

Searching for meaning? Try appreciating the small things

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Appreciating the intrinsic beauty in life's everyday moments can contribute to a more meaningful existence, according to new research.

In a paper recently published in *Nature Human Behavior*, Joshua Hicks, a professor in the Texas A&M University Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, says this may be a previously unaccounted for factor tied to perceptions of [meaning](#).

"It might not relate to whether you matter in the grand scheme of things, but we've shown people who value the [little things](#), like your cup of coffee in the morning or being [mindful](#) in conversations with others, tend to have a high sense of meaning in life," he said.

Hicks studies existential psychology. Put simply, he aims to understand the "big questions" in life. He describes his main focus as the experience of life—studying people's subjective feeling that their life has meaning.

Scholars like Hicks generally agree there are three main sources of a subjectively meaningful existence: coherence, or the feeling that one's life "makes sense"; the possession of clear, long-term goals and sense of purpose; and existential mattering. This last factor, he says, is the belief that one's actions matter to others.

What Hicks and his co-authors argue in their latest research is that appreciating and finding value in experiences, referred to as experiential appreciation, is a fourth fundamental pathway toward finding meaning in life.

Researchers measured this factor by asking study participants how strongly they identified with statements linked to finding [beauty](#) in life and appreciating a wide variety of experiences. They were also asked to recall the most meaningful event of the past month, among other questions, with the goal of measuring experiential appreciation. Hicks described this series of experiments in [a recent article](#) he co-authored for *Scientific American*.

In each case, the results confirmed the original theory that appreciating small moments can make for a more meaningful life.

For example, participants who were assigned to watch a sequence of picturesque nature montages scored by slowly building instrumental music from the BBC documentary "Planet Earth" reported greater feelings of experiential appreciation than those who watched a two-minute instructional woodworking video.

Hicks said the research began early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, when people were isolated at home and in some cases unable to pursue their goals. The question of whether people could still experience a high sense of meaning during those conditions was of great importance, he said, and remains important in the post-quarantine era.

Understanding the main components contributing to meaning in life can help researchers look for interventions for those who feel their lives lack meaning, he said.

People with certain personality types may be better at practicing mindfulness and recognizing intrinsic beauty, Hicks said, but that doesn't mean everyone can't cultivate this skill. To appreciate the small things in a fast-paced world, he said, people just need to slow down.

"Meaning is all around us when we can experience the natural beauty in the world. It can be the beauty in another person's face, the food we eat or the songs we listen to," he said. "Right now, since cell phones and social media are so prevalent, I think that stuff detracts from our sense of meaning. Those things can be entertaining, but too much of it can really distract from what's real, like natural beauty."

More information: Jinhyung Kim et al, Experiential appreciation as a pathway to meaning in life, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-021-01283-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01283-6)

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