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What am I going to do with my life? What really matters to me? How will I leave my mark? These questions can fill us with hope, inspiration, and irritation. Leading a life of purpose, or making an enduring commitment to
contributing to the broader world in personally meaningful ways, is associated with a range of benefits, including better physical health, enhanced psychological well-being, superior academic achievement, and enriched social connections. Despite these advantages, leading a life of purpose is rare, as researcher William Damon describes in his 2009
book, The Path to Purpose: As many as two out of three young adults struggle to articulate a clear purpose for their lives. Before young people can identify a purpose in life is not often studied, but when it has been, scholars have found it to be a source of stress and anxiety
especially when it feels like everyone else has it all figured out. (Rest assured, others are likely still working it out, too!) Members of my Adolescent Moral Development Lab and I became interested in how we could help young adults navigate the potentially distressing process of searching for a purpose in life. With the generous support of a grant
from the Templeton Religion Trust, we conducted a two-year study, and our emerging findings suggest practicing patience and purpose. How patience and purpose go hand in hand Patience is the ability to stay actively engaged in working toward a goal without
becoming frustrated. Patiently pursuing purpose does not mean sitting by and waiting for inspiration to strike. Instead, it means engaging in the personal reflection and intentional conversations that help us figure out how we want to contribute to the broader world without feeling rushed or hurried. Accepting that the search is a long-term endeavor
can help us cultivate our purpose in a more efficient and growth-supporting way. Practicing patience may facilitate the search for purpose is not a one-and-done kind of activity. It is unlikely to be the case that we search for a purpose once and then spend the rest of
our lives pursuing that single purpose. Instead, we tend to pursue multiple purposes across our lifetimes. Purposes wax and wane with the other things going on in our lives. For instance, we may find purpose in parenting, but that purpose may transform when we launch our adult children and reinvest in personally meaningful work-related aims.
Others of us may find purpose in work, and upon retirement those purposes may recede as we find new ways of contributing to our communities. For young adults, purposes are likely to evolve as they navigate the many transitions associated with this stage of life (e.g., moving from high school into college and from college into the working world).
Moves like these are often accompanied by evolutions in our purposes in life. The point is that the search for new ways of making progress toward our personally meaningful aims or for new ways of contributing to the broader world
Given that the search for purpose is likely to represent a long-term, possibly even a lifelong, activity, it is worthwhile to understand how we can engage in the self-exploration process in the most productive and rewarding way possible. Emerging findings from our study suggest patience may help optimize the search process in at least five ways.
Practicing patience allows us to stand back and take in the full picture of the aim we are after. We can become so focused on figuring out what it is we want to accomplish that we lose the forest for the trees. Taking a broad perspective on the purpose development process may yield insights into progress made to date, and recognizing and even
celebrating this progress can fuel our ongoing efforts. Allowing ourselves time to take in the bigger picture may reveal more efficient routes for making progress toward our purpose. Patience may bolster resilience. Patient individuals take setbacks in stride; they continue making forward progress despite them. Rather than being derailed by
challenges in the pursuit of purpose, patient individuals view hardships as inevitable and surmountable. Practicing patience is an important way of cultivating the resilience required to both search for and pursue a purpose in life, as Anne Colby suggests in her 2020 paper, "Purpose as a Unifying Goal for Higher Education." Practicing patience may
encourage a more thoughtful approach to pursuing meaningful aims. Rather than moving forward in haste, patient individuals move ahead with intention and deliberation, and this may support more sustainable progress in the search for purpose. Compared to others, patient individuals may be more likely to take time to develop relationships with
mentors and like-minded peers who can facilitate their progress toward purpose. Slowing down to connect with others along our path to purpose can help us make progress in figuring out how we want to leave our mark (and these relationships may also support our pursuit of purpose, once we have determined what it entails). Patience in the pursuit
of larger aims may foster personal growth. In addition to encouraging resilience and social connections, practicing patience builds self-regulation, self-discipline, and deferred-gratification skills. Developing these strengths of character is likely to benefit individuals in many life domains, including in future periods of self-exploration and subsequent
purpose cultivation efforts. Finally, patient individuals may be more likely than impatient individuals to enjoy the search. Patience enables us to savor the process of figuring out what matters most and how we want to meaningfully contribute to the broader world. It allows us time to celebrate the small successes and be present in the purpose
cultivation process. The mindfulness that can accompany a patient pursuit of purpose is likely to enhance our well-being during the search process and in our lives more generally. In each of these ways, patience may represent a critical component of a healthy and productive search for purpose. The bottom line: Whether searching for our own
purpose in life or supporting someone in their search, remember to practice patience. When we find ourselves becoming agitated and frustrated by the feeling that everyone else has it all figured out, we should remind ourselves to slow down. Take heart in knowing that the process requires time. Focus on the big picture, recall that setbacks are
inevitable and surmountable, connect with others who can support your search, take stock of gains, and find the joy in the process, if you can. Before you know it, you might just have figured out how you want to use your skills and talents to contribute in meaningful ways to the world beyond yourself. To read the published manuscripts from which
these findings were drawn, please visit Kendall Cotton Bronk's website. Upon publication, articles from this study will be posted there. 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, which has blossomed in recent years. According to Strecher, the strength
of one's life purpose—which involves a combination of living 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 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' telomeres—the end caps on genes that tend to shorten with age—were measured before and after some of the moms attended a
mindful meditation 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 mindfulness, as expected, but by increases in a sense of life purpose, which the
meditation inspired. Studies like these show the potential positive impacts of purpose, which, Strecher argues, should encourage us to consider promoting it in our schools and workplaces. For example, students who are encouraged to consider promoting it in our schools and workplaces.
such as science and math classes. And businesses that put 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 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 self with your life purpose requires energy and willpower: wind in your sails to move you forward, and a strong
rudder to prevent being blown off course," he writes. But how can we move from imagining our purpose to fulfilling it? 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 are all bidirectional—meaning they influence each other, he writes. Therefore, it makes sense to both figure out your purpose are all bidirectional—meaning they influence each other, he writes.
pursue your purpose. Much of his book is devoted to suggesting just how to do that. Though studies found throughout 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." 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 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 cholesterol tests and cancer screenings. In short, a sense of purpose is very strongly associated with mental and physical well-being—and that's why it is core to most 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
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
reported lower purpose than people who identified either as women or men. While it may be tempting to think that women-identifying quiz takers find more 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 higher purpose (such as education, health care, and mental health services) is greater than in the 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 quiz. 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 time Confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies that have reported increasing purpose with time Confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies that have reported increasing purpose with time Confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies that have reported increasing purpose with time Confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies that have reported increasing purpose with time Confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies that have reported increasing purpose with time Confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies and the confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies are sufficient to the confirming popular ideas about wisdom later in life—and in agreement with several studies are sufficient to the confirming popular ideas are sufficient to the c
each decade of life. The data also show a flattening of the decade-to-decade increase in purpose after 60, which may simply reflect a crisis of purpose after 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 understand the importance of that work. What about ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences in GGSC purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences associated with other factors and the purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences associated with other factors are purpose quiz scores related to ethnic background? Differences associated with other factors are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores are purpose quiz scores as of the purpose quiz scores are
tenth of a point on the scale. Scores from 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 score
relative to the other ethnic backgrounds.) Ethnicity-based differences on the GGSC 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 and the contract of the contract of purpose in society.
from various cultures might not interpret this question the same way: "How excited are you about carrying out the plans that you set for yourself?" For starters, being "excited" 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
educational credentials allow us to "follow our passions." Neighborhood makes a small difference While the difference who live in big cities reported higher purpose 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." This data point
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 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 People with stronger political views report higher purpose in life than people with
moderate political views. While these differences are numerically small (just over one-tenth of a point lower in the moderate group), they are easy to interpret. Since political views are typically intertwined with people with stronger political views. It is
also notable that people's political views typically grow more pronounced 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 into 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? 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 protect your health? A new study aimed to find out—and their answer
reveals the power of 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 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 weight, chronic diseases, alcohol use, and smoking habits. Finally
they reported on 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 were tied to living longer. What they found was illuminating. Without considering any other factors, a person's life satisfaction was not related
directly to how long they lived. On the other hand, people who reported having a stronger purpose in life could be more relevant for your longevity than life satisfaction—which may be dependent on other things. "You might think that there is a
confounding variable to explain this, but life satisfaction wasn't significant for longevity, while purpose in life was," he says. How 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 shorter lives, in general. They found that, no matter one's overall demographics,
purpose in life still mattered for longevity. They also found that people benefitted at all ages from both greater purpose and life satisfaction, though the oldest 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 and longevity held, while
the relationship between life satisfaction and longevity did not. This suggests your life satisfaction may be closely tied to how health so, whether 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 strong purpose, no matter your health status." In a final analysis, Martela and his colleagues tested how a person's life satisfaction—but life satisfaction—but life satisfaction wasn't significant if someone had low
levels of purpose. This supports the conclusion that purpose is more helpful than life satisfaction for extending one's life. Why would purpose in life affect longevity this way? Martela suggests that since purpose in volves striving for something meaningful, it's more active than life satisfaction, which is more of a passive assessment of one's life.
situation. Additionally, he thinks purpose might be a kind of coping mechanism, allowing people to get through hard times better than life satisfaction. That doesn't mean having life satisfaction isn't 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, even in midlife. And, since we have these tools at our disposal, we should consider developing a sense of 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." 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 about what matters 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 decides to
study medicine. Of course, experiences like poverty and 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 point you toward your purpose in life. Here are some of her recommendations based on her research on purpose at uncovering your values, interests, and skills, as well as practicing positive emotions like gratitude, can help point you toward your purpose in life.
you care about Purpose is all about applying your skills toward contributing to the greater good in a way that matters to you. So, identifying what you care about is an important first step. In 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 (and why). Afterward, they could use that reflection to consider more concrete steps 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 your care about in your community? By an organization that helps seniors find new purpose in life. Instead of envisioning an ideal future world, though, he suggests posing three questions to your care about in your community? By an organization that helps seniors find new purpose in life. Instead of envisioning an ideal future world, though, he suggests posing three questions to your care about in your community? By a cause? What he would be 
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 PositivePsychology.com: the Valued Living Questionnaire, the Portrait Values Questionnaire, and the Persona
Values Questionnaire. All have been 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 and may be helpful to those who feel overwhelmed by all they want to change. Bronk found that helping people prioritize their values and may be helpful to those who feel overwhelmed by all they want to change.
were most 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 or informally in conversation with trusted others. People who know you well may be able to see things in you 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. Volunteering has the added benefit of improving our health and longevity, at least for some people. However, not all 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, because purposes usually emerges from our reasons for caring, says
Bronk. Of course, those of us who are a bit older can still find these questions valuable. However, 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 closer to achieving it, perhaps by focusing your attention on the people and experiences you encounter that may help 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 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 at these larger-than-life examples can be too intimidating, says Bronk. If so, you can look for everyday people who are doing at these larger than-life examples can be too intimidating, says Bronk. If so, you can look for everyday people who are doing at these larger than-life examples can be too intimidating, says Bronk. If so, you can look for everyday people who are doing at these larger than-life examples can be too intimidating, says Bronk. If so, you can look for everyday people who are doing at these largers are the same than look for everyday people who are doing at these largers are the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyday people who are doing at the same than look for everyd
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. Scroll To Top By Science of Happiness Podcast | May 22, 2025 Learn how poetry can help
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United States. How often do we stop to think about the meaning of life? If you're like me, probably not much. Even though I may feel a vague sense of anxiety around how my life is unfolding and the inevitability of death, I don't often slow down enough to reflect on what happens after we die or what it means to live life to the fullest. But according to
                                        psychologist Steven Heine, this is the wrong attitude. By reflecting on existential questions like these and considering our own answers to these questions, we can live a more authentic, meaningful existence. "When people feel they are leading a meaningful life, their lives make more sense to them," writes Heine
"They have a sense of purpose that guides their behaviors. They feel that their lives matter and that they're capable of making a difference in the world." Why focus on meaning As Heine writes, the search for meaning is an inherent part of being human. Yet many of us don't take the time to think about our place in the universe or what we value most
Instead of focusing on what might bring us more meaning, we distract ourselves with superficial sources of gratification—like overconsumption, alcohol and drugs, TV bingeing, or mindless social media scrolling—which are easier to access and, therefore, tempting. The ease with which we can get sucked into these interferes with making meaningful
changes to our lives, argues Heine. How to focus more on the larger context of our lives? We can look to philosophers who tried to explain the different approaches to the search for meaning, argues Heine. For example, Kierkegaard, a theologian, believed in God but also believed that people have free will and meaning in life is a personal
construction. Camus, on the other hand, believed there was no God or inherent meaning in life; so, we must revolt against the absurdity of it all and live life with passion. Contemplating conflicting views like these, Heine suggests, help us clarify our own beliefs about life's bigger questions. And, he adds, psychological science can help explain why we
have this urge to see our lives as coherent and meaningful. If they aren't, we'll experience unpleasant cognitive dissonance and try to resolve that, somehow. "Our brains have evolved what I term a sense-making system, which ensures that we feel what we are doing is meaningful and makes good sense . . . and directs us to make efforts to correct
matters whenever it senses anything that no longer makes sense," he writes. Though we have tools at our disposal, the path to more meaning is not necessarily straight or narrow, Heine writes, but one involving personal choice and many possible detours. Our personal sense of meaning will be affected by our culture and the events in our lives—how
we managed them and what they taught us. The trick is to recognize this and use it to our advantage. "Everything we encounter is wrapped up in layers of meanings, many of which are subjective and personal, and those meanings determine the ways that we make sense of our situation and the ways we act," writes Heine. In other words, we have
some power over the meaning we attribute to events and how these come together to shape the meaning of our lives overall. How to infuse life with more meaning The keys to a meaningful life generally stem from three things: our close personal relationships and communities, our work, and being connected to something greater than ourselves. Each
of these can have a huge effect on our well-being through the meaning they impart. While there isn't necessarily a one-size-fits-all approach, here are some tips Heine suggests for finding meaning: Ground yourself in your personal values. When people encounter problems in their lives, they can react in different ways depending on how grounded they
feel, says Heine. "When people are grounded, they feel that the key connections in their lives that provide the foundation of a sense of meaning are solidly intact," he writes. "They know who they are, who their important relationships are, and what they stand for, and they are in a better position to confront any new threats they might encounter." A
simple exercise of writing about what you value and why it's important has been found to benefit people in many situations, writes Heine. He points to studies suggesting that doing so can help people change their lifestyle in healthy ways, do better in school when disadvantaged, and accept their choices in life and their mortality more easily. Use
nostalgia to reflect on your life. Engaging in nostalgia can help us see parts of ourselves that have remained steadfast, despite the passage of time. By reflecting on past experiences and how we dealt with them, we can boost our sense of continuity and authenticity. To stimulate nostalgia, you can look through old photos, listen to favorite songs from
the past, or go through old keepsakes and recall what was happening at that time of your life, says Heine. Or you can contact an old friend and reminisce about the past. It can be especially powerful to recall times when you were socially connected with others, he adds, since relationships are so meaningful. "By making your past memories more
accessible, you will be better able to connect the path of your current life with the events of your path have shaped who you are today." Research has found that reflecting on our lives through nostalgia can help us increase our sense of meaning, feel more socially
connected, have a greater sense of authenticity, and be motivated to pursue important goals, among other benefits. Pursue self-transcendent experiences. There is a reason many people find meaning in religion—it can give us a sense of self-transcendent experiences. There is a reason many people find meaning in religion—it can give us a sense of self-transcendent experiences.
ways to seek transcendent experiences that inspire awe and wonder—and these, too, bring meaning to our lives. For example, watching a beautiful sunset or a starlit sky, witnessing people doing supremely moral acts, encountering deep states of meditation, or seeing incredible architecture or art can all inspire awe. When we have these kinds of
mind-expanding experiences, they challenge our view of everyday existence in a way that forces us to think about what life means and what matters. "During . . . awe experiences, people's lives often feel more significant and meaningful, as they have the sense that they are connected to something much vaster than themselves and that their existence
extends beyond the material world," writes Heine. Enhance your relationships, "One of the most relationships," writes Heine. For that reason, it's good to spend time with those we love—whether that means our families, friends, or
romantic partners. Nurturing these relationships brings a sense of meaning in life; even when they are challenging, our sense of meaning can help us maintain them in the long run. For example, a parent who finds taking care of their kids to be tedious or difficult may be able to persevere and find joy because of the meaning it provides in their lives.
Another way that relationships can imbue meaning is when we are part of a group or community with shared interests and values. If you lack this sense of belonging in your life, it could help to others in need or working toward preserving a green space in your community—which can
help connect you with others. Find meaning and purpose in your work. The work we do in the world is a primary way we fulfill existential needs, writes Heine. "When people think about who they are, a big part of their answer comes from what they do for a living or whatever organizations they belong to." Work provides a sense of identity and self-
worth, and it allows us to contribute to something greater than ourselves, which feels purposeful. Work can also bring us meaning if the money we earn is used to provide for others (e.g., our families). Simply recognizing this can help us see the meaning behind what we do for a living, making our lives richer. Some careers lend themselves easily to
finding meaning—such as those serving the needs of others, like teachers, health care workers, or the clergy, writes Heine. However, it can be challenging trends in the work world itself—like more remote work and less stable employment. But some of it comes from not
keeping in mind the greater purpose of our work—how it contributes to something bigger than ourselves and to our sense of self-efficacy. If you find it hard to find meaning in work—or if you've retired and have lost the everyday meaning work supplied—it's still possible to find meaning in volunteering, participating in groups that interest you, or
taking classes, writes Heine. Seek psychologically rich experiences. While there are many roads to happiness and meaning, one that is less commonly recognized is what psychologically rich life." This means seeking experiences that are novel and different—ones that challenge our way of thinking, offer us new perspectives, or
stimulate deep feelings in us. While these can be large in scope (like living abroad for a year), they can also be simple and easy to do, writes Heine. For example, he suggests things like trying out a new ethnic cuisine, visiting an art gallery, or trying out an escape room with friends. "Psychologically rich experiences present people with complex
challenges, and they provide opportunities for learning and discovery, all of which tend to be associated with enhanced feelings of meaning," he writes. Recognize your own heroic journey. All of us have had to face obstacles at some point in our lives. If we can reflect on how we overcame those obstacles—whether by pulling on our personal
resources, learning new ways of thinking or behaving, creating allies to help us in our guest, or something else—we can tap into our own heroic narrative and find a sense of meaning in our existence. Of course, writing about the heroic thread in your life story may not grab you. Nor might some of the other ways to find meaning that Heine suggests
But it doesn't hurt to assess where you're at in each of these areas of life and see what you may be missing, he says. "If you can shore up any of the underpinnings of meaning that you find are lacking, you'll likely start to feel that your life is more meaningful." 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 people, it was just good to have a goal, no matter what it was. 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 higher levels of purpose at one point
in time have objectively better physical agility four years later than those who report less purpose. Patrick Hill and his Washington University colleagues have found important advantages for more purposeful adults, including 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 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 accomplish big things together. A 2007 study suggests that managers can effectively boost the work experience 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 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? What do
you really care about, and why? Focusing on an ideal self can increase optimism for the future, which researchers believe is tied to purpose Clarify 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 regond at the regal at the regond at the regond at the regond at the regond at th
can point you in the right direction. Volunteering expands your experience, while also improving your well-being and helping the world. Not only that, 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. Do you have a sense of purpose? For decades, 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
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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.

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