The Science of a Meaningful Life

Emiliana Simon-Thomas, PhD
Science Director
Does a Meaningful Life = Maximizing joy and pleasure?

“...the purpose of life is not to be happy at all. It is to be useful, to be honorable. It is to be compassionate. It is to matter, to have it make some difference that you lived.”

(Leo Rosten, 1963)
"You have a sense of purpose when you make valuable contributions to others or to society that you find personally meaningful and that don’t harm anyone."

(Morten Hansen, Great at Work, 2018)
Where Does Meaning Come From?

- Deep-seeded prosocial drive (e.g. care-giving, consolation, forming and maintaining long term social bonds)
Where Does Meaning Come From?

- Group-level adaptation (altruism, coordinated effort, and cooperation)

(Rand & Greene 2012)
Biological Drivers of Meaning

- The sustained reward value of generosity
- Neural regions for empathy, compassion, and gratitude

(Hubbard et. al., 2016)
Does a Meaningful Life = Overall Happiness?

A leading scientific definition of happiness:

“...the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.”

(Lyubomirsky, 2007)

A.k.a. well-being, eudaimonia, flourishing, thriving...
Myths about Meaning

• We’re born with it (or not)
• It comes from fulfilling popular culture expectations or self-focused needs
• It is the result of high status or privilege
Barriers to Finding Meaning

• Inaccurate popular norms
• Negatively-biased, self-focused cost-benefit analyses
• Perceived ineffectiveness, lack of impact or progress
• Solely transactional climate
• Time famine/persistent distraction

“Live each moment. Practice being mindful. Be present in... Hold on, I have to take this.”
8 Tips for a Meaningful Life

- Optimism: Think positively
- Mindfulness: Attend with gentle care
- Connect: Engage & foster friendship
- Gratitude: Savor & say “thank you”
- Compassion: Extend care & help
- Kindness: Give, share & cooperate
- Play: Just for fun!
- Awe: Elevate & inspire
Optimism (a.k.a. positive emotional style)

Savoring and enhancing what is good

• Prioritize shared experiences over things
  - Levity, amusement, and play
  - Biophilia, awe and the sublime
• Friendly, safe perceptual lens
• Expressive writing and journaling: Three Good Things, Best Possible Self, Three Small Wins, Three Funny Things
Let’s Try One Together

Turn to the person next to you and exchange brief accounts of your most recent jaw-dropping, tingly, deeply inspiring experience.

*Awe = the experience of being in the presence of something extraordinary that does not fit into your typical mode of thinking and understanding.
Figure 3. Study 2 sequential mediation model. Distinct line styles represent different steps in the model. Numbers above lines are unstandardized coefficients of that path. *** p < .001.
Mindfulness

Understanding and relating to one’s own mental experience in a real-time, nurturing way

- Inner awareness practices, e.g. mindfulness, contemplative/centering prayer, yoga
- Labelling, disclosing, and self-distancing emotions
- Reframing into “challenge” vs. “threat” mindset
- Self-compassion
- Compassion
Let’s Try Another
Mindful Breathing
Inhale deeply, invite yourself to exhale more slowly than you inhale, and pause briefly before each next inhale.
• @ 5-6 breaths per minute, 10 seconds per breath
• @ 4 sec inhale, 6 sec exhale, 1 sec pause
How Do We Know This Works?

(Garland et. al., 2015)
Social Connection

You count on others and others can count on you

• Common humanity, humility, and vested interest in something beyond the self
• Ease at affiliating with and accepting/lending support

“I don’t care if she is a tape dispenser. I love her.”
Let’s Try One More

Gratitude 1 2 3

• Think of something good that has happened or come up for you recently that was tied to another person’s effort
• Turn to a partner in the room
• Pretend your partner here is the person that made this good thing happen for you
Connecting People with Positive Outcomes

Over the next three minutes, take turns *being specific* while saying “Thank You”

1. Describe **what the person did** that you are thanking them for.
2. Acknowledge the **effort** that went into what they did to benefit you; what did they invest or forego?
3. Explain how the person’s actions **benefitted you**.

Greater Good Science Center

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### How Do We Know This Works?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Increased</th>
<th>Decreased</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>Physical discomfort and disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Optimism, hope, and meaning</strong></td>
<td>Chronic and post traumatic stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and life satisfaction</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perseverance and goal attainment</strong></td>
<td>Depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual transcendence</td>
<td>Envy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Prosocial appraisals, motivation, and behavior</strong></td>
<td>Entitlement and possessiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support seeking</td>
<td>Incivility and aggression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social appeal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendship, and relationship quality, satisfaction, and endurance</td>
<td>Leadership endorsement and success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is So Much More!

**Shared Identity**
How to encourage generosity by finding commonalities between people.

**Capitalizing on Positive Events**
Use good news to strengthen your bonds with friends or family.

**Random Acts of Kindness**
How to feel happier by doing things for others.

**Awe Walk**
Find wonder and inspiration through a simple stroll.

**Three Funny Things**
Get happier by seeing the humor in life.

**Making an Effective Apology**
A good apology involves more than saying "sorry."

**How Would You Treat a Friend?**
Build resilience by changing the way you respond to challenges.

**Letting Go of Anger Through Compassion**
To foster resilience, think about a hurtful event in a different way.

[ggia.berkeley.edu](http://ggia.berkeley.edu)
There is So Much More!

Resources

Websites

1. greatergood.berkeley.edu
2. ggsc.berkeley.edu
3. ggia.berkeley.edu
4. ggie.berkeley.edu
5. thnx4.org
6. The Science of Happiness podcast (@ iTunes)

Online Courses on edX.org:

1. The Science of Happiness
2. Foundations of Happiness at Work
3. Mindfulness and Resilience to Stress at Work
4. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence at Work
THANK YOU!