

CONNECTIONS

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Purpose in Life and a Long-Term View on Well-Being

An interview with Stacey Schaefer



Center for Healthy Minds Scientist **Stacey Schaefer**, in collaboration with the study's lead researcher Carol Ryff at UW-Madison and Center for Healthy Minds Founder Richard Davidson, helps manage the neuroscience portion of a nationwide study that explores well-being across the lifespan. The project, called Midlife in the United States (MIDUS), has followed thousands of adults for the past 20 years to learn how their experiences influence their

physical and psychological health. Schaefer shares why purpose in life and people's exposure to adversity have come up as themes in the research.

What do we know so far about the research that links purpose in life to well-being?

One of the things to come out of the study is if you look at all age groups from 20 to 70-year-olds, if you have greater purpose in life, you're less likely to be dead 10 years later. Fascinatingly, it doesn't matter if you're older versus younger, or if you have a chronic condition or disease, having low levels of purpose in life increases your risk of dying. Other researchers studying different populations have also found this effect.

What's the background for this research?

This research has its roots in the theoretical work of Carol Ryff also here at UW-Madison, who is the lead researcher on MIDUS study. When she developed her concept of psychological well-being, she had six major components based on the work of ancient philosophers to modern day scientists, one being purpose in life and the others being personal relation to others, self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery and personal growth.

In terms of biomarkers of health, like better cardiovascular or immune function or lower rates of disease, purpose in life has been a predictor. And there have been a growing number of studies, one of which is a part of MIDUS, showing that purpose in life is a big predictor of mortality in our study sample.



Hello City Employees!

CONGRATULATIONS to Hailey Krueger, our EAP Specialist, and her family on the birth of her son, Isaac! Isaac was born on Friday, August 18 at 12:30 am. We are excited for Hailey and family as they welcome him into their lives. We hope that she enjoys her time away with her family and we are anxiously awaiting her return to the office. We miss her already.

In this EAP newsletter, we have included an article from our very own UW-Madison Center for Healthy Minds on "Purpose in Life." Greater purpose in life has a direct impact on longevity and wellbeing no matter your age or if you have a chronic condition or disease. Take this moment to consider what makes you happy and makes you feel fulfilled.

Along that same theme, Meg Selig, in a post for *Psychology Today*, encourages us not to postpone our happiness until some condition or external circumstance is met, like retirement or a vacation. Research suggests that there are 12 strategies that can be deployed today to be happier right now.

Sometimes unhappiness or low mood can come from a clinical condition that finding a better attitude or purpose in life cannot improve. In those cases, we encourage you to contact us, or your doctor to obtain necessary medical and/or psychological treatment. We are experts at helping you navigate your health care coverage to find the right specialist.

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What's a good example of a person's purpose in life?

It's really individual. One of the most important theorists as to the importance of finding meaning in life is Victor Frankl, who was a Holocaust concentration camp survivor. He lost his family in the Holocaust, and yet survived and continued his work as a psychiatrist afterwards. His therapeutic approach stressed the importance of finding meaning, even in suffering. I think his survival of both the concentration camp and the loss of his family and continued work helping people is the most profound example possible of someone whose purpose or meaning in life provided resilience to the extreme adversity he experienced.

For me, I have a 7-year-old son who gives me a huge purpose in life in that I need to be here for him. For some people, it can be something as simple as getting older and your children may not need you as much, but you may seek the companionship of a pet. The pet then needs you. Or it could be your career volunteer work, or goal of spreading well-being and kindness, or perhaps you want to make a lot of money. It depends on the person what provides meaning.

So purpose in life has some sort of protective property... Have we learned how the brain and body play into the equation?

It's very early, and we don't have much brain data on this, but what we have found is an interesting relationship between emotional recovery and purpose in life. In the lab, we've used a task that measures eye blink startle, or the magnitude of eye blinks when someone is startled by a loud burst of white noise. The magnitude of eyeblinks varies depending on whether someone is viewing (or recently viewed) positive, neutral, or negative pictures. We use the magnitude of their eyeblink to obtain a measure of their emotional response to the pictures.

What we saw was that purpose in life really didn't predict differences in people's reactions to the unpleasant pictures, but it did after the picture went off. So those people who had greater purpose in life had smaller startle eyeblink responses after the picture was off (and the computer screen was black and the room was dark) than people who had lower purpose in life. Basically, higher purpose in life was associated with smaller startle responses after negative provocations, suggesting those people who have greater purpose in life were able to get over the negative provocation more quickly.

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Hello cont. from page 1.

According to the International Association for Suicide Prevention, untreated depression can lead to high-risk behaviors and even suicide. Every year, more than 800,000 people die by suicide and up to 25 times as many make a suicide attempt. You truly do not need to look far to find someone whose life has been impacted by suicide. September 10, 2017 is World Suicide Prevention Day. We have included information to increase awareness so that we can all be a part of the solution. We have included specific links to information for First Responders that include a screening tool, and the signs to watch for in young people and in the workplace.

Please know that we are here for you, should you need additional support on any issue that effects your well-being and the wellbeing of your family members.

Jresa J. Martiney

How can we cultivate more purpose in life?

An Italian group has developed well-being interventions focused on Carol Ryff's theories of well-being, and they are currently testing their intervention's effectiveness. So far, they do appear helpful. Personally, my interpretation is that realizing what gives you meaning and purpose—recognizing it and acknowledging it—is important. If something is really important to you but you ignore it, that can be detrimental. For example, if you believe in the current societal standards of success, but your family is still more important to you than your career, it's really hard for a lot of us to juggle time, to balance work and our families. Working 80 hours a week and trying to "have it all" may not be better off for your family, your health and well-being—or your longevity.

Instead, think about what gives your life meaning. Do what makes you happy or makes you fulfilled, and make sure to save time for it. It may help you to start your day thinking about your purpose in life, or thinking about what gives your life meaning when trying to refocus after a stressful or unpleasant experience.

A Recipe for Misery: I'll Be Happy When . . . Even in tough times, these 12 strategies could bring joy to your heart.

by Meg Selig, PsychologyToday.com

Are you waiting until your life is problem-free to be happy? If so, you could be waiting for a long, long time—like forever.

It's common for all of us to tell ourselves during times of stress, "When I finally have ___ (fill in the blank) or when ___ (fill in the blank) is over, then I can be happy." That first fill-in-the-blank could be "a home of my own," "a committed relationship," or "a better job." That second fill-in-the-blank event could be anything from "the divorce," "the home repair," "the illness," "she stops drinking," or just a particularly busy time.

But the idea that you can't be happy unless and until some condition is met can itself be a huge barrier to happiness. While it is certainly normal to wish that a period of unusual stress would be over, you could be losing a lot of your precious life by giving in to excessive misery and unhappiness. (I would like to clarify that I am talking here about the relatively predictable crises of everyday life, not catastrophic events like Hurricane Harvey. Dealing with trauma is a different process from dealing with stress.)

I'm not suggesting that you fake-happy your way through the day. Not at all. Within your challenging context, I'm suggesting that you find real happiness, if only for a few minutes at a time. (Of course if you are feeling depressed, out of control, traumatized, or suicidal, **please get help.**)

Try these 12 ways to become less miserable—and even happier—right now:

1. Recognize the unhappiness you are experiencing.

Research indicates that accepting your negative feelings will, paradoxically, increase your well-being. Accepting negative feelings such as disappointment, anger, and sadness will also reduce stress. While it is not clear why acceptance of negative feelings is such a potent strategy, previous research has shown that labeling negative feelings—"I'm feeling resentful," "This is sadness"—shifts your feelings from the emotional part of your brain to the thinking part of your brain. Once your "thinker" (the prefrontal cortex) is on board, you can put your feelings in perspective.

2. Give yourself some compassion.

Talking kindly to yourself could bring moments of comfort. You may not have many people in your life right now who can give you the deep empathy that you need, but you do have one person—you.

3. Give yourself permission to be happy when it's possible.

Tell yourself that you don't need to feel guilty for wanting moments of relief, happiness, and joy in your life.

4. Experience pleasurable and healthy distractions.

Once you give yourself permission to be happy, you can better allow yourself the experience of small pleasures—a walk, a cup of coffee, a chat with a friend, a visit to the park. Music, books, and films can provide both escape and contentment. Remind yourself that it's OK to have fun even though part of your life may be falling apart.



REMOVE BARRIERS

5. **Hold tightly to your self-care program**—or start one if you don't have one.

Exercise, eat right, connect with friends, and get plenty of sleep. Resist the "false friends" of over-drinking, over-eating, and the couch-potato life.

6. **Seek out creative and meaningful activities.**

Pour your feelings into a hobby or a creative activity. Writing in your journal can help you focus and may even be therapeutic, according to studies by James Pennebaker and associates.

7. **Compartmentalize.**

For example, if the source of your unhappiness is work, put your work struggles in the "work compartment" of your brain. Leave them there when you're at home so you can enjoy your home life. When you get back to work, take those work issues out again and deal with them as best you can. Taking a mental break from your troubles may even help you envision new solutions.

8. **Realize that everything changes.**

Events change, feelings change. However you feel now, you are likely to feel differently in the future... perhaps even in the next moment. Let "this too shall pass" become your motto.

9. **Change one small aspect of your situation.**

Is there a way to make even a tiny change that will improve your life? "Do one thing different," as therapist Bill O'Hanlon said in his book by the same name. Then take another action that will help you. And another . . .

10. **Ask for help.**

You may think you are admitting defeat by asking for help. Reframe this destructive idea! Instead, think of yourself as the CEO of your own life (because you are), and delegate some responsibilities to others. Use the time you gain for self-care, fun, and meaningful activities. Find a therapist who can be your ally and sounding-board.

11. **Help others.**

While it may sound odd to suggest to help others when you yourself need help, research shows that helping others will make you happy, among other health benefits. You may also realize that your situation could always be worse—because it could. (If you are already a full-time caregiver, this tactic may not be the best one for you.)

12. **Be grateful for what you can.**

Gratitude is the cousin of happiness.

There are times when searching for happiness could be a way to avoid facing serious problems. For example, if you are unhappy because you are in an abusive and life-threatening relationship, it could be a cop-out to focus on moments of happiness. **Call a hotline** for help and get out when you can!

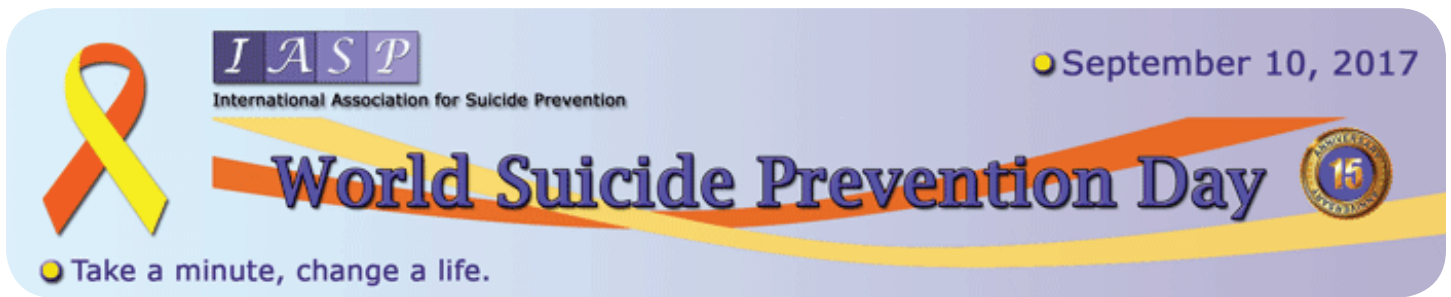
Some extraordinary people can find happiness even under the harshest conditions. Such individuals amaze and inspire me! For example, poet and author Nina Riggs was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. She knew she would die and leave her two young sons behind. Before her death at the age of 39, she was able to tell her husband, "I have to love these days in the same way I love any other."

When you wait for some external event to occur so that you can be happy, you are taking a passive stance toward your own well-being. Remember, you alone have the ultimate responsibility for your own happiness.

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Every year, more than 800,000 people die by suicide and up to 25 times as many make a suicide attempt. Behind these statistics are the individual stories of those who have, for many different reasons, questioned the value of their own lives.

Each one of these individuals is part of a community. Some may be well linked in to this community, and have a network of family, friends and work colleagues or school mates. Others may be less well connected, and some may be quite isolated. Regardless of the circumstances, communities have an important role to play in supporting those who are vulnerable.

This sentiment is reflected in the theme of the 2017 World Suicide Prevention Day: 'Take a minute, change a life.' As members of communities, it is our responsibility to look out for those who may be struggling, check in with them, and encourage them to tell their story in their own way and at their own pace. Offering a gentle word of support and listening in a non-judgmental way can make all the difference.

Taking a minute can change a life

People who have lived through a suicide attempt have much to teach us about how the words and actions of others are important. They often talk movingly about reaching the point where they could see no alternative but to take their own life, and about the days, hours and minutes leading up to this. They often describe realizing that they did not want to die but instead wanted someone to intervene and stop them. Many say that they actively sought someone who would sense their despair and ask them whether they were okay.

Sometimes they say that they made a pact with themselves that if someone did ask if they were okay, they would tell them everything and allow them to intervene. Sadly, they often reflect that no one asked.

The individuals telling these stories are inspirational. Many of them recount reaching the point where they did try to take their own lives, and tell about coming through it. Many of them are now working as advocates for suicide prevention. Almost universally, they say that if someone had taken a minute, the trajectory that they were on could have been interrupted.

Life is precious and sometimes precarious. Taking a minute to reach out to someone – a complete stranger or close family member or friend – can change the course of their life.

No one has to have all the answers

People are often reluctant to intervene, even if they are quite concerned about someone. There are many reasons for this, not least that they fear they will not know what to say. It is important to remember, however, that there is no hard and fast formula. Individuals who have come through an episode of severe suicidal thinking often say that they were not looking for specific advice, but that compassion and empathy from others helped to turn things around for them and point them towards recovery.

Another factor that deters people from starting the conversation is that they worry that they may make the situation worse. Again, this hesitation is understandable; broaching the topic of suicide is difficult and there is a myth that talking about suicide with someone can put the idea into their head or trigger the act.

The evidence suggests that this is not the case. Being caring and listening with a non-judgmental ear are far more likely to reduce distress than exacerbate it.

Resources are available

There are various well-established resources that are designed to equip people to communicate effectively with those who might be vulnerable to suicide. Mental Health First Aid, for example, is premised on the idea that many people know what to do if they encounter someone who has had a physical health emergency, like a heart attack (dial an ambulance, administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation), but feel out of their depth if they are faced with someone experiencing a mental or emotional crisis. Mental Health First Aid teaches a range of skills, including how to provide initial support to someone in these circumstances. There are numerous other examples too; relevant resources can be found on the websites of the **International Association for Suicide Prevention** and the **World Health Organization**.

Join in on World Suicide Prevention Day

2017 marks the 15th World Suicide Prevention Day. The day was first recognized in 2003, as an initiative of the International Association for Suicide Prevention and endorsed by the World Health Organization. World Suicide Prevention Day takes place each year on September 10.

If there is anyone you are concerned about, take a minute to check in with them. It could change their life.

Suicide Prevention Resources

According to the **CDC**, a variety of factors may increase the risk of suicide such as family history, previous attempts, history of mental health disorders, and AODA issues. It is also recognized that certain groups of people may share more of these risk factors than others. In bringing awareness to the topic of suicide and the power that each of us has to change a life, we are providing some links to information that addresses preventing suicide among First Responders, young people, and those we work with.

Police

- ✦ 7 ways to prevent police suicide by focusing on overall officer well-being, *Police One*, September 2016
- ✦ Police Suicide and the Solutions, *Law Officer*, April 2017

Fire/EMS

- ✦ Understanding Fire Service Suicide, the Key to Prevention, *Station Pride*, April 2017
- ✦ Suicide is Killing Our Paramedics, *EMS1*, June 2016
- ✦ Firefighter/EMT Suicide Screening Tool, *Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance*

Youth

- ✦ Preventing Youth Suicide, *National Association of School Psychologists*
- ✦ Prevent Teen Suicide, *Psychology Benefits Society*

Workplace

- ✦ The Role of Co-Workers in Preventing Suicide in the Workplace, *Suicide Prevention Resource Center*

*Thanks for reading,
we hope you found the information useful!*

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