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Palmer offers steady words of wisdom for today's educators in the United States. By Science of Happiness Podcast | April 3, 2025 Embrace the beauty of your accent in this self-compassion meditation that guides you in a reflection of your history, heritage, and connection to your By Jill Suttie | February 18, 2025 A psychologist argues that asking ourselves existential questions and recognizing our values can make life more fulfilling and meaningful. By Jeremy Adam Smith | January 10, 2018 Are you struggling to discover your purpose? That may be because you feel isolated from other people. Here's how you can overcome that. By Jill Suttie | August 6, 2020 Having a meaningful, long-term goal is good for your well-being. Here's how to find one. By Jeremy Adam Smith | February 19, 2021 Do you have a long-term goal that's meaningful to yourself and the world? By Jill Suttie | November 20, 2024 A new study suggests that a sense of purpose may be more important to our longevity than life satisfaction. By Daryl R. Van Tongeren | September 24, 2024 Studies are investigating the process of leaving religion and what a flourishing life after religion looks like. By Jill Suttie | August 21, 2024 A new book makes the case that hope is the right response when we are facing difficulties in our lives. By Science of Happiness Podcast | June 19, 2025 How can we build a sense of hope when the future feels uncertain? Poet Toms Morn tries a writing practice to make him feel more hopeful and By Margaret Golden | April 4, 2025 Teacher and activist Parker J. Palmer offers steady words of wisdom for today's educators in the United States. Victor Strecher, a behavioral scientist at the University of Michigan's School of Public Health, lost his 19-year-old daughter to a sudden heart attack in 2010; she had been living with a rare heart condition for years. Her fragility and eventual death upended his thoughts on what life should be about and how to live it and it moved him to write a book called Life on Purpose. The book is a meditative, at times inspirational, exploration of the nature of purpose; it both considers how philosophers have long debated the relationship between purpose and happiness and also shares uplifting stories of individuals who have discovered their purpose. It includes Strecher's personal revelations as well as those of others whose found their purpose and changed the trajectory of their lives. But the book is also a review of the science of purpose, which has blossomed in recent years. According to Strecher, the strength of one's life purpose—which involves a combination of living according to your values and goals, and striving to make a positive difference in the world—can be measured, and it correlates highly with psychological wellness and even markers of physical health and longevity. For example, studies have found that for every one-point increase on a six-point scale measuring purpose in life, adults with heart disease have a 27 percent decreased risk of having a heart attack over a two-year period. For older adults, a one-point difference in purpose can mean a 22 percent decreased risk of having a stroke. It's not clear how purpose in life would have these impacts, but it's possible that there is some kind of interaction with stress, which has already been shown to affect us at a cellular level. In one study, researchers looked at how meditation might impact gene health in highly stressed mothers. The length of mothers' telomeres—the end caps on genes that tend to shorten with age—were measured before and after some of the moms attended a mindful meditation retreat. Compared to a control group, women who'd received the meditation training did indeed have longer telomeres at the end of the retreat, suggesting better health. But the researchers found that this effect was accounted for not by increases in mindfulness, as expected, but by increases in a sense of life purpose, which the meditation inspired. Studies like these show the potential positive impacts of purpose, which, Strecher argues, should encourage us to consider promoting it in our schools and workplaces. For example, students who are encouraged to consider education as relevant to their life purpose are more likely to try harder in classes they find boring or hard, such as science and math classes. And businesses that put purpose at the forefront tend to be more enjoyable places to work and more financially successful in the long run than those who only pursue profit. In one study, researchers found that hospital workers were 45 percent more inclined to use good hand-washing hygiene if they were told it helped prevent patients from catching diseases than if they were told it helped them. Connecting their habits to a service-oriented purpose inspired better behavior. Pointing out to employees that their actions affect others can result in transcending behaviors and save lives, Strecher says. Putting purpose into action Of course, giving lip service to having a purpose in life is not going to cut it. It has to be genuine and to truly reflect your goals and values. Also, there is a difference between finding your purpose and acting upon it, says Strecher. The dynamic process of aligning yourself with your life purpose requires energy and willpower: wind in your sails to move you forward, and a strong rudder to prevent being blown off course, he writes. But how can we move from imagining our purpose to fulfilling it? Energy and willpower are needed, writes Strecher, and these can be boosted by making healthier lifestyle choices: sleeping and eating better, exercising, and being more present in your everyday life (e.g., through meditation or tai chi or other practices that increase your presence). The relationships between healthy lifestyle choices, energy, willpower, and purpose are all bidirectional, meaning they influence each other, he writes. Therefore, it makes sense to both figure out your purpose and engage more in healthy behaviors, in order to have enough energy and willpower to pursue your purpose. Much of his book is devoted to suggesting just how to do that. Though studies found throughout the book lend some credence to Strecher's claims about the benefits of purpose, they are relatively few in number and not always completely convincing. Even Strecher acknowledges that the science is still in its infancy. We still don't know very much about interventions meant to increase purpose in life, let alone their results, he writes. Purpose may be more elusive than we realize, perhaps the culmination of a lifetime of personal interactions and individual experiences and may be next to impossible to foster in the general public. Still, it wouldn't hurt the world if we all started examining our lives in deeper ways and tried a bit harder to find our own purpose. After all, any efforts that increase our desire to help the world are probably positive. And the consequences of not doing so could be dire. If I were you, I wouldn't wait around for more research. I'd just get a purpose, writes Strecher. The scientific evidence supporting the benefits of one is extremely promising, and, at the risk of sounding a bit alarmist, we need it. 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 community. Here are six ways to overcome isolation and discover your purpose in life. 1. 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. 2. Turn hurts into healing for 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 well as next, might have to do with the emotions and behaviors we cultivate in ourselves. 3. 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 is a sense of purpose, and she toiled for years as a writer and social-justice activist in Santa Rosa, California. But when wildfires 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. 5. Find and build community As we see in Danis 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 Sugarman-Brozán feels driven to leave the world in a better place than I found it. 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