

Have you found meaning in life? Answer determines health and well-being

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Dilip V. Jeste, MD, senior associate dean for the Center of Healthy Aging and Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences at UC San Diego School of Medicine. Credit: Erik Jepson, UC San Diego Publications

Over the last three decades, meaning in life has emerged as an important question in medical research, especially in the context of an aging population. A recent study by researchers at University of California San Diego School of Medicine found that the presence of and search for meaning in life are important for health and well-being, though the relationships differ in adults younger and older than age 60.

"Many think about the meaning and purpose in life from a philosophical perspective, but meaning in life is associated with [better health](#), wellness and perhaps longevity," said senior author Dilip V. Jeste, MD, senior associate dean for the Center of Healthy Aging and Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences at UC San Diego School of Medicine. "Those with meaning in life are happier and healthier than those without it."

The study, publishing online in the December 10, 2019 edition of the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*,

found the presence of meaning in life is associated with better physical and mental well-being, while the search for meaning in life may be associated with worse mental well-being and cognitive functioning. "When you find more meaning in life, you become more contented, whereas if you don't have purpose in life and are searching for it unsuccessfully, you will feel much more stressed out," said Jeste.

The results also showed that the presence of meaning in life exhibited an inverted U-shaped relationship, while the search for meaning in life showed a U-shaped relationship with age. The researchers found that age 60 is when the presence of meaning in life peaks and the search for meaning of life was at its lowest point.

"When you are young, like in your twenties, you are unsure about your career, a life partner and who you are as a person. You are searching for meaning in life," said Jeste. "As you start to get into your thirties, forties and fifties, you have more established relationships, maybe you are married and have a family and you're settled in a career. The search decreases and the meaning in life increases."

"After age 60, things begin to change. People retire from their job and start to lose their identity. They start to develop health issues and some of their friends and family begin to pass away. They start searching for the meaning in life again because the meaning they once had has changed."

The three-year, cross-sectional study examined data from 1,042 adults, ages 21 to 100-plus, who were part of the Successful Aging Evaluation (SAGE)—a multi-cohort study of senior residents living in San Diego County. The presence and search for meaning in life were assessed with interviews, including a meaning in life questionnaire where participants were asked to rate items, such as, "I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life"

and "I have discovered a satisfying life purpose."

"The [medical field](#) is beginning to recognize that meaning in life is a clinically relevant and potentially modifiable factor, which can be targeted to enhance the well-being and functioning of patients," said Awais Aftab, MD, first author of the paper and a former fellow in the Department of Psychiatry at UC San Diego. "We anticipate that our findings will serve as [building blocks](#) for the development of new interventions for patients searching for purpose."

Jeste said next research steps include looking at other areas, such as wisdom, loneliness and compassion, and how these impact meaning in life. "We also want to examine if some biomarkers of stress and aging are associated with searching and finding the [meaning](#) in life. It's an exciting time in this field as we are seeking to discover evidence-based answers to some of life's most profound questions."

More information: Awais Aftab et al, Meaning in Life and Its Relationship With Physical, Mental, and Cognitive Functioning, *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2019). [DOI: 10.4088/JCP.19m13064](https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.19m13064)

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