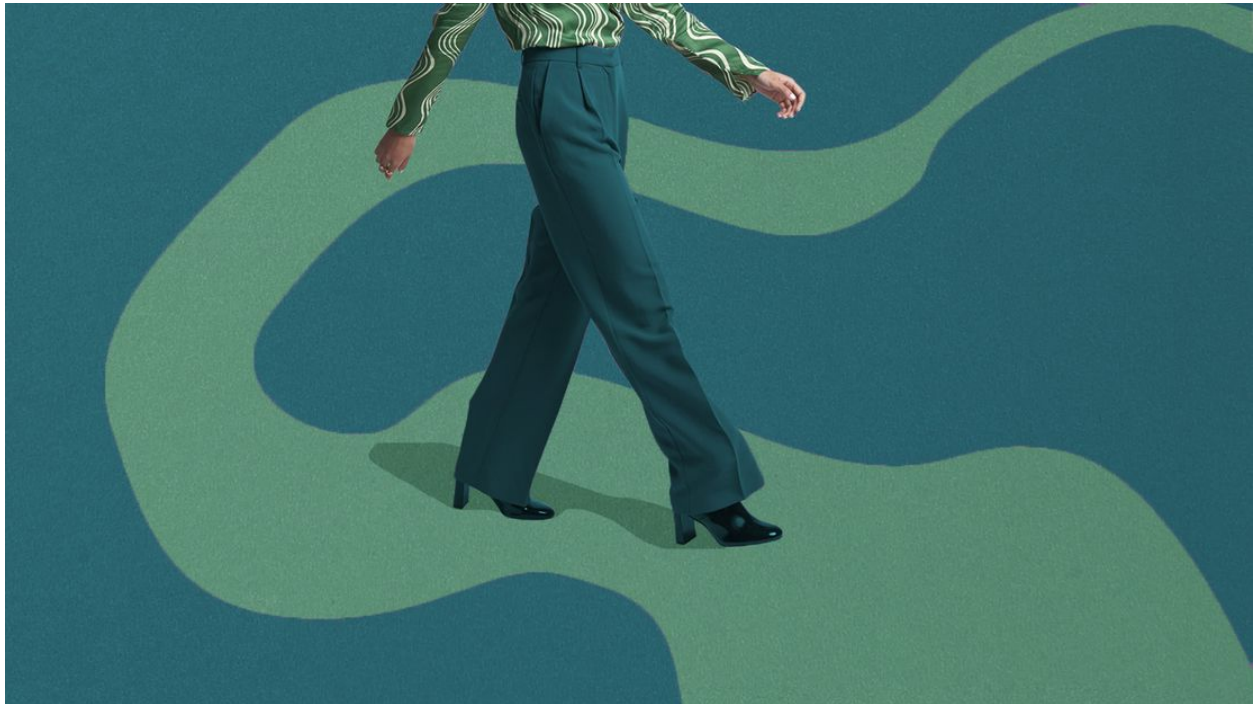


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All About Purpose: What It Means and Why It's So Good for You

By Michele Lent Hirsch



Psychologists say a sense of purpose can mean specific life goals or just a feeling of motivation to go about your daily to-dos.

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Kate Ellis, a former English professor who taught at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, for more than 40 years, says she started teaching as a way to have a positive impact on others. In her younger years, she knew this was important to her. And it still is for her now, at 86.

“When I began thinking about retiring, I knew I would not want to stop doing something I loved,” Ellis says, “so I began volunteering and teaching memoir-writing classes at the

Harlem Vet Center.” She figured that writing would be therapeutic for the veterans in her class, just as it may have helped her former college students.

Ellis will soon start teaching another class, too, at Inspīr, a senior living community in New York City where she now lives. She’s incredibly happy to continue doing what gave her a sense of purpose for many decades — even if the job title and classrooms have changed.

Ellis’s awareness of what gives her a sense of direction, and the steps she’s taking to seek out ways to maintain it (even through life changes), is what mental health experts define as purpose.

“Purpose in life is finding meaning in and having goals for your life,” says Stacey M. Schaefer, PhD, a psychologist and researcher at the University of Wisconsin in Madison’s Center for Healthy Minds.

A sense of purpose — and the ability to adapt it throughout different phases of your life — has a positive effect on health and well-being, including your physical health and how you respond to stress. Studies suggest it may even help people live longer. (More on that below.)

If you’re not sure you’ve figured out what gives you a sense of direction, you’re not alone, says Patrick Hill, PhD, an associate professor of psychological and brain sciences at Washington University in St. Louis who studies purpose. Many people, he emphasizes, struggle to find it.

His and others’ work provides ideas for seeking out a sense of purpose. It doesn’t all have to tie in with a big life goal like Ellis’s of helping others. In fact, mental health experts say, purpose can be found in small daily tasks, too.

How Psychologists Define Purpose

Dr. Hill, who conducts research at Washington University in St. Louis’s Purpose, Aging, Transitions, and Health Lab, says that even among those who study the concept, defining it can be tricky.

Purpose can be defined in two ways, Hill says. One is the content or character of your goals for life. According to this first definition, you might realize, for example, “my purpose in life is to help those in need” or “my purpose in life is to promote science.”

The American Psychological Association defines purpose in a similar way: “a mental goal or aim that directs a person’s actions or behavior.”

But the second way Hill and his colleagues define the concept is a little more nebulous: You can *feel* a sense of purpose, whether or not you tie it to a big aim.

A sense of purpose without a large life goal, Hill says, means you still wake up in the morning feeling motivated. But unlike those who have a life goal directing them (“I’m feeling pumped to teach biology tonight because my purpose in life is to promote science”), someone may attribute their sense of motivation to a smaller reason (“I’m feeling pumped

to teach biology tonight because I did a good job planning this week's lesson") — or, even, to nothing at all ("I'm feeling pumped to teach biology — I just feel motivated").

Whether purpose is of the life-goal variety, just a feeling someone has, or somewhere in between, it can be good for health and well-being.

In his studies, Hill uses a questionnaire to capture people's thoughts and feelings in this area. It's common, he says, for people to report feeling a sense of purpose without being able to give specifics. People also sometimes know that their sense of purpose comes from a particular domain — home, social life, or work — even if they can't narrow it down beyond that.

Dr. Schaefer agrees that a sense of purpose can come from something relatively small.

"It doesn't have to be a grand purpose. You don't have to be necessarily saving the world," Schaefer says. Day-to-day tasks like cleaning the house and cooking dinner can feel meaningful. Purpose can come from simply waking up in the morning and having something you want to accomplish for an hour that day, Schaefer says.

Why a Sense of Purpose Is Good for Your Health

Studies across different age groups and different populations all lead to one major health benefit when it comes to purpose: You'll live longer, Schaefer says.

"It doesn't matter what age you're at, whether you're 20, 30, 40, 60, 70," she says. "Those people who have a higher purpose in life are less likely to be dead when followed up."

Schaefer points to an important paper published in 2009 in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*. [↗](#) That longitudinal study, conducted with the Rush Memory and Aging Project, showed that those with higher levels of purpose in life at the start of the study were more likely to be alive five years later than those with lower levels of purpose.

This particular study focused on older adults, and included people of various demographics and with various chronic conditions. It showed that across a relatively wide swath of people, purpose improved survival.

That means whether it comes to disease, accidents, suicide, or other factors, having a sense of purpose seems to be protective and to promote longevity, Schaefer says.

Hill explains that there may be a few reasons behind this link between purpose and longevity.

One, he says, is that people who have a sense of purpose may be less distracted by daily events (and potential stressors). As he puts it, if you feel you have a path in life, you may be less stressed by the small stuff that hinders those who may not have as clear a sense of direction. It's not that you don't face those hindrances (the spilled coffee or tough conversation), but it's less likely they'll ruin your day.

In studies where people are shown negative or stressful images, including a study Schaefer led, people with a relatively high sense of purpose were able to recover more quickly. ↗

Another reason why purpose may boost health, Hill says, is that people with a strong sense of purpose tend to take better care of themselves, whether it's through how they eat, how active they are, how much alcohol they drink, or how often they go to the doctor.

Hill coauthored a 2021 study showing that people with a greater sense of purpose in life were more willing, in general, to get a COVID-19 vaccine. Even when researchers accounted for demographic factors, political affiliation, and psychological well-being, adults who reported higher sense of purpose were more likely to also report the vaccine was important for personal health, for the health of others, and to return to regular activities. ↗

Another key study, also conducted with the Rush Memory and Aging Project, took a different approach. Researchers used interviews and assessments of cognitive function, as well as sense of purpose, while participants were still alive, then autopsies of their brains (which the participants had agreed to) after they'd died.

The data showed higher levels of purpose reduced the harmful effects of Alzheimer's disease: People who'd reported higher levels of purpose showed better cognitive function despite evidence of the disease in their brains. ↗

Can Our Sense of Purpose Change?

Throughout the course of our lives, we take on different roles, Hill says. Some are fleeting, some longer term. Plumber, lawyer, girlfriend, gardener: Each has the possibility of bringing with it a different sense of purpose. So, yes, as you grow in life and take on new roles, you might find new sources of purpose.

If your purpose is too strongly tied to one specific title, Hill says, you can end up feeling completely derailed when that role ends. If it can be shaken by something like retirement, a breakup, an injury, or another life change, it may be more helpful to think of your purpose in a broader, more adaptable way, he explains.

For Ellis, for example, retirement could have been crushing had she thought that her purpose in life was specifically to be an English professor at Rutgers. Instead, she was able to see that her larger purpose was to have a positive impact on others — and that her university position was one of many that could help her fulfill that aim. That knowledge allowed her to seek out new roles that would provide a similar feeling.

Jennifer Ho, PsyD, a California-based clinical psychologist, says that's a healthy approach. As a therapist, her work often focuses on helping people identify the underlying values that are important to them, so that they're not attached to just one situation in particular for fulfillment.

Tips for Finding Your Own Sense of Purpose

First, consider if there's a discrepancy between the expectations you're putting on yourself and what really makes you happy, Dr. Ho says.

Think of a young man whose parents told him he had to go to a “good” college and become a doctor or lawyer in order to lead a worthwhile life. If he doesn’t finish college, and feels he isn’t living up to the expectations placed on him, he might end up struggling to find purpose. But that doesn’t mean he can’t find it, Ho says. He needs to first step back and figure out what’s meaningful to him — his own underlying values — rather than what might have been meaningful to his parents.

What if he talks with a therapist and realizes that one of his deepest values is connecting with those around him? Rather than living by his parents’ expectations of an elusive status-filled job, he might make more time outside of work to paint portraits of his community — something he’s always loved, and that he now realizes gives him purpose.

Think about which expectations, standards, and values you have for yourself feel important for you to meet, Ho says. Have you been trying to live up to someone else’s?

In her experience, Ho has found therapy can help some people identify their underlying values and figure out what gives them a sense of meaning.

She’s also found that for some clients of hers who grew up outside of the United States, the notion of finding one’s purpose can seem like an individualistic idea. The messaging, particularly in American society, is often that purpose relates to career, she says — so if you’re from a culture that instead emphasizes family or community, searching for purpose may seem at odds with your worldview.

Hill adds that it might be a matter of semantics. Research suggests that most people across cultures find the concept of purpose appropriate and something worth having, but may use different language to describe it, he says.

If you’d like to talk with a therapist about finding more meaning in your life, Ho recommends looking for one who’s sensitive to an array of cultural norms.

If you’re embarking on this search on your own, Hill points to research that has outlined three pathways to finding your purpose. [↗](#)

1. **Be proactive.** Try new things, whether it’s actively seeking out new experiences or activities, or engaging with new people. Doing so can help you figure out your purpose, Hill says. Going to a cooking class, reading about a subject that’s always intrigued you, or exposing yourself in some other way to something new will help get you thinking. When trying new things or putting yourself out there feels daunting, Ho says, build up to it incrementally. Browse a website for just a few minutes. Walk by the building where the class is held. Eventually it will feel a little more familiar, and you might feel more comfortable signing up and attending.
2. **Learn from others.** Think of people in your life who have a strong sense of purpose. Maybe it’s someone whose larger aim aligns with yours and you can learn more about a skill or interest from them. You can learn simply by having role models who show the value of living a purposeful life — even if their own particular area isn’t the

one that suits you. Talk to them about how they found purpose, and ask if they've ever struggled with it. What do they do to stay connected to that deeper sense?

3. **Reflect.** Think back to moments in the past that felt meaningful to you. Doing so can help you find clues to what might provide meaning for you in the future. Hill says that could look like reflecting on why a particular class you took years ago still stands out to you, or reflecting on how a major life event — whether a positive one or a difficult one — has stayed with you. And on a smaller scale, if today you felt a little more of a sense of purpose than you did two days ago, reflect on what you did differently today, to help you figure out that shift.

Lastly, Hill says, remember again that you're not alone: both in feeling you've not yet found your purpose, as many people haven't — and also that your search doesn't have to be solitary.

"Very few people come upon their purpose totally on their own," he says. Keep in mind that your broader community, your environment, and the people you know can help.

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