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Here's how to find one. By Jeremy Adam Smith | February 19, 2021 Do you have a long-term goal that's meaningful to yourself and the world? By Jill Suttie | November 20, 2024 A new study suggests that a sense of purpose may be more important to our longevity than life satisfaction. By Science of Happiness Podcast | May 15, 2025 Spring Washam guides us on a gentle visualization to help you tap into the joy, wonder, and possibility that creativity brings. By Daryl R. Van Tongeren | September 24, 2024 Studies are investigating the process of leaving religion and what a flourishing life after religion looks like. By Jill Suttie | August 21, 2024 A new book makes the case that hope is the right response when we are facing difficulties in our lives. By Margaret Golden | April 4, 2025 Teacher and activist Parker J. Palmer offers steadying words of wisdom for today's educators in the 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 a new book, Start Making Sense by 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 that occurred along the way, writes Heine. "You will be reminded about how 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-transcendence or being connected to something bigger than ourselves. But for nonbelievers, there are other 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 reliable sources of meaning in our lives is the interpersonal connections that we have—in particular, those of our closest 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 volunteer for a cause you believe in—perhaps providing 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 to find meaning in work for many people. Part of that comes from changing 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 psychologists call a "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 quest, 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 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 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 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), the associations between people's responses to these life questions and scores on the quiz raise interesting questions about different factors that can shape anyone's sense of 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 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 age—GGSC quiz results showed persistent increases in purpose with 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 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 understand the importance of that work. What about ethnic background? Differences in GGSC 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 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 quiz 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 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 that purpose rose with educational attainment. This reflects the formative role that learning, knowledge, professional identity, and work experience play in discovering what drives our 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 purposeful 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 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's values, identity, and even professional choices, it's not surprising to see higher purpose in 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-laden experiences easier to come by than others—the science of 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? 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 looks like? Alongside the self-help hype is a body of research on 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; 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 A 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 music or volunteering, some teens start to discover paths they want to pursue. Other teens have challenging life experiences, 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 your skills and your interests—and in a larger sense, your identity—seems to be key to pursuing 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 would have in life. Researchers found that the more solid their sense of identity, the more purposeful 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 purposeful building a more solid sense of identity over time. "Identity and 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 family. Working in that field means he's always learning things he can apply to 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 weren't possible in our chaotic midlives, and a reconnection with the things 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. 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 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," they suggest. By seeing purpose in the lives of other people, teens are more likely to see it in 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 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. And there are so damn many messages 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 keep this from happening 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 a second experiment, the researchers randomly assigned some participants to write letters of gratitude—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, we do know that gratitude strengthens relationships—and those are often the source of our 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 the people around us. Many people told me about finding 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 in a better place than I found it." Becoming a mom "strengthened that purpose (it's going to be their 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. Amber Cantorna was raised by purpose-driven parents who were right-wing Christians. "My mom had us involved in stuff all the time, all within that conservative Christian bubble," she says. This family 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." The trouble is that this underlying purpose involved making 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 helped you to overcome them? How did other people help you? How did your 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 own strengths and how applying those strengths can make a difference in the world, which increases 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 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. 1. Identify the things 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 anything they wanted to 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 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 PositivePsychology.com: the Valued Living Questionnaire, the Portrait Values Questionnaire, and the Personal 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 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, 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,

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 healthy you feel, says Martela. "It's hard to be satisfied with your life if you struggle with your 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 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 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 involves 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 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, 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." 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 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 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 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 would change if you had a magic wand and could change anything. Then ask yourself, why you chose 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: If it's hard to figure out what matters most 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 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. 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 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 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 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 education as relevant to their life purpose are more likely to try harder in classes they find boring or hard—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 purpose and acting upon it, says Strecher. "The dynamic process of aligning yourself 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 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."