

A sense of purpose is good for you

Maria Zaraska has found that if you have a higher sense of meaning in life, you'll not only be happier but will be healthier and live longer.

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Diet and exercise are vital for health and a long life, but science shows there is another longevity ingredient we often overlook: finding purpose. Research reveals that people who believe their existence has meaning have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol and more favourable gene expression related to inflammation.



If a 90-year-old with a clear purpose in life develops Alzheimer's disease, that person will probably keep functioning relatively well despite pathological changes in the brain, one study found.

Another meta-analysis of 10 studies involving more than 136,000 people found that having purpose in life can lower your mortality risk by about 17 per cent – about as much as following the famed Mediterranean diet.

Two years ago when researching my book, *Growing Young: How Friendship, Optimism and Kindness Can Help You Live to 100*, I talked to scientists and centenarians in Japan about the reason behind their nation's exceptional longevity.

While similar interviews I've conducted in the West tended to centre on diet and exercise, in Japan conversations quickly moved to ikigai, often translated as "purpose in life" or "life worth living". Ikigai is seen as having such measurable effects on longevity that Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has included it in the official health promotion strategy.

In one epidemiological study conducted on more than 43,000 Japanese, not having ikigai was linked to a 60 per cent higher risk of dying of cardiovascular disease. That's a lot. Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables each day can cut the danger of succumbing to cardiovascular disease by "just" 27 per cent.

Elderly Japanese I interviewed talked about ikigai as "taking care of grandchildren", "volunteering", and "keeping their street clean and pretty".

To Naoki Kondo, health sociologist at the University of Tokyo, one of the key factors for having ikigai is a paying job. "I want to work until a second before I die," he told me. Although the concept of ikigai doesn't translate easily to all cultures, Western researchers have shown the related concepts of purpose and meaning in life can have significant impacts on our physical wellbeing.

"In the last 10 to 15 years, there has been an explosion of research linking wellbeing in its many forms to numerous indicators of health.

"When that work [began], we didn't know that purpose in life would emerge as such an important predictor of numerous health outcomes," says Carol Ryff, psychologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and director of the Midus (Midlife in the United States) national study of Americans.

Research has shown that people who have high levels of purpose in life spend fewer nights in hospital, have lower odds of developing diabetes, and more than two times' lower risk of dying from heart conditions than do others.

The late Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, hypothesised that higher purpose gives people a will to stay alive. Research is now catching up with that idea. People who have purpose in life are more likely to keep active, get their cholesterol levels checked, and even undergo colonoscopy.

Yet, when scientists control for health-related behaviours, the strong effects of meaning on longevity still persist.

The explanation may lie in part in how having purpose in life affects our stress response. In lab experiments, when volunteers are made anxious (because they are told to give a public speech, for instance), stress markers – such as the hormone cortisol – tend to spike. But those who report high levels of purpose "calm down more quickly", says Eric Kim, psychologist at the University of British Columbia.

Similar stress-buffering effects of meaning have been found in research using functional MRI scans, which found that when people who report having a high level of purpose are shown disturbingly negative images, such as those of plane crashes and burned cars, the brain's fear centre, the amygdala, doesn't activate as much as it does in people who report a lower sense of purpose.

Unfortunately, searching for – or having – purpose in life isn't straightforward.

One challenge is defining the thing to begin with. While Aristotle talked about a lifelong pursuit of “virtuous activity of [the] soul,” 21st-century psychologists talk about having a sense of direction, of setting goals and objectives.

In a more precise scale developed by Ryff and her colleagues, having purpose means answering “yes” to questions such as “some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them”, and “no” to “I sometimes feel as if I’ve done all there is to do in life”. The good news is that it’s possible to boost our sense of meaning and purpose through simple interventions, such as volunteering.

“People do increase their sense of compassion and really do get new world views as they volunteer, [which] might actually help make the soul warmer,” Kim says. He thinks mindfulness or joining a group of people who share your values could also help you find meaning. Such interventions haven’t yet been tested in research, however.

Although volunteering or joining a club might be difficult during the pandemic, history teaches us that tough times may offer unique opportunity for finding purpose.

According to an analysis of words used in historical collections of written text, French people haven’t been as happy since the end of World War II as they were during the war. The same analysis suggested Britons seemed to be less happy in the 1980s than in the 1940s.

There are some indications that Americans and Europeans alike may be engaging in more purposecreating behaviours during this pandemic than they did before Covid-19.

News accounts say charity donations are up in the United States and Britain. According to a study done by market research company IPSOS, almost half of Americans checked in on elderly or sick neighbours when the pandemic began, while 20 per cent potentially exposed themselves to the virus to help other people.

In one Irish survey, 57 per cent of those responding said they were now re-evaluating their lives. During the (northern) spring lockdown in France, where I live, as in many cities and towns around the world, we clapped and banged on pots to cheer for doctors and nurses for 52 days straight, rain or shine. It made us feel connected and purposeful.

Maybe we couldn’t help save patients, but at least we could provide support for those who did.

If we keep such things going, if we find purpose and meaning in the current gloom, we may end up not just happier but healthier and longer-lived – and perhaps more resilient in the face of Covid-19 stress, too.

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