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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.

- 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.
- Turn hurts into healing of 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.
- 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.
- 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 writers 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.
- 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 Superman-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 do? What’s the 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.
- 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.”
- Scroll To Top A new study suggests that even across cultures, there is a lot of similarity in where humans find purpose in life and how it brings us fulfillment. By Jill Suttie | July 9, 2025 Having a purpose in life has been found to have many benefits for people, including better health and emotion management, less stress during stressful times, and even economic success. And it is considered a key to happiness and well-being. But does it matter how you find it? Can you give it them? Do different sources of purpose affect our well-being in different ways? Answers to these questions are hard to come by, because most research on purpose doesn't look that granularly at the concept. Instead, it's often measured by asking people how much they agree with general statements, like "I have aims and objectives for living" or "My life is meaningful"—not specifically what those meaningful aims are. But, in a new study, researchers Michael Mask and Steven Heine of the University of British Columbia and their colleagues aimed to get more detail about people's purposeful pursuits across cultures and to see their effect on "the good life." Ultimately, they found that our purposes around the world have a lot in common. Cultural similarities around purpose In the first part of their study, Mask and his colleagues asked 200 American participants to write about seven things that gave them a sense of purpose in life. Then, they analyzed over 2,000 responses to come up with 16 general categories of purpose that encompassed everyone's answers: Self-improvement: Becoming the best you can be Family: Supporting and providing for your family and caretaking Relationships: Searching for, finding, or maintaining close relationships Religion/spirituality: Living in accordance with and meeting the standards of your religious or spiritual beliefs Recognition: Being respected and having high status Happiness: Being happy, enjoying life, and feeling good Self-sufficiency: Being able to take care of yourself physically and financially, and having the freedom to do so as you wish Material wealth: Getting rich, owning nice things, and buying whatever you want Internal standards: Knowing who you are and what you stand for and living your life according to these principles Positive impact: Making the world a better place Matterring: Inspiring others and leaving a legacy; making an impact Occupational fulfillment: Finding your calling through work; doing your job well and working hard Persevering: Handling what life throws at you—not giving up and dealing with the struggles inherent in life Physical health: Taking care of your body and being healthy Inner peace: Being grateful for what you have and accepting what you can't change Service: Serving your country or community After testing out these categories with a different group of 100 American participants, their team surveyed over 1,000 people from Japan, India, Poland, and the United States to find out how much these categories reflected their own purpose in life. Specifically, participants reported how much each source of purpose influenced the decisions they made and guided their behavior, as well as how happy, meaningful, and psychologically rich their lives were—all aspects of "the good life." (Psychological richness involves experiencing diverse, challenging, and interesting activities that evoke complex emotions and change your perspective.) Analyzing the results, the researchers found that people in each of these unique cultures had very similar sources of purpose and prioritized each category similarly, too. "Happiness," "self-sufficiency," and "family" were in the top five for each country, while "religion" and "recognition" were in the bottom five for each country. Also, there was a lot of agreement on what sources of purpose went along with more meaning, happiness, or psychological richness in life. This finding surprised Heine, who, as a cultural psychologist, is used to seeing more variability among people of different cultures. "What stands out from our finding is just how much agreement there was within these four quite different countries about what kinds of purposes are associated with a good life," he says. "They're not identical, but there is a striking amount of similarity." Different purposes for different ends So how did different types of purposes relate to different ways of living well? The researchers found that people whose purpose came from "mattering" were the most likely to have a more meaningful life, overall, with "perseverance" and "service" also tied to meaning. This fits in with past research explaining how meaning in life involves a sense of purpose, coherence, and mattering, says Heine. "It makes sense that 'mattering' is especially linked with meaning, as it [suggests people] want to make a difference in the world," he says. "And 'service' means you are guided by contributing to others—another source of meaning." People felt happier depending on how much they pursued "inner peace," with the pursuit of "positive impact," "physical health," and "happiness" also tied to happiness more than other sources of purpose. While it may seem obvious that aligning your decisions with inner peace, happiness, and good health would make you personally happier, it's less obvious that making a positive impact would lead to happiness. However, Heine points to research that suggests that those who benefit others are happier—for example, his colleague Elizabeth Dunn's work finding that spending money on others makes you happier than spending it on yourself. "What you are doing is making the world a better place, and that should be especially rewarding," he says. For the psychologically rich life, pursuing "service" was the top contender for people across cultures. This seems counterintuitive, because service isn't necessarily associated with novelty, complexity, or challenge. But it's possible, says Mask, that serving others opens us to new perspectives and a range of emotions—and a range of emotions—for example, happiness at connecting with people in less fortunate circumstances, but also sadness about their misfortune—that could be relevant to a psychologically rich life. "These aspects of service (emotional complexity, perspective-changing experiences) may be what link it to psychological richness," says Mask. Interestingly, pursuing material wealth was the lowest predictor of every form of the good life in this study. Heine suggest that the reason may be that pursuing wealth takes you away from more reliable sources of purpose associated with the good life—like relationships, a sense of community, work, or connection to a cause or spiritual practice. "Chasing material wealth is not associated with the kinds of connections that underlie a good life," he says. Variations in purpose and well-being While the overall results suggest an almost universal experience of purpose, there were some cultural variations in the findings, too. For example, for Japanese people, finding purpose through their occupation mattered a lot more to their quality of life (in every sense) than it did in the other cultures studied. Heine, who's familiar with Japanese culture through his research, says that finding rings true, as he has witnessed how central work life is to people's well-being and personal identity in Japan. On the other hand, he and Mask couldn't explain why seeking purpose through family did not predict meaning in life as much, except in Poland, where it ranked second. Given research on how close relationships bring us a sense of meaning, they'd expected it to pop up at the top of the list for all countries. According to Heine, it's possible that in countries where people feel strong obligations and expectations around their family (like in Japan and India), other areas of fulfillment may have felt more novel and relevant to them. Mask wonders if it could be due to how different cultures think about family as a source of purpose, which their general survey couldn't detect. "It could be the case that how people conceive of family in these different societies might look very different," he says. But, he adds, it can't be more without getting more granular detail in future studies. Aiming for the good life yourself Knowing that certain elements of a good life may be supported by sources of purpose like mattering, inner peace, or service could be useful to know, especially if you're aiming for a happier, more meaningful, or psychologically rich life. But Heine is not sure that there can be a "purpose prescription" based on their findings alone. "Purpose and meaning in life have an important subjective element. It wouldn't be good for an individual to share the same purpose just because others endorse it," he says. On the other hand, he and Mask both hope their research will encourage more people to consider focusing on what brings purpose to their lives, to help achieve greater overall well-being. "Though the goal of our paper was to highlight many sources of purpose, our take-home message is that having any kind of purpose is key to having a good life," says Heine. Greater Good wants to know: Do you think this article will influence your opinions or behavior? 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 lifetimes. 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, good 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. 百度知道>提示信息 知道宝贝找不到问题了> 提示信息 知道宝贝找不到问题了> 提示信息 知道宝贝找不到问题了> 提示信息 知道宝贝找不到问题了> 提示信息 知道宝贝找不到问题了> 3. Recognize your strengths and talents We all have strengths and skills that we've developed over our lifetimes, which help make up our unique personalities. Yet some of us may be unsure of what we have to offer. If we need help, a survey like the VIA Character Strengths Survey can be useful in identifying our personal strengths and embracing them more fully. Then, you can take the results and think about how you can apply them toward something you really care about. But it can also be helpful to ask others—teachers, friends, family, colleagues, mentors—for input. In the Purpose Challenge, students were asked to send emails to five people who knew them well and to pose questions like: What do you think I'm particularly good at? What do you think I really enjoy? How do you think I'll leave my mark on the world? Adults can do this if they need feedback, too—either formally or informally in conversation with trusted others. People who know you well may be able to see things in you that you don't recognize in yourself, which can point you in unexpected directions. On the other hand, there is no need to overly rely on that feedback if it doesn't resonate. Getting input is useful if it clarifies your strengths—not if it's way off base.
- Try volunteering Finding purpose involves more than just self-reflection. According to Bronk, it's also about trying out new things and seeing how those activities enable you to use your skills to make a meaningful difference in the world. Volunteering in a community organization focused on something of interest to you could provide you with some experience and do good at the same time. Working with an organization serving others can put you in touch with people who share your