

How to Cultivate Meaning and Well-Being Through Simple, Everyday Actions

Understanding your personal values, and making choices that match them, may be the secret to a purposeful life.

March 18, 2019



Lealnard/Adobe Stock

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl suggested that the search for meaning is the primary motivation in human beings. It is an essential part of our existence, from young children asking “why” questions to make sense of the world to adults seeking more meaning at work or amid a midlife crisis.

Throughout history and across cultures, other social scientists, philosophers, religious scholars, poets, and laypeople alike have grappled with the all-important issue of meaning. Today, more and more research underscores that experiencing meaning may improve our [well-being](#) and [help us cope](#) and [thrive](#). And the modern explosion of knowledge, abundance of choice, and fast pace of technology only make existential questions about [meaning and purpose more pressing](#).

But meaning is hard to put our fingers on. The meaning of life—or even the meaning of *our* life—can feel like a big abstract question without any clear answer, no matter how much we ponder it.

Frankl argued that “what matters is not the meaning in life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person’s life at a given moment.” In other words, meaning manifests in what we actively and consciously choose to do with our lives. Experiencing meaning *in* life is a concrete question that has everything to do with our priorities, with how we spend our time—at work or at play, with others or alone, in competition or in service.

Experiencing meaning in life is a concrete question that has everything to do with our priorities, with how we spend our time—at work or at play, with others or alone, in competition or in service.

Was Frankl right? I decided to conduct a [study](#) to begin to investigate if we could cultivate more meaning and well-being through such simple, everyday actions.

I developed a survey measuring how much individuals seek out meaningful experiences in everyday life—a concept I named “prioritizing meaning.” People who prioritize meaning would agree with statements like, “The

manner in which I organize my day reflects values that are meaningful to me” or “I choose to include in my life activities that are meaningful to me, even if they often require effort.” For example, they might spend time writing a book, supporting someone in need, or volunteering for a valued cause such as an animal shelter.

The respondents also answered questions about how much they were searching for meaning in life and their overall well-being.

My research, recently published in the [*Journal of Happiness Studies*](#), indicates that people who prioritize meaning through their actions *do* tend to have a greater sense of meaning in life, and in turn they experience less negative emotion and more positive emotion, gratitude, coherence (a sense of optimism and control), happiness, and life satisfaction. In addition, people who are searching for meaning have a higher sense of meaning and well-being when they are actually prioritizing meaning in their daily lives.

That means that if we’re wishing for a more meaningful life but not actively doing anything about it, we probably won’t fare very well. Rather than hoping we will discover or figure out the meaning of our lives someday in the future, it may be possible for us to take ownership of cultivating and experiencing a meaningful life on a day-to-day basis.

Prioritizing meaning vs. positivity

My concept of prioritizing meaning was partly inspired by the idea of “[prioritizing positivity](#),” developed by researcher Lahnna Catalino and her colleagues in 2014. They observed that many people pursue happiness by trying to feel good all the time, which can backfire. Instead, another approach is to prioritize positivity, or seek out and schedule your day around pleasant experiences. Their research found that this strategy—trying to control your actions rather than your feelings—is a more effective way to enhance well-being than obsessing about happiness.

My study suggests that prioritizing meaning is similarly beneficial—but how do the two differ?

Through my analysis, I discovered that they were both related to many of the same benefits, although there were some differences. It was only people who tended to prioritize meaning who had a greater sense of meaning and gratitude, while those who tended to prioritize positivity were less depressed.

Combining both strategies of prioritizing positivity and meaning may be the best approach. It could lead to short-term benefits, like happiness and positive feelings, as well as long-term benefits, like an overall sense of coherence in life.

How to prioritize meaning in your life

Although our understanding of prioritizing meaning is still evolving, these findings do offer a few practical takeaways to help us pursue a meaningful life.

It may not be enough to simply have an intellectual understanding of your personal values or the sources of meaning in your life. For example, if you value family but don't translate that into action by spending more time with your children, that value may not benefit your well-being. As Tagore suggests, we often get too occupied with “preparing our instruments” to take the next step and actually use them to “sing our song.” We may know what is meaningful to us, yet we don't necessarily translate these intentions into everyday living.

Bridging that gap is crucial. Each new day is an opportunity to do the things that truly matter to us to live a full, meaningful life, a life that is worth living. When we plan our days, we can choose to schedule activities that are in congruence with the things that matter to us, that hold import and value for us. Which meaningful activities or interactions should you prioritize in the next 24 hours, and which activities should be removed or modified? What is

the alignment between your current to-do list or daily routine and your personal values? How did you spend your last 24 hours? Your week? Your year?

Self-awareness can help you understand your personal values, align your daily activities with them, and refine your choices over time as you observe how they affect your sense of meaning.

Self-awareness can help you understand your personal values, align your daily activities with them, and refine your choices over time as you observe how they affect your sense of meaning. Pausing the rat race and allowing yourself to mindfully pay attention to your meaningful moments, dreams, and wishes is vital in calibrating your compass.

For example, if personal growth and self-development are meaningful for you, translating these values into action may include daily activities such as listening to inspiring talks or cultivating a new skill or interest. And when you're faced with actions that may be less pleasant in the moment, such as taking care of a child or elderly parent, you can remember to ask yourself, "Why is this important to me?"

Albert Camus once said, "Life is a sum of all your choices," and Annie Dillard adds, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." We build our well-being through the things we repeatedly do every day; it doesn't just happen to us. When we take responsibility for our interactions, choices, and actions in day-to-day life, we can spend more time on the things that really matter to us and use our instruments to play our unique song.

This article originally appeared on [Greater Good](#), the online magazine of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, one of Mindful's partners. [View the original article.](#)

