

Sense of purpose

Note: This topic page is written about older children and teenagers, however some aspects will also be relevant to younger children.

What do we mean by purpose?

Where are you going with your life? What kind of person do you want to be? What can you contribute to others? These are questions about your purpose in life. They are sometimes difficult questions, depending on where we are in our lives. But evidence suggests strongly that having answers to these questions will help us flourish.

Purpose is a stable and generalised intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.

Damon et al, 2003

As suggested by the definition above, purpose is a desire to achieve something that is important to you, as well as a desire to make a difference in the world. Making a difference to the world sounds like it has to be something that affects the lives of lots of other people, but this is not the case. It could be as simple as making a difference to someone in your family. The point is that purpose is about more than just ourselves - it's also about having a positive impact on the lives of others in some way. Purpose can be described as a goal, but is much broader and long-lasting than goals such as getting mince in for tea tonight or finding a good parking space!

We may have one strong purpose in life, like to be a great teacher or to work for the welfare of animals or to bring up children successfully. This one strong purpose may steer the course of our life. We may have several different purposes at the same time, such as being a good parent, loving our partner or best friends, being helpful to others by the work that we do and giving, in some way, to our local community. Or we may have different purposes at different times in our lives depending on our age and family circumstances.

Our purpose may be about what we want to *do* or it may be more focused on what kind of person we want to *be*. For example, we may have a purpose always to be kind to others or to be a good friend or to be courageous in all that we do.

Tell me, what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver

Why is purpose important for our wellbeing?

Research has shown that having a sense of moral purpose is really important for our happiness and emotional wellbeing. Our purpose keeps us motivated, gives us energy and helps us cope with any problems or difficult circumstances that come up. Purpose is also about recognising and fulfilling our highest potential, allowing us to be our best and give our best to others.

...happiness cannot be pursued: it must ensue. One must have a reason to be happy. Once the reason is found, however, one becomes happy automatically.

Victor Frankl

Victor Frankl initiated research into purpose and meaning, with his book 'Man's Search for Meaning'.

Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist who experienced and survived life as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. In his book he describes his experience and his observations of how life could be endured, even in these worst possible circumstances. He explained that this can be done by having a strong desire to find a meaning or purpose. Some prisoners were committed to the purpose of surviving for someone they loved who they believed was still alive. Frankl, like others, was committed to the purpose of providing care and support to those even worse off than himself in the camp.

Frankl also had an even greater purpose - he believed his experience could help people suffering from anxiety and stress, by helping them to find their purpose in life. He suggested that to be truly happy, we need a sense of purpose or meaning that is *outside of ourselves*. And that when we lose sight of our purpose or worth to others, we become anxious and stressed. After his time in the camp, he went on to help people in his therapeutic practice to discover what they valued most and reach their true potential.

Living and acting with others' interests at heart without obvious benefit to ourselves has been shown to be good for our health and wellbeing. Research shows that helping others can boost our confidence and our immune system.

Having a strong moral purpose has been found to give meaning to life in the here, now and future. It can also promote mental wellbeing, achievement and pro-social behaviour (behaviour that shows concern for the welfare of others).

Not having a sense of purpose can leave us without a sense of direction or with a sense of confusion about our lives and therefore a lack of fulfilment. If we let ourselves be led along in the flow of life around us, we may not end up where we want to be. Having a strong sense of purpose helps us direct and take control of our own lives and our own destinies.

I determined never to stop until I had come to the end and achieved my purpose.

David Livingstone

Did you know?



Young people are happier when they have a sense of purpose in their lives. A recent study with a group of UK undergraduates found that having a sense of purpose was strongly and positively related to happiness.

French, S. & Joseph, S. (1999). Religiosity and its association with happiness, purpose in life and self-actualisation. *Mental health, Religion & Culture*, 2(2): 117-120.

Finding our purpose

Sometimes we are so caught up in the busyness of our day-to-day lives that we don't stop and assess where we are, where we're going and what's really important to us. Are we doing what we really want to do with our lives?

Sometimes we don't find out what we really want to do or be until we face a major life event such as having a serious illness or the break-up of a long-term relationship. However, we don't need to have a major life event to start bringing a sense of purpose into our lives. We just need to know that it's crucial for our happiness and wellbeing to do so.

How you find your purpose is a very personal thing. To find our unique purpose in life, we need to discover what really makes us tick. Some of us may know this without even having to think, others may have to dig a little deeper. Finding our purpose involves:

- Thinking about the people that are really important to us and how we want them to think and feel about us.
- Knowing what our talents and strengths are.
- Thinking about what we truly love to do at work and in our leisure time.
- Thinking about what we believe we can do for others.

Deep down in every human heart is a hidden longing,
impulse, and ambition to do something fine and enduring.

Grenville Kleiser

Young people and purpose

Young children are more likely to have goals that are fairly short-term and quite focused, like wanting a pet or passing a test. As they grow into their teens, their thinking will become more abstract and they will begin to question their identity and purpose in life. They will want to know who they are and who they are to become.

It has been suggested by researchers that a lack of a sense of purpose in young people can lead to early personal difficulties such as selfishness, lack of enthusiasm, depression, as well as social difficulties such as antisocial behaviour and unstable close relationships. It has also been found to lead to risky behaviours such as drug-taking and driving under the influence of alcohol.

More information

In a group of 582 US high school students, it was found that those with a lower sense of purpose were more likely to engage in risky behaviours (e.g. drug-taking, driving under the influence of alcohol). This was the finding for males and females, and for the three ethnic groups represented in the sample.

Sayles, M.L. (1995). Adolescents' purpose in life and engagement in risky behaviours: Differences by gender and ethnicity. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 55: 2727.

You can't tell young people who they are or who they are to become. However you can support them to recognise and fulfil their highest potential which will help them find their purpose in life. Having meaningful relationships with adults is one of the most important factors in helping children and young people succeed in life.

How to help young people find a sense of purpose

- Think about your own sense of purpose. This will help put you in the frame of mind to encourage young people to think about their own purpose. To do this, focus on the times that have given you the greatest sense of satisfaction, or the times that you have been so absorbed in something that you have lost track of time. Or imagine yourself at your very best or doing what you've always dreamed of doing:
 - What are you doing?
 - What do your close friends and family notice about you?
 - What do you notice about yourself?
- Take time to talk to children about the issues that are important in your life. Explain why these things really matter to you and give you a sense of purpose, e.g. being a blood donor; sending gifts to needy children at Christmas; raising money for a worthy cause; adopting a wild animal, etc.
- Believe that every child has a purpose and that they can succeed in that purpose. If you believe in them, they are more likely to believe in themselves.
- Treat all young people as having worth - as young people who can contribute in all aspects of life. This will build their confidence in their own ability to do things.
- Become a 'treasure hunter' – look for the 'treasure' in each child (i.e. their unique gifts or personality traits), which may not be recognised by others or by the child themselves. Knowing what they are good at can help them find a purpose.
- Give young people opportunities to recognise and develop their own unique strengths as opposed to focusing on correcting their weaknesses. Strengths don't have to be in traditional academic subjects or even in arts or sports. Strengths also include character traits such as being kind, being good at accepting others, being courageous, or having a good sense of humour. Help them think about how they can use these strengths to help others, whether in their home life, their social life or in their future education/career.
- Help young people to develop the ability to think about their future by asking questions like:
 - What are your hopes and dreams?
 - Which one is most important to you just now?
 - What can you do now to make that dream a little closer?
- Help young people to think about their purpose by encouraging them to reflect on what they love and what they're best at:
 - What do you love doing most?
 - What do you do that makes you feel really good about yourself?
 - Who do you really admire and why?
- Help young people to see that they can have multiple roles in life (home and family, education and career, community and service, and hobbies and recreation) and that they can have a purpose in each of these roles.
- Help young people to break down their purpose into achievable goals and help them to take action and support them to keep going until they've achieved their goals. For example, if they love animals and want to be involved in animal welfare, you could start by encouraging them to put some of their pocket money into adopting a wild animal or visiting the zoo and finding out more about what they could be involved with. Or if they

want to have a better relationship with their sister, you could encourage them to think about some small things they could do to be kind to her.

- Teach children that doing something for someone else can give them a sense of purpose and make them feel very good about themselves. So get them to think about the little things they could do to help others, such as helping with housework or going to visit a grandparent or elderly neighbour or helping a friend with their homework.

To know one life has breathed easier because you have lived... This is to have succeeded.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Activities

Here are some activities to help children and young people think about their purpose:

A newspaper article



This activity will help children think about the kind of person they want to be in the future and what they want others to think of them.

Say to a group of children or individual child:

"Five years from now, your local paper does a story about you and something you have achieved. They want to interview three people who know you well – for example: a parent, a friend, a brother, a sister, a teacher, etc. What would you want them to say about you?"

Ask the children to write down the names of three key people in a list and then write beside each name what they would like that person to say about them. They could then write the whole newspaper article about themselves.

A thing like me



This activity can help children think about who they truly are and what they're good at, in a way that they might not have thought about before.

Ask children to think of something that represents them, e.g. a daisy, a tiger, a teddy bear, a candle, etc. and ask them to tell the others in the group why they think it represents them. They could write a paragraph or a poem about it.

You could also do this by laying out some small objects like toy animals on a table and letting the children pick out which one is most like them. In a group discuss why they are like this object while they hold the object.

The little-BIG thing hunt



Lots of little things are really important because they can make a BIG difference to our lives. Every person is important too, because everyone can make a BIG difference to someone else.

What you need:

- A few examples of little things that can make a big difference – such as a penny, a shoe lace, a button, a pencil, a key, seeds, a sugar lump, a sachet of salt, a match, a postage stamp, a telephone number, a ticket, a chilli, a stone, etc.

What you do:

- Show your family or group the little things you've found that can make a big difference. Ask why each of the little things is so important. For example: the penny makes a big difference if you're one penny short of the amount you need to buy a bottle of milk; it's hard to walk in shoes when your shoelace is broken; if the button fell off your trousers they might fall down; a pencil can write an important message; without a little key you couldn't get into your house...
- Then ask everyone to go on a 'little-BIG-thing' hunt to look for ten (or so) little things that make a big difference.
- Gather all the little-BIG-things together and see how many little things can make a really big difference, or are really important to you.
- Then let each person think about which little-BIG-thing is most like them. Do they feel like a lump of sugar because they like to make other people's lives sweeter? Or a button because they help to hold things together?
- Ask each person to talk about the little-BIG-thing they chose and why they chose it.

Some things to talk about together:

- What little things have other people done for you that have made a big difference in your life?
- What little things can you do that might make a big difference in your own life?
- What little things can you do to make a big difference in your family, class, community, workplace, etc?

Other ideas:

- Give each person a small box and ask them to fill it with little things that can make a big difference. You'll be surprised how many things you can fit in such a small space!
- Ask everyone to list all the little ways in which they can make a big difference to the people and world around them (by putting their litter in the bin, recycling, saying thank you, smiling, etc).
- Most of the big things we manage to do in our lives are because we've done lots of little things first. Think of a big thing you would really like to do. Then write down all the little things you're already doing that will help you with your big plan. Make another list of some more little things that will help you with your big plan that you've not had chance to try yet. What difference might it make if you do these little things too?