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on the GGSC purpose quiz scores do not reflect innate potential or generalized patterns of purpose in society. Rather, they suggest a number of ways to examine whether the manner of asking about or assessing purpose in life aligns with multiple cultural ideals. For example, people from various cultures might not interpret this question the same way: “How excited are you about carrying out the plans that you set for yourself?” For starters, being “excited” about a self-focused ideal is a very Western, individualistic frame of mind, and less likely to be highly endorsed by people with more collectivist ideals. Further, any observed differences in purpose scores by ethnic background would need to account for how systemic social and policy factors shape access to resources, as well as opportunities to consider, learn about, and pursue what matters in life. More schooling, more purpose Consistent with many studies about the importance of education in purpose in life, we found that purpose rose with educational attainment. This reflects the formative role that learning, knowledge, professional identity, and work experience play in discovering what drives our sense of purpose in life. When it comes to acting in accordance with, and being recognized for, efforts that reflect and validate our sense of purpose in life, higher educational credentials allow us to “follow our passions.” Neighborhood makes a small difference While the difference is small (less than one-tenth of a point), people who live in big cities reported higher purpose than all other neighborhoods: small city, suburban, and rural. Some argue that people in large, metropolitan areas harbor extra self-importance compared to people in smaller cities or rural areas. Perhaps this mindset could bump up responses to questions like: “I know how I can use my talents to make a meaningful contribution to the larger world,” which might be more difficult to endorse for people who do not feel as much contact with “the larger world.” This data point highlights a couple potential boundary conditions for purpose. The first is illusory: that purpose must be about playing a hugely influential role in a world-changing issue. In fact, purpose can be local, proximal, and connected to tiny steps, like planting flowers or offering a kindness to someone in need. And while purpose is typically beneficial, we should be wary of pursuing purpose so single-mindedly that we end up making no room for spontaneity or unstructured experience, or getting drawn into purposeful but harmful pursuits. There are probably ways living in a big city does provide the context for purpose that could explain the slightly higher scores, but, like other factors described, it is not a requirement for having purpose. For people with less direct contact with the “larger world,” practices that focus on core values and personal goals for the future can be helpful for strengthening purpose. Strong political views are associated with stronger purpose People with stronger political views report higher purpose in life than people with moderate political views. While these differences are numerically small (just over one-tenth of a point lower in the moderate group), they are easy to interpret. Since political views are typically intertwined with people’s values, identity, and even professional choices, it’s not surprising to see higher purpose in people with stronger political views. It is also notable that people’s political views typically grow more pronounced with age. People in some professions are more purposeful than others Perhaps not surprisingly, people who work to help others tend to score higher in purpose than those in other professions. Again, while it is tempting to attribute this difference to the jobs themselves—and there are indeed ways that some professions can make purpose-laden experiences easier to come by than others—the science of purpose suggests that anyone can introduce greater purpose into their life regardless of their occupation. Anyone—regardless of demographics, education, politics, and more—can connect what they do to a broader, worldly impact that transcends space and time. Greater Good wants to know: Do you think this article will influence your opinions or behavior? Scroll To Top By Jill Suttie | July 9, 2025 By Jill Suttie | July 9, 2025 A new study suggests that even across cultures, there is a lot of similarity in where humans find purpose in life and how it brings us fulfillment. 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Our sense of purpose will change over the course of our lifetime. As we grapple with our identity as teens, settle into the responsibilities of adulthood, and make the shift to retirement, the research finds that our sense of purpose will naturally wax and wane. Like happiness, purpose is not a destination, but a journey and a practice. That means it’s accessible at any age, if we’re willing to explore what matters to us and what kind of person we want to be—and act to become that person. If we’re able to revisit and renew our sense of purpose as we navigate milestones and transitions, suggests this research, then we can look forward to more satisfying, meaningful lives. Researchers have discovered that a sense of purpose is linked to a number of good outcomes, across the lifespan, for both individuals and organizations. Youth who have a sense of purpose also report higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction—which seems associated with better educational outcomes. One study looked at college students who wanted to help others, create art, or achieve financial success. The researchers didn’t find significant differences in positive outcomes among the groups. For young people, it was just good to have a goal, no matter what it was. For young and old alike, the physical benefits of a sense of purpose are well-documented. For example, Eric Kim and his colleagues at Harvard’s School of Public Health 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. Patrick Hill and his Washington University colleagues have 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. Why? Researchers suggest that people take better care of themselves when they feel like they have something to live for. Having a purpose also seems to be associated with lower stress levels, overall, which contributes to better health. Do some purposes confer more benefits than others? The answer so far is yes—if you are older. One study found that young adults with a more “prosocial” purpose—one aimed at helping others—experienced greater personal growth, integrity, and health later in adulthood. This result was echoed by a 2019 study by Anne Colby and colleagues at Stanford University. They surveyed almost 1,200 Americans in their midlife about their well-being and what goals were important to them. The researchers found significantly higher well-being among 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. Indeed, looking beyond individual lives, a sense of purpose appears to have evolved in humans so that we can cooperate and accomplish big things together. A 2007 study suggests that managers can effectively boost the work experience and well-being of their employees by helping them connect to a job-related higher purpose. The 2013 Core Beliefs and Culture Survey revealed that 91 percent of respondents who believe that their company has a strong sense of purpose also say it has a history of strong financial performance. Purpose is adaptive, in an evolutionary sense. It helps both individuals and the species to survive and thrive. Purpose often grows from our connection to others, which is why a crisis of purpose is often a symptom of isolation. Once you find your path, you’ll almost certainly find others traveling along with you, hoping to reach the same destination—a community. According to research by Kendall Cotton Bronk, finding one’s purpose requires four key components: dedicated commitment, personal meaningfulness, goal directedness, and a vision larger than one’s self. Often, finding our purpose involves a combination of finding meaning in the experiences we’ve had, while assessing our values, skills, and hopes for a better world. It means taking time for personal reflection while imagining our ideal future. Here are some exercises purpose researchers recommend for finding your purpose in life: The Magic Wand: Think about the world around you — your home, community, the world at large—and visualize what you would change if you had a magic wand and could change anything. Then ask yourself, why you chose what you did and consider concrete steps you might take to move the world a little closer to that ideal. This exercise has been used to foster purpose in youth and young adults, in particular. Best Possible Self: Imagine yourself at some future age — like 10 or 20 years down the road—and think about what your life would be like if everything went as well as possible. Then ask yourself these questions: What are you doing? What is important to you? What do you really care about, and why? Focusing on an ideal self can increase optimism for the future, which researchers believe is tied to purpose Clarify your values: If it’s hard to figure out what matters most to you, affirming your values can help. Three values surveys—the Valued Living Questionnaire, the Portrait Values Questionnaire, and the Personal Values Questionnaire—ask you to rank the importance of different values, something that can help you get clearer about your purpose. Recognize your strengths: To get a handle on your particular skills, try the VIA Character Strengths Survey to see what it reveals about you. Or, you can contact people who know you—teachers, friends, family, colleagues, and mentors—and ask them what you’re good at, what you seem to like to do, and how you might make your mark on the world. Sometimes an outsider’s opinion can help clarify your personal strengths and help you figure out how best to apply them. Volunteer: Finding purpose is aided by having a broad set of meaningful experiences that can point you in the right direction. Volunteering expands your experience, while also improving your well-being and helping the world. Not only that, volunteering puts you in touch with people who have similar values, who may inspire you or point you toward other opportunities for making a difference that you hadn’t thought of before. Cultivate positive emotions: Positive emotions help us to broaden our outlook on the world and feel energized to take action for the greater good; so they can be useful for finding purpose. Gratitude and awe, in particular, help us care about others, build relationships, and feel connected to something greater than ourselves, which is why they’re tied to fostering purpose. You can try our website, Greater Good in Action, to find exercises that will help bolster your sense of purpose — and make you happier, too.

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