

How to Find Your Purpose in Midlife



By Jill Suttie | [Greater Good Magazine](#)

My youngest will be going off to college next fall, meaning I'll soon be an empty nester. After having raised my kids for the last 22 years or so, a large part of my purpose in life will leave along with my son.

I know I'm not alone in feeling both sad and panicky about this big shift—a lot of other people face similar feelings. We wonder what life will be like and what we will do with ourselves once our kids have flown the coop.

One possibility is to renew our sense of purpose.

Having a purpose in life means caring deeply about a goal that you are willing to work toward achieving—often to help others or affect the world in some positive, productive way. Researchers like [Kendall Bronk](#) and educators like [Patrick](#)

[Cook-Deegan](#) have done a lot to understand how we foster a sense of purpose in adolescents.

But what about older people like me? Do we need a sense of purpose, or should we just sit back and enjoy life? For young adults, the world and their possibilities seem wide open—college students embark on a career path, and young parents start their families. How do we find a sense of purpose after we've had the career and raised our children?

Though purpose may seem like it belongs to the realm of younger people, evidence is mounting that having a purpose is important throughout one's lifespan. Researchers are finding strong associations between having a purpose in life in adulthood and better physical health and well-being down the road. Their findings point to the need to foster purpose in older adults, especially in those who may find themselves adrift after children move away or post-retirement.

Not only could encouraging a new purpose in life result in happier, healthier midlife adults, it could motivate older adults to use their gifts for the greater good—thereby benefitting us all.

Why older adults need a sense of purpose

The physical benefits of a sense of purpose are well-documented, says Eric Kim of Harvard's School of Public Health.

Using data from the [Health and Retirement Study](#) at the University of Michigan, he and his colleagues 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. There is even a "dose response"—meaning, for every jump in purpose scores, people

were 13-14 percent less likely to experience physical declines in grip strength and walking speed.

Though initially skeptical that purpose could have this kind of an impact, Kim is now convinced otherwise.

“It’s very interesting to see how this construct of purpose—which has long been discussed by philosophers and theologians—is associated with all of these benefits,” Kim says. “It’s not counterintuitive to me anymore; though it is when I present this kind of research to cardiologists or other scientists.”

Patrick Hill of Washington University’s [Purpose, Aging, Transitions, and Health Lab](#) and his colleagues have also 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.

“Perhaps because people with purpose have an overall outlook regarding the importance of their goals in life, they take care of themselves better,” Kim suggests.

There’s probably something else going on, too, says Hill. He points to an unpublished study where researchers monitored people daily to see how stressful events in their lives affected their stress levels. Those people who reported having a higher sense of purpose felt significantly less stress and anxiety after a stress-filled day than other participants—a finding supported by [other studies](#) on purpose and decreased stress reactivity.

“If you have a day in which you experience a stressful event, maybe those stress events aren’t influencing you or impacting you as much if you have a purpose,” he says.

Are some purposes better than others?

Does it matter what kind of purpose we pursue? The answer so far is yes—if you are older.

Hill points to a [study](#) done with college students whose goals coalesced around four different categories. On one side stood goals that aimed to help others—that is, “prosocial” goals. Others were artistic, and some were simply more self-oriented: financial goals or recognition and achievement at work. The researchers didn’t find significant differences in positive outcomes between the groups. It was just good to have a goal, no matter what it was.

“There are benefits to living a life of purpose even if it isn’t deemed to be focused on helping others beyond the self,” Hill says.

But there’s an important caveat for older adults. That same study found that students with a more prosocial purpose experienced benefits *later* in adulthood—namely, greater personal growth, integrity, and generativity—a marker of purpose tied to well-being. This suggests the focus of one’s purpose may indeed make a difference down the road, as you age.

Researchers at Stanford are starting to dig into that question. In a soon-to-be published study, Anne Colby and her colleagues surveyed almost 1,200 Americans in their midlife about what goals were important to them, offering choices that were focused beyond the self—like improving the lives of others, building a better community, or teaching what they’d learned to others—and choices that weren’t—like strengthening their financial situation, pursuing sports or hobbies, or continuing their education. They also measured their psychological well-being, including their levels of empathy,

wisdom, generativity, gratitude, and happiness.

“Those who were purposeful beyond the self said their lives were filled with joy and happiness”—Professor Anne Colby

Next, they interviewed over a hundred representatives from the survey in depth to find out how engaged they were in pursuing those goals and the impact this had on their lives. Colby found significantly higher well-being in 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.

“To get very high psychological well-being from being deeply engaged with others and transcending the self, that’s a well-documented impact,” says Colby. “We saw this clearly in our interviews, too: Those who were purposeful beyond the self said their lives were filled with joy and happiness.”

Colby doesn’t know whether having a beyond-the-self purpose affects *physical* health, though, as her study didn’t measure health changes over time. But when she asked people about their *current* state of health, she found that, contrary to popular belief, poor health was not a barrier to having a purpose beyond the self.

“It’s not that purpose makes no difference to health,” says Colby. “But people whose health was not good for different reasons were still able to be purposeful.”

While her results on well-being sound promising, they are not Colby’s main concern. She believes it’s important to study beyond-the-self purpose so we can understand how to engage people in caring about others and the common good—not because it makes someone happier or healthier.

“The fortunate thing is that you don’t have to choose between sacrificing yourself to make the world a better place and well-being,” says Colby. “In fact, it’s the opposite: You gain

and the rest of the world gains at the same time.”

How to foster purpose in midlife

While this research continues to evolve, it’s unclear whether purpose can be taught to adults in midlife or whether it develops naturally over time. But Kim suggests purpose can at least be enhanced.

He points to programs designed to increase purpose in [older adults](#) and [cancer patients](#) that have resulted in greater health and well-being. Though this research is fairly preliminary, it suggests that purpose might be enhanced through specific therapy add-ons.

Connecting people to volunteering can help build purpose, too, says Kim. He points to a [study](#) where randomly assigning older people to tutor schoolkids increased their feelings of generativity in comparison to a control group. Plus, it benefitted the students, too.

Colby agrees that volunteering can be an entryway to purpose, and says there is a lot of research supporting the benefits of volunteering, in general. However, she also warns against seeing volunteerism as a panacea.

“Sometimes volunteering can be deadening. It needs to be engaging. You have to feel you’re accomplishing something,” says Colby.

Jim Emerman, a collaborator of Colby’s, agrees. He is the former CEO of the American Society on Aging and current vice president of [Encore.org](#)—an organization devoted to studying and advocating for purposeful engagement for midlife and older adults. Encore.org not only helps match adults to opportunities in their communities, it also educates organizations and policy groups about what older Americans have to offer.

“Older adults are a growing population with a strong motivation and desire to actualize those feelings, to become a force for good in their community,” says Emerman. “Too often, institutions devalue them, or they’re entrenched in ideas about what old age is about and set up obstacles.”

This is particularly ironic, given how older people often have a renewed sense of freedom when their kids have left home or after they retire. They may finally be at a point where they have more time to pursue purposeful activities and find that too few value their contributions.

Emerman would like to change that.

“We found that around 31 percent of our group [from Colby’s survey] are pursuing purpose, while another 20 percent have a strong desire for purpose, but something is holding them back,” says Emerman. “That’s a lot of people who could be giving back to their community if given the right opportunity.”

How can someone find that opportunity? Often, people just need to be asked by someone they know to step up, says Emerman—but many are not asked. Their workplace goes out of business or they leave, and there’s no one there to help connect them to something else, he says.

“If supports were more widely available, it would help more people who are on the cusp of engaging with purpose do so,” he says.

Still, adults in midlife might not want to wait around until somebody figures out how they can plug in. If you’re an older adult and you long to contribute, he suggests using online resources, including [Encore.org](https://www.encore.org), to see where your interests take you.

“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?" says Emerman. "Those questions really help one focus."

About the Author



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