysregulation of these systems can predict chronic illness such as heart disease.
- **Better Brain Processes Linked to Lower Levels of Stress Hormones:** Scans of brain circuitry showed that those with higher well-being, including purpose in life, reacted longer to positive images (in brain regions referred to as "reward circuitry"), which, in turn, was associated with lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol over the course of the day. Higher cortisol has been associated with multiple physical health problems.
- **Less Inflammation:** Although completing fewer years of school is associated with increased inflammation (measured by IL-6), which is a contributing factor to chronic disease, some with a high school diploma or less nonetheless reported high levels of purpose and showed the same lower levels of inflammation seen among those with college degrees.

[Zilioli, 2015; Heller, 2013; Morozink, 2010]

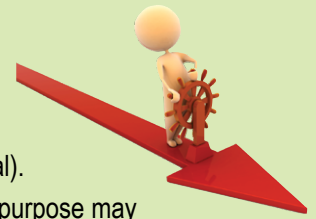
The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for.

∞ Fyodor Dostoevsky

Purpose is Associated with Other Important Benefits

Thinking Skills:

- MIDUS participants with higher purpose in life had better cognitive/intellectual skills (memory, planning/problem-solving, staying focused on a goal).
- This was true for people of all ages, indicating that purpose may protect against decline in memory and thinking skills that some experience as they get older.
- Working toward a purpose likely requires use of intellectual skills, which may help keep those skills sharp with age. [Lewis, 2017]



Improves Day-to-Day Experiences:

Over an eight day period, MIDUS participants reported how often they experienced:

- positive & negative emotions (calm, satisfaction, fear, frustration)
- physical problems (headache, fatigue, cough)
- stressful situations (arguments, work problems)
- positive events (sharing a good laugh).

Results showed that those with higher purpose:

- had fewer negative emotions
- had more positive emotions, which did not decrease in response to stressful situations
- had fewer physical symptoms, which did not increase on stressful days
- experienced as many stressful events, but had fewer negative emotions afterwards.

[Hill, 2018 & 2020]

Combating the Opioid Epidemic:

- MIDUS data show that reported misuse of drugs (without a doctor's prescription, in larger amounts than prescribed) increased from the mid-1990s to the early 2010s, especially among midlife and older adults (aged 50-76) with lower incomes and less education.
- During the same time period, mental health also deteriorated (increased depression & negative emotions) among those with less income and education, and overall reports of back pain nearly doubled, both of which may lead people to relieve symptoms by misusing opioid painkillers.
- However, having greater purpose was associated with higher pain tolerance and less depression; those showing higher purpose were less likely to be misusing drugs 10 years later. [Glei, 2020; Kim, 2020]

Taking Better Care of Oneself:

Other studies have linked higher purpose in life to positive health behaviors, including:

- exercising more
- eating healthier
- using preventive health care services
- better sleep quality. [Ryff & Kim, 2020]



Activities that Can Nourish Purpose

These are some of the activities that MIDUS research has associated with increased purpose, which could translate into future interventions to help improve people's sense of purpose in life:

Volunteering:

- Those over 65 who suffered major role losses (they were no longer employed, married, or raising children) had a lower sense of purpose.
- However, those who volunteered were protected from having lower purpose, perhaps because volunteering provided new social roles and different meaningful activities. [Greenfield, 2004]



Social Connection & Being Religious:

Being more socially connected is associated with having more purpose:

- Providing support to friends can increase purpose by making people feel needed and useful.
- Belonging to a group can increase purpose if members share similar values and pursue common goals.

But what if you lack quality relationships?

- For those whose friendships were more stressful than supportive, being more religious was associated with having more purpose.



Religion may bolster purpose in two ways:

- Relationships with divine beings may fulfill similar needs as human friendships: divine beings can be consulted for advice & reassurance; divine relationships can make one feel valued & needed.
- Religious beliefs may include a divine plan or world view that provides a purpose. [Chan, 2019]

Purpose at Work:

- Those who got more help and support from their co-workers were more likely to have a higher sense of purpose. These supportive ties can increase a sense of belonging, which is linked to having purpose.
- People whose jobs required a high level of skill also had more purpose. Using one's expertise to overcome obstacles on the job may lead to feeling more purposeful. [Weston, 2021]



One should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has their own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfillment.

 Viktor Frankl

In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl explained why he thought many were suffering from lack of purpose. He said that: no instinct tells us what we *have* to do, no tradition tells us what we *ought* to do, and sometimes we don't even know what we *wish* to do.

He suggested these ways to find purpose:

- by creating a work or doing a deed (achievements)
- by experiencing something (goodness, truth, beauty, nature, culture)
- or encountering someone (helping those you love achieve their full potential)
- by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering (when we cannot change our situation, we must change ourselves, such as by finding meaning in sacrifice or bravery).



In his words:

There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that so effectively helps one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life.

Please Stay in Touch

Thank you for making this research possible by completing past surveys that included questions about purpose in life. We'd like to continue sending you future newsletters, so please:

Send any changes in your address, phone(s), and/or email(s) to:

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