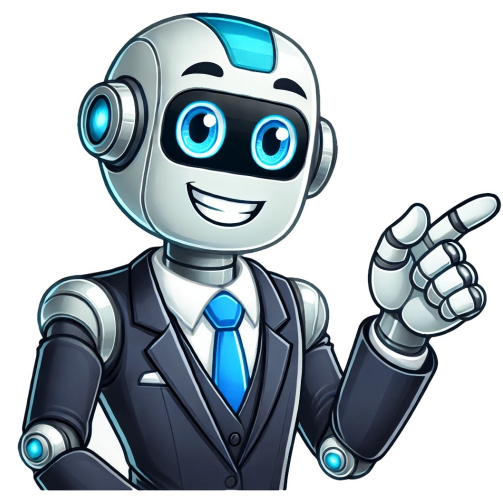


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Scroll To Top A new study suggests that even across cultures, there is a lot of similarity in where humans find purpose in life and how it brings us fulfillment. By Jill Suttie | July 9, 2025 Having a purpose in life has been found to have many benefits for people, includingbetter health and emotion management, less stress during stressful times, and eveneconomic success. And it is considered a key to happiness and well-being. But does it matter where your sense of purpose comes from? 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 doesnt look that granularly at the concept. Instead, its often measured by asking people how much they agree with general statements, like I have aims and objectives for living or My life is meaningfulnot 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 peoples 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 everyones 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 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 placeMattering: 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 younot 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 cant changeService: 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 wereall 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. Theyre 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 othersanother 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, its less obvious that making a positive impact would lead to happiness. However, Heine points to research that suggests that those who benefit others are happierfor example, his colleague Elizabeth Dunns 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 isnt necessarily associated with novelty, complexity, or challenge. But its possible, says Mask, that serving others opens us to new perspectives and a range of emotionsfor example, happiness at connecting with people in less fortunate circumstances, but also sadness about their misfortunethat 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 lifelike 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, whos familiar with Japanese culture through his research, says that finding rings true, as he has witnessed how central work life is to peoples well-being and personal identity in Japan. On the other hand, he and Mask couldnt explain why seeking purpose through family did not predict meaning in life much, except in Poland, where it ranked second. Given research on how close relationships bring us a sense of meaning, theyd expected it to pop up at the top of the list for all countries. According to Heine, its 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 couldnt 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, they cant say 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 were 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 wouldnt 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? > > > 3. Recognize your strengths and talents We all have strengths and skills that weve 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 otherteachers, friends, family, colleagues, mentorsfor 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 Im particularly good at?What do you think I really enjoy?How do you think Ill leave my mark on the world? Adults can do this if they need feedback, tooeither formally or informally in conversation with trusted others. People who know you well may be able to see things in you that you dont 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 doesnt resonate. Getting input is useful if it clarifies your strengthsnot if its way off base. 4. Try volunteering Finding purpose involves more than just self-reflection. According to Bronk, its 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 passions and inspire you. In fact, its easier to find and sustain purpose with others supportand a do-gooder network can introduce you to opportunities and a community that shares your concern. Volunteering has the added benefit of improving our health and longevity, at least for some people. However, not all volunteer activities will lead to a sense of purpose. Sometimes volunteering can be deadening, Stanford University researcher Anne Colby. It needs to be engaging. You have to feel youre accomplishing something. When you find a good match for you, volunteering will likely feel right in some waynot draining, but invigorating. 5. Imagine your best possible self This exercise is particularly useful in conjunction with the magic-wand exercise described above. In Greater Goods Purpose Challenge, high school students were asked to imagine themselves at 40 years of age if everything had gone as well as it could have in their lives. Then, they answered questions, like: What are you doing? What is important to you? What do you really care about, and why? The why part is particularly important, because purposes usually emerges from our reasons for caring, says Bronk. Of course, those of us who are a bit older can still find these questions valuable. However, says Bronk, older folks may want to reflect back rather than look ahead. She suggests we think about what weve always wanted to do but maybe couldnt because of other obligations (like raising kids or pursuing a career). There seems to be something about seeing what you truly want for yourself and the world that can help bring you closer to achieving it, perhaps by focusing your attention on the people and experiences you encounter that may help you get there. 6. Cultivate positive emotions like gratitude and awe To find purpose, it helps to foster positive emotions, like awe and gratitude. Thats because each of these emotions is tied to well-being, caring about others, and finding meaning in life, which all help us focus on how we can contribute to the world. In her study with young adults, Bronk found that practicing gratitude was particularly helpful in pointing students toward purpose. Reflecting on the blessings of their lives often leads young people to pay it forward in some way, which is how gratitude can lead to purpose. There are many ways to cultivate awe and gratitude. Awe can be inspired by seeing the beauty in nature or recalling an inspirational moment. Gratitude can be practiced by keeping a gratitude journal or writing a gratitude letter to someone who helped you in life. Whatever tools you use, developing gratitude and awe has the added benefit of being good for your emotional well-being, which can give you the energy and motivation you need to carry out your purposeful goals. 7. Look to the people you admire Sometimes the people we admire most in life give us a clue to how we might want to contribute to a better world ourselves. Reading about the work of civil rights leaders or climate activists can give us a moral uplift that can serve as motivation for working toward the greater good. However, sometimes looking at these larger-than-life examples can be too intimidating, says Bronk. If so, you can look for everyday people who are doing good in smaller ways. Maybe you have a friend who volunteers to collect food for the homeless or a colleague whose work in promoting social justice inspires you. You dont need fame to fulfill your purpose in life. You just need to look to your inner compassand start taking small steps in the direction that means the most to you. This article is part of a GGSC initiative on Finding Purpose Across the Lifespan, supported by the John Templeton Foundation. In a series of articles, podcast episodes, and other resources, well be exploring why and how to deepen your sense of purpose at different stages of life. 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 its accessible at any age, if were willing to explore what matters to us and what kind of person we want to beand act to become that person. If were 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 satisfactionwhich 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 didnt 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 Harvards 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. Theyre 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 yesif you are older. One study found that young adults with a more prosocial purposeone aimed at helping othersexperienced 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, youll almost certainly find others traveling along with you, hoping to reach the same destinationa community. According to research by Kendall Cotton Bronk, finding ones purpose requires four key components: dedicated commitment, personal meaningfulness, goal directedness, and a vision larger than ones self. Often, finding our purpose involves a combination of finding meaning in the experiences weve 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 largeand 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 roadand 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 its hard to figure out what matters most to you, affirming your values can help. Three values surveysthe Valued Living Questionnaire, the Portrait Values Questionnaire, and the Personal Values Questionnaireask 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 youteachers, friends, family, colleagues, and mentorsand ask them what youre good at, what you seem to like to do, and how you might make your mark on the world. Sometimes an outsiders 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 hadnt 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 theyre 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. >> \_>

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