

purpose in life really matters for health and wellbeing: how well do you score?

When I get to heaven, God will not ask "Why were you not Moses?". He will ask "Why were you not Susya? Why did you not become what only you could become?" Susya, a Hasidic rabbi

This handout – complete with internet links to all research articles & other resources – appeared as the first couple of a series of four blog posts on purpose in life which began on on 23.05.12

purpose in life really matters: I was struck by a paper published this month in the journal Archives of General Psychiatry – "Effect of purpose in life on the relation between Alzheimer disease pathologic changes on cognitive function in advanced age". The authors wrote "In recent years, systematic examination has shown that purpose in life is associated with a substantially reduced risk of incident AD (Alzheimer disease), mild cognitive impairment, disability, and death. In this study, we sought to extend these findings by examining the neurobiologic basis of the protective effect of purpose in life on cognition." The same research group published a fascinating paper a couple of years ago – "Purpose in life Is associated with mortality among community-dwelling older persons" – with its abstract reading "Objective: To assess the association between purpose in life and all-cause mortality in community-dwelling elderly persons. Methods: We used data from 1238 older persons without dementia from two longitudinal cohort studies (Rush Memory and Aging Project and Minority Aging Research Study) with baseline evaluations of purpose in life and up to 5 years of follow-up to test the hypothesis that greater purpose in life is associated with a reduced risk of mortality among community-dwelling older persons. Results: The mean {+/-} standard deviation score on the purpose in life measure at baseline was 3.7 {+/-} 0.5 (range = 2-5), with higher scores indicating greater purpose in life. During the 5-year follow-up (mean = 2.7 years), 151 of 1238 persons (12.2%) died. In a proportional hazards model adjusted for age, sex, education, and race, a higher level of purpose in life was associated with a substantially reduced risk of mortality (hazard ratio = 0.60, 95% Confidence Interval = 0.42, 0.87). Thus, the hazard rate for a person with a high score on the purpose in life measure (score = 4.2, 90th percentile) was about 57% of the hazard rate of a person with a low score (score = 3.1, 10th percentile). The association of purpose in life with mortality did not differ among men and women or whites and blacks. Further, the finding persisted after the addition of terms for several potential confounders, including depressive symptoms, disability, neuroticism, the number of chronic medical conditions, and income. Conclusion: Greater purpose in life is associated with a reduced risk of all-cause mortality among community-dwelling older persons."

And these findings aren't only relevant for older people. So Steger & colleagues recently reported in their paper "Meaning in life across the life span: Levels and correlates of meaning in life from emerging adulthood to older adulthood" that "Meaning in life is thought to be important to well-being throughout the human life span. We assessed the structure, levels, and correlates of the presence of meaning in life, and the search for meaning, within four life stage groups: emerging adulthood, young adulthood, middle-age adulthood, and older adulthood. Results from a sample of Internet users (N = 8756) demonstrated the structural invariance of the meaning measure used across life stages. Those at later life stages generally reported a greater presence of meaning in their lives, whereas those at earlier life stages reported higher levels of searching for meaning. Correlations revealed that the presence of meaning has similar relations to well-being across life stages, whereas searching for meaning is more strongly associated with well-being deficits at later life stages." And in a similar vein, Cotton Bronk et al wrote in "Purpose, hope, and life satisfaction in three age groups" that "Using the Revised Youth Purpose Survey (Bundick et al., 2006), the Trait Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985), the present study examined the relationship among purpose, hope, and life satisfaction among 153 adolescents, 237 emerging adults, and 416 adults (N = 806). Results of this cross-sectional study revealed that having identified a purpose in life was **[Cont.]**

associated with greater life satisfaction at these three stages of life. However, searching for a purpose was only associated with increased life satisfaction during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Additionally, aspects of hope mediated the relationship between purpose and life satisfaction at all three stages of life. Implications of these results for effectively fostering purpose are discussed."

These findings have such wide relevance – for how we raise & educate our children, for our own health & wellbeing, and for our work as health professionals. There are fascinating potential implications for psychotherapy. See, for example, Jonathan Adler's paper published this year – *"Living into the story: agency and coherence in a longitudinal study of narrative identity development and mental health over the course of psychotherapy"* – with its abstract reading *"Narrative identity is the internalized, evolving story of the self that each person crafts to provide his or her life with a sense of purpose and unity. A proliferation of empirical research studies focused on narrative identity have explored its relationship with psychological well-being. The present study is the first prospective, multiwave longitudinal investigation to examine short-term personality change via an emphasis on narrative identity as it relates to mental health. Forty-seven adults wrote rich personal narratives prior to beginning psychotherapy and after every session over 12 assessment points while concurrently completing a measure of mental health. Narratives were coded for the themes of agency and coherence, which capture the dual aims of narrative identity: purpose and unity ... Results indicated that, across participants, the theme of agency (purpose) ... increased over the course of time. In addition, increases in agency were related to improvements in participants' mental health. Finally, lagged growth curve models revealed that changes in the theme of agency occurred prior to the associated improvements in mental health."* See too last year's findings by Vilhauer et al in *"Treating major depression by creating positive expectations for the future"* where they reported *"The study examined a new manualized treatment designed to help people anticipate a more positive future ... compared to depressed patients in the same clinic who enrolled in traditional cognitive-based group psychotherapy."* A description of the research commented *"Recent imaging studies show that depressed patients have reduced functioning in the regions of the brain responsible for optimism ... Also, people with depression tend to have fewer skills to help them develop a better future. They have less ability to set goals, problem solve or plan for future events ... Future-Directed Therapy is designed to reduce depression by teaching people the skills they need to think more positively about the future and take the action required to create positive future experiences ... (it) helps people shift their attention constructing visions of what they want more of in the future and it helps them develop the skills that they will need to eventually get there."* The results of the comparison trial were clearly encouraging with this future-orientated approach producing greater improvements than traditional cognitive-behavioural therapy in depression, anxiety and overall life satisfaction & enjoyment.

how well do you score on purpose in life questionnaires? So there are a whole series of research studies showing how important it is to have goals and a sense of purpose in order to thrive both physically & psychologically. It seems probable that we do best when we're balanced about this, so the authors of this year's paper – *"Comparing three methods to measure a balanced time perspective: The relationship between a balanced time perspective and subjective well-being"* – write *"The results demonstrated that having a BTP (balanced time perspective) is related to increased satisfaction with life, happiness, positive affect, psychological need satisfaction, self-determination, vitality, and gratitude as well as decreased negative affect."* And a commentary on the paper noted *"Do you look fondly at the past, enjoy yourself in the present, and strive for future goals? If you hold these time perspectives simultaneously – and don't go overboard on any one of them – you're likely to be a happy person."* So what goals might we strive for and are some goals & kinds of purpose more likely to lead to fulfilment than others? Recognizing and assessing the importance of life meaning & purpose goes back many years. Crumbaugh & Maholick published the *"Purpose in life scale (PIL)"* (inspired by Viktor Frankl's work) back in 1964. Just last year a short 4-item form of the original longer 20-item PIL found that negative answers to questions about *"clarity of goals in life"*, *"sense of meaning & purpose in life"*, *"progress toward life goals"* & *"purpose & meaning in life found so far"* are ***useful [Cont.]***

in predicting psychological distress". I find it helpful to remember that Frankl – with his searing experience of life in a concentration camp – highlighted that meaning is not just about the future but is also very much about the present – *"meaning in life is found in every moment of living; life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death."* This broader understanding of meaning – standing squarely both in the future goals we strive for and in the values we live by moment to moment – is well emphasised in the widely used *"Bus driver metaphor"*.

There have been a number of further initiatives to develop purpose in life assessment measures. Examples include Morgan & Farsides's *"Meaningful life measure"* and Waterman & colleagues' *"Questionnaire for eudaimonic well-being"*. Steger et al's *"Meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ)"* is particularly accessible and his website gives more details. Here is the MLQ, complete with advice on score interpretation, downloadable both as a Word doc and as a PDF file. It's interesting to answer the MLQ on Martin Seligman's *"Authentic Happiness"* website as it allows you to compare your score with others. Also worth completing on the Seligman site is the *"Approaches to happiness questionnaire"* with its assessment of the Pleasurable, the Engaged & the Meaningful life. The MLQ is a ten item scale measuring *"presence"* of meaning in life and *"search"* for meaning in life. It is your agreement or disagreement with the five statements about *"presence"* of meaning in life that are most associated with stress, health & wellbeing costs or benefits. Each question is answered on a 1 to 7 scale that runs from *"absolutely untrue"* (1), through *"mostly untrue"* (2), *"somewhat untrue"* (3) and *"can't say true or false"* (4), to *"somewhat true"* (5), *"mostly true"* (6) and *"absolutely true"* (7). The five statements are *"I understand my life's meaning"*, *"My life has a clear sense of purpose"*, *"I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful"*, *"I have discovered a satisfying life purpose"* and *"My life has no clear purpose"*. The answer to the last of these five statements is reverse scored (subtract the score from 8). In a survey of 8,756 internet users – *"Meaning in life across the life span: Levels and correlates of meaning in life from emerging adulthood to older adulthood"* – mean (average) scores (with standard deviations) for the different age groups were 23.9 (7.6) for 18-24 year olds; 22.4 (8.2) for 25-44 year olds; 24.7 (8.1) for 45 to 64 year olds; and 26.9 (7.6) for those who were 65 or older. It's likely that approximately 70% of people will score within the range of a standard deviation less to a standard deviation more than the average score for their age group. This means that, for example, only about 15% of 25-44 year olds will score less than 14.2 and about 15% will score more than 30.6. It's likely that scoring high rather than low will have significant implications for health & wellbeing. In the recent paper – *"Purpose in life is associated with mortality among community-dwelling older persons"* – which used a different, but similar, assessment questionnaire, the chances of someone who scored in the top 10% on their purpose in life measure dying over the five years of follow-up were only 57% of someone who scored in the bottom 10%.

It's very likely that this association of purpose in life with health & wellbeing involves at least a three way set of connections – higher purpose in life leads to greater health & wellbeing, and also greater health & wellbeing leads to higher purpose, and also third factors (possibly good relationships or a positive personality or educational background, etc) may lead to both greater health & wellbeing and also higher purpose scores. However there are good reasons to think that deliberately nourishing one's sense of purpose in life is likely to lead to improvements in our levels of stress, health & wellbeing – see, for example, the findings on psychotherapy effects mentioned earlier in this handout or in the sequence on *"Goal renewal boosts wellbeing"*. In the linked handout *"Purpose in life: values, meaning, goals & challenges"*, I'll look at how one might develop and connect with an increased sense of purpose and values.
