

Finding Meaning & Purpose

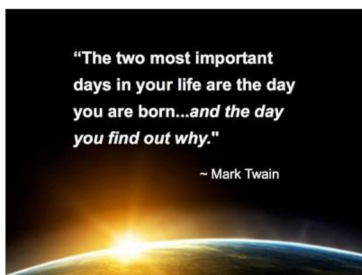
Many of us spend a lot of time in the pursuit of happiness, striving towards a goal of a better paid job, greater status, or obtaining the latest possession.

An unfulfilled life might mean an unhealthy and unhappy life, but that's not necessarily the case. However, lack of meaning and purpose can result in anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.



Lack of Purpose

There have been, and still are, times when terrible events happen to a community or a country, and our lives are shaken to the core. What really matters at those times?



We hear about the community spirit of the London Blitz, of that shared purpose of coming together and working towards a common goal, helping others and contributing to the "war effort".

Modern life can lack that community spirit and togetherness, and we can wander aimlessly through the routine of daily life, looking for something we don't even know we're missing.

The Pursuit of Happiness

The pursuit of happiness can lead us to feel stressed, frustrated, depressed, anxious. Happiness is usually about trying to satisfy our wants and needs - looking towards ourselves, an inward-looking focus.

We can learn from the rich and famous that money, fame and possessions often don't go hand in hand with happiness.

Search for Meaning

Where are you heading? Would you start out on a year-long journey to an unknown destination? Or would you ask questions about the journey, and about the destination?

Finding purpose and fulfilment is more about giving, to others, to the community, to the environment, to the world. We often become more outward focused to find meaning and purpose.

In giving, in finding purpose, we find fulfilment and satisfaction, but not necessarily happiness....although it can be a by-product.

Finding purpose gives us exactly that - a purpose to go on in spite of life circumstances.

Viktor Frankl

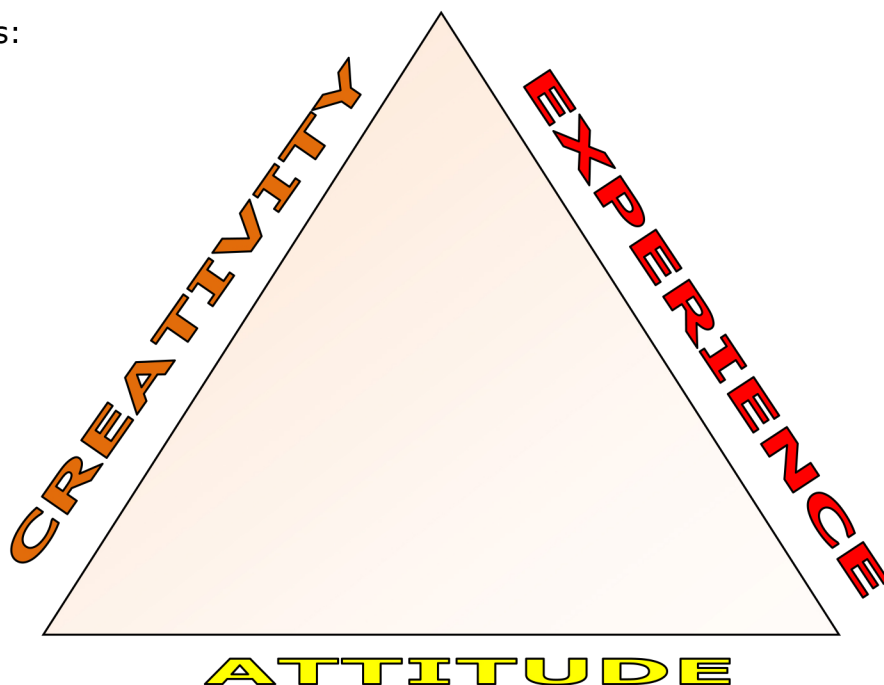
Viktor Frankl (see "Man's Search for Meaning") found meaning and purpose even as a Nazi concentration camp prisoner. He noticed that those fellow prisoners lacking a sense of purpose gave up and died more quickly than those with purpose. Those with purpose were the people more likely to survive - they looked back on their lives with a sense of satisfaction, and looked forward to future achievements.

Frankl found his purpose in helping his fellow prisoners to find meaning and purpose, even in those extreme conditions of suffering. For example, the scientist who decided he wanted to finish his book, and the father who desperately wanted to be reunited with his child (safely) overseas. Frankl found that even in extreme suffering, we can change the way we think about that situation, to give us a sense of purpose.

He devised his "meaning triangle" to help us identify the ways we can add purpose to our lives.

Viktor Frankl's (1964) **Meaning Triangle**

Three Values:



CREATIVITY

- Giving something to the world through self-expression
 - Work, good deeds, art, music, writing, invention

EXPERIENCE

- Receiving from the world
 - through nature, culture, relationships, interactions with others and our environment, spirituality

ATTITUDE

- Even if we can't change a situation or circumstance, we can still choose our attitude toward a situation, condition or suffering – changing the way we think about life situations, seeing a different perspective, looking at it a different way

Frankl’s Two types of Meaning

Ultimate Meaning	Meaning of the Moment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">A meaning we can never reach but just glimpse at the horizon... a life direction and set of values rather than an achievable goal.We might set goals to achieve whilst moving in the direction of our life values. <div><ul style="list-style-type: none">E.g. Helping others</div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Realising we have choices in each momentMaking wise and responsible decisions <div><ul style="list-style-type: none">E.g. What can I do right now, in this situation, that will be helpful to others?</div>

Find YOUR purpose

In order to find your purpose, try doing and experiencing different things. Find your passion! You will know when you find it, from how you feel, and that sense of fulfilment and deep satisfaction.

Ask yourself what do you really enjoy doing? What is your passion? What really inspires you? What are you really skilled at?

What do you want to be remembered for? What do you want to be your legacy?



Be open minded and flexible in how you think about things. Don't discount anything! We often have several different purposes, or life values. For example: being a good wife and mother, being a writer, being a teacher. Each one can give you that sense of fulfilment.

Meaning and purpose can change over time.

Ask yourself how important certain aspects of your life are. Which of these (or others) are MOST important to you? Score them on a scale of 0 - 5 with 0 being not at all imporant, and 5 being most important.

- Relationships: partner, children, parents, siblings, friends etc
- Work and career
- Education and achievement
- Spirituality
- Connecting with nature
- Helping others
- Caring for the environment
- Health living / lifestyle choice
- Caring for animals

You may find that you have several life values or purposes. You might find it useful to identify the 1 or 2 that are MOST important to you. Those you feel most passionate about.

You have found your life's purpose!

Take Action!

DAILY ACTION + PASSION = PURPOSEFUL LIFE

Having identified your life purpose or values, you can start to move towards and plan something every day that is purposeful, that takes you towards that purpose.

Choose purposeful activities that you can engage in locally, or perhaps support from a distance.

You might choose to keep a diary (or [Positive Data Log](#)) of what you have done each day, that fits with your purpose or life value.

You might identify a [SMART goal](#) to work towards, that fits with each of your life values or purpose.

Unfulfilled at work

If your paid occupation or regular activity seems not to fit with your purposeful life:

- Consider the wider purpose of the organisation you work for.
- Are there any different roles you can consider outside of your current job description? (e.g. union rep, social activity co-ordinator, or perhaps a more informal role)
- Find a way of incorporating your purpose within your current role, e.g. if your purpose is helping others, then maybe you can offer assistance to colleagues who are not as knowledgeable or skilled
- Could you talk to a colleague, supervisor, manager etc who could help you identify ways to change the way you work in or develop your current role?
- Consider the effect of your paid employment on your life's purpose of e.g. providing for and supporting your family and/or other meaningful others.
- If you have trouble identifying meaningful purpose in your paid employment, then you could do something purposeful outside of work, in the evenings or at weekends

Finding Meaning in Difficult Situations

- When you find yourself in a difficult situation, ask yourself:
- How can I make this situation more meaningful?
- What can I do right now, that would make it meaningful?
- What can I learn from this experience?
- What can I change for the future? What can I do next time?
- How can this experience help me, or help others?

What gives your life meaning?

Write down the areas in which you’d like to find meaning

What do you enjoy? What gives you a sense of achievement? Is there something you’ve always wanted to do, or do more of? What are you drawn to? What makes you feel purposeful? What do you value in life?

- Having chosen your life direction, ask: What can I do that will lead me towards my life direction?
- Then break it down into more detail – what you can do, how you can do it, when etc.

CREATIVITY

Work, good deeds, art, music, writing, invention, helping others, sponsored event, voluntary work, charities, hobbies, interests

EXPERIENCE

Being with nature, music, art, theatre, concerts, galleries, museums, literature, outdoor mindful activity (awareness of environment), [mindfulness](#), being with others, spirituality

ATTITUDE

Challenging existing attitudes, changing the way we think about life situations, seeing a different perspective:

[STOPP!](#)

- Is there another way of looking at this?
- What’s the bigger picture?
- How might someone else see this situation?
- What advice would I give to someone else in this situation?
- What’s the most helpful and best response for me, others & this situation?