



Living with Purpose



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Why is it important to have purpose as we age?

Having purpose is good for us. Patrick Hill, Associate Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences at WashU defines purpose as the “notion that you have daily activities you find meaningful or engaging and that give you direction for your life, reasons to continue going.” Research has found that a sense of purpose is positively correlated with physical activity, vegetable intake, quality of sleep, and maintenance of function as we get older.¹ Having a purposeful life can protect us from cognitive decline.² and is associated with better mental health outcomes.³ It is even associated with lower mortality rates.⁴

How can we find purpose as we age?

Purpose is available to people of all backgrounds, ages, socioeconomic status, and gender, and poor health does not always limit purpose in life.⁵ Purpose-finding might involve identifying a new hobby, expanding a current one, or approaching daily tasks with a sense of intention. Other ways to cultivate purpose include writing or journaling and connecting with a faith, philosophical, or spiritual community. Volunteering has been shown to increase sense of purpose in life or feelings that life matters.⁶ Additionally, pursuing an encore career is a way to find purpose. An encore career is work in the second half of life (50’s and beyond) that combines social impact and purpose. An encore career is more about life stage than age, and can be paid or volunteer, and doesn’t have to be in the non-profit sector.

Findings on Purpose from Research at WashU

Below are some important findings from Patrick Hill and collaborating researchers on purpose in older adulthood.

Sense of purpose predicts valuable outcomes in older adulthood, such as healthy cognitive and physical function, and lowered risk for early mortality.^{7, 8} Research also suggests that even though depressive symptoms are often related to lower cognitive functioning in older adulthood, this effect is weaker for purposeful adults.⁹

Not everyone loses purpose in retirement. Many older adults, particularly retirees, may lose some sense of purpose over time.¹⁰ Research shows, however, that retirement has only a small impact on a reduced sense of purpose, and some older adults see no effect on purpose after retirement.¹¹

Active engagement is important for having and maintaining purpose. Research shows that staying engaged in leisure activities leads to more purpose in general and this association is even stronger among retired adults.¹²

Supportive relationships matter for purpose. Research finds that more supportive relationships correlate with more sense of purpose; while strained relationships are associated with less purpose.¹³

Researchers have identified the following three approaches to helping you find purpose in life:¹⁴

- 1. Proactive purpose finding** involves actively seeking out opportunities and interests that can lead us to a more defined sense of purpose. It requires openness to new ideas and experiences, tends to encourage self-reflection, and often involves trial-and-error.
- 2. Reactive purpose finding** is a result of our sense of personal meaning or focus being altered after we experience a stressful life event. In reactive purpose finding, we begin to develop or seek purpose in life as a response to a major event or change in circumstance.
- 3. Interactive purpose finding** is related to observing the behavior of others and talking with friends and family about their motivations and desires. Surrounding ourselves with purposeful people can help purpose finding feel more manageable.

When finding purpose, *“The key things to think about are: 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?”*¹⁵

If you are feeling stuck finding purpose, reflecting on the following questions might help:

What do you love to do? What would you do even if you did not get paid?
What do other people say you are good at doing?
What are the most realistic things you want to experience, do, or accomplish on your bucket list?
Do you need income, or would you consider volunteering or working for free or at a lower cost for a good cause?
What are ways that you can help others in your community?

Resources

Below are some resources to help you find and fulfill your purpose.

AARP is a nonprofit, membership-based organization that helps people age 50 and older improve the quality of their lives and communities and offers members a variety of resources to help them re-engage with their life’s purposes.

Website: aarp.org

Telephone: 1 (888) 687 2277

Encore.org leads programming efforts that engage older adults in both paid and unpaid work roles to create intergenerational connections and empower older adults.

Website: encore.org

Telephone: (415) 430 0141

Volunteermatch.org is one of many available search engines designed to connect volunteers and organizations in need.

Website: volunteermatch.org

Oasis is a national organization that helps connect older adults to lifelong learning, volunteering, and wellness related activities. Go to their website to learn more about their offerings in your area or online.

Website: <https://www.oasisnet.org/>

Retirement and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) is a federally funded program that places adults 55+ with organizations in need of volunteers.

Website: <https://americorps.gov/serve/fit-finder/americorps-seniors-rsvp>

Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes are located across the country, and they are programs housed within universities that offer continuing education programs. You can look into the programs offered to find some in your area or online.

Website:

<https://www.osherfoundation.org/olli.html> ▪

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