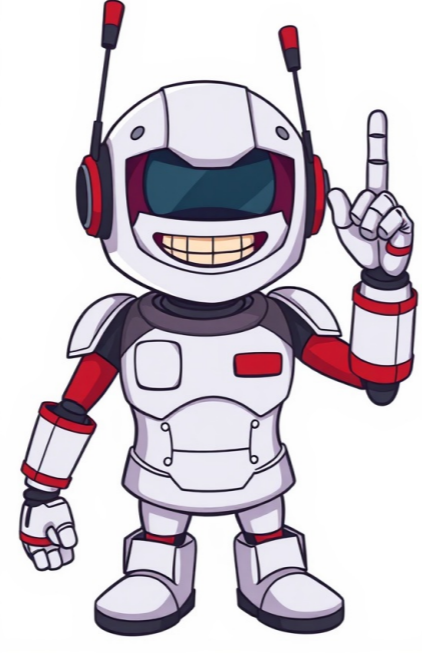


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Do you have a sense of purpose? For decades, psychologists have studied how long-term, meaningful goals develop over the span of our lives. The goals that foster a sense of purpose are ones that can potentially change the lives of other people, like launching an organization, researching disease, or teaching kids to read. Indeed, a sense of purpose appears to have evolved in humans so that we can accomplish big things together—which may be why it’s associated with better physical and mental health. Purpose is adaptive, in an evolutionary sense. It helps both individuals and the species to survive. Many seem to believe that purpose arises from your special gifts and sets you apart from other people—but that’s only part of the truth. It also 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. Here are six ways to overcome isolation and discover your purpose in life.
1. Read Reading connects us to people we’ll never know, across time and space—an experience that research says is linked to a sense of meaning and purpose. (Note: “Meaning” and “purpose” are related but separate social-scientific constructs. Purpose is a part of meaning; meaning is a much broader concept that usually also includes value, efficacy, and self-worth.) In a 2010 paper, for example, Leslie Francis studied a group of nearly 26,000 teenagers throughout England and Wales—and found that those who read the Bible more tended to have a stronger sense of purpose. Secular reading seems to make a difference, as well. In a survey of empirical studies, Raymond A. Mar and colleagues found a link between reading poetry and fiction and a sense of purpose among adolescents. “Reading fiction might allow adolescents to reason about the whole lives of characters, giving them specific insight into an entire lifespan without having to have fully lived most of their own lives,” they suggest. By seeing purpose in the lives of other people, teens are more likely to see it in their own lives. In this sense, purpose is an act of the imagination. Many people I interviewed for this article mentioned pivotal books or ideas they found in books. The writing of historian W.E.B. Du Bois pushed social-justice activist Art McGee to embrace a specific vision of African-American identity and liberation. Journalist Michael Stoll found inspiration in the “social responsibility theory of journalism,” which he read about at Stanford University. “Basically, reporters and editors have not just the ability, but also the duty to improve their community by being independent arbiters of problems that need solving,” he says. “It’s been my professional North Star ever since.” Spurred by this idea, Michael went on to launch an award-winning nonprofit news agency called The San Francisco Public Press. So if you’re feeling a crisis of purpose in your life, go to the bookstore or library or university. Find books that matter to you—and they might help you to see what matters in your own life.
2. Turn hurts into healing for others Of course, finding purpose is not just an intellectual pursuit; it’s something we need to feel. That’s why it can grow out of suffering, both our own and others’. Kezia Willingham was raised in poverty in Corvallis, Oregon, her family riven by domestic violence. “No one at school intervened or helped or supported my mother, myself, or my brother when I was growing up poor, ashamed, and sure that my existence was a mistake,” she says. “I was running the streets, skipping school, having sex with strangers, and abusing every drug I could get my hands on.” When she was 16, Kezia enrolled at an alternative high school that “led me to believe I had options and a path out of poverty.” She made her way to college and was especially “drawn to the kids with ‘issues’”—kids like the one she had once been. She says: I want the kids out there who grew up like me, to know they have futures ahead of them. I want them to know they are smart, even if they may not meet state academic standards. I want them to know they are just as good and valuable as any other human who happens to be born into more privileged circumstances. Because they are. And there are so damn many messages telling them otherwise. Sometimes, another person’s pain can lead us to purpose. When Christopher Pepper was a senior in high school, a “trembling, fearful friend” told him that she had been raped by a classmate. “I comforted as well as I could, and left that conversation vowing that I would do something to keep this from happening to others,” says Christopher. He kept that promise by becoming a Peer Rape Educator in college—and then a sex educator in San Francisco public schools. Why do people like Kezia and Christopher seem to find purpose in suffering—while others are crushed by it? Part of the answer, as we’ll see next, might have to do with the emotions and behaviors we cultivate in ourselves.
3. Cultivate awe, gratitude, and altruism Certain emotions and behaviors that promote health and well-being can also foster a sense of purpose—specifically, awe, gratitude, and altruism. Several studies conducted by the Greater Good Science Center’s Dacher Keltner have shown that the experience of awe makes us feel connected to something larger than ourselves—and so can provide the emotional foundation for a sense of purpose. Of course, awe all by itself won’t give you a purpose in life. It’s not enough to just feel like you’re a small part of something big; you also need to feel driven to make a positive impact on the world. That’s where gratitude and generosity come into play. “It may seem counterintuitive to foster purpose by cultivating a grateful mindset, but it works,” writes psychologist Kendall Bronk, a leading expert on purpose. As research by William Damon, Robert Emmons, and others has found, children and adults who are able to count their blessings are much more likely to try to “contribute to the world beyond themselves.” This is probably because, if we can see how others make our world a better place, we’ll be more motivated to give something back. Here we arrive at altruism. There’s a little question, at this point, that helping others is associated with a meaningful, purposeful life. In one study, for example, Daryl Van Tongeren and colleagues found that people who engage in more altruistic behaviors, like volunteering or donating money, tend to have a greater sense of purpose in their lives. Interestingly, gratitude and altruism seem to work together to generate meaning and purpose. In a second experiment, the researchers randomly assigned some participants to write letters of gratitude—and those people later reported a stronger sense of purpose. More recent work by Christina Karns and colleagues found that altruism and gratitude are neurologically linked, activating the same reward circuits in the brain.
4. Listen to what other people appreciate about you Shawn Taylor with his family Giving thanks can help you find your purpose. But you can also find purpose in what people thank you for. Like Kezia Willingham, Shawn Taylor had a tough childhood—and he was also drawn to working with kids who had severe behavioral problems. Unlike her, however, he often felt like the work was a dead-end. “I thought I sucked at my chosen profession,” he says. Then, one day, a girl he’d worked with five years before contacted him. “She detailed how I helped to change her life,” says Shawn—and she asked him to walk her down the aisle when she got married. Shawn hadn’t even thought about her, in all that time. “Something clicked and I knew this was my path. No specifics, but youth work was my purpose.” The artists, writers, and musicians I interviewed often described how appreciation from others fueled their work. Dani Burlison never lacked a sense of purpose, and she toiled for years as a writer and social-justice activist in Santa Rosa, California. But when wildfires swept through her community, Dani discovered that her strengths were needed in a new way: “I’ve found that my networking and emergency response skills have been really helpful to my community, my students, and to firefighters!” Although there is no research that directly explores how being thanked might fuel a sense of purpose, we do know that gratitude strengthens relationships—and those are often the source of our purpose, as many of these stories suggest.
5. Find and build community As we see in Dani’s case, we can often find our sense of purpose in the people around us. Many people told me about finding purpose in family. In tandem with his reading, Art McGee found purpose—working for social and racial justice—in “love and respect for my hardworking father,” he says. “Working people like him deserved so much better.” Environmental and social-justice organizer Judi Sugerman-Brozan feels driven “to leave the world in a better place than I found it.” Becoming a mom “strengthened that purpose (it’s going to be their world, and their kids’ world),” she says. It “definitely influences how I parent (wanting to raise anti-racist, feminist, radical kids who will want to continue the fight and be leaders).” Of course, our kids may not embrace our purpose. Amber Cantorna was raised by purpose-driven parents who were right-wing Christians. “My mom had me involved in stuff all the time, all within that conservative Christian bubble,” she says. This family and community fueled a strong sense of purpose in Amber: “To be a good Christian and role model. To be a blessing to other people.” The trouble is that this underlying purpose involved making other people more like them. When she came out as a lesbian at age 27, Amber’s family and community swiftly and suddenly cast her out. This triggered a deep crisis of purpose—one that she resolved by finding a new faith community “that helped shape me and gave me a sense of belonging,” she says. Often, the nobility of our purpose reflects the company we keep. The purpose that came from Amber’s parents was based on exclusion, as she discovered. There was no place—and no purpose—for her in that community once she embraced an identity they couldn’t accept. A new sense of purpose came with the new community and identity she helped to build, of gay and lesbian Christians. If you’re having trouble remembering your purpose, take a look at the people around you. What do you have in common with them? What are they trying to be? What impact do you see them having on the world? Is that impact a positive one? Can you join with them in making that impact? What do they need? Can you give it them? If the answers to those questions don’t inspire you, then you might need to find a new community—and with that, a new purpose may come.
6. Tell your story Amber Cantorna Reading can help you find your purpose—but so can writing. Purpose often arises from curiosity about your own life. What obstacles have you encountered? What strengths helped you to overcome them? How did other people help you? How did your strengths help make life better for others? “We all have the ability to make a narrative out of our own lives,” says Emily Estfahan Smith, author of the 2017 book The Power of Meaning. “It gives us clarity on our own lives, how to understand ourselves, and gives us a framework that goes beyond the day-to-day and basically helps us make sense of our experiences.” That’s why Amber Cantorna wrote her memoir, Refocusing My Family: Coming Out, Being Cast Out, and Discovering the True Love of God. At first depressed after losing everyone she loved, Amber soon discovered new strengths in herself—and she is using her book to help build a nonprofit organization called Beyond to support gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Christians in their coming-out process. One 2008 study found that those who see meaning and purpose in their lives are able to tell a story of change and growth, where they managed to overcome the obstacles they encountered. In other words, creating a narrative like Amber’s can help us to see our own strengths and how applying those strengths can make a difference in the world, which increases our sense of self-efficacy. This is a valuable reflective process to all people, but Amber took it one step further, by publishing her autobiography and turning it into a tool for social change. Today, Amber’s purpose is to help people like her feel less alone. “My sense of purpose has grown a lot with my desire to share my story—and the realization that so many other people have shared my journey.” How often do we stop to think about the meaning of life? If you’re like me, probably not much. Even though I may feel a vague sense of anxiety around how my life is unfolding and the inevitability of death, I don’t often slow down enough to reflect on what happens after we die or what it means to live life to the fullest. But according to a new book, Start Making Sense by psychologist Steven Heine, this is the wrong attitude. By reflecting on existential questions like these and considering our own answers to these questions, we can live a more authentic, meaningful existence. “When people feel they are leading a meaningful life, their lives make more sense to them,” writes Heine. “They have a sense of purpose that guides their behaviors. They feel that their lives matter and that they’re capable of making a difference in the world.” Why focus on meaning As Heine writes, the search for meaning is an inherent part of being human. Yet many of us don’t take the time to think about our place in the universe or what we value most. Instead of focusing on what might bring us more meaning, we distract ourselves with superficial sources of gratification—like overconsumption, alcohol and drugs, TV bingeing, or mindless social media scrolling—which are easier to access and, therefore, tempting. The ease with which we can get sucked into these interferences with making meaningful changes to our lives, argues Heine. How to focus more on the larger context of our lives? We can look to philosophers who tried to explain the different approaches to finding meaning. For example, Kierkegaard, a theologian, believed in God and that people have free will and meaning in life is a personal construction. Camus, on the other hand, believed there was no God or inherent meaning in life, so we must revolt against the absurdity of it all and live life with passion. Contemplating conflicting views like these, Heine suggests, help us clarify our own beliefs about life’s bigger questions. And, he adds, psychological science can help explain why we have this urge to see our lives as coherent and meaningful. If they aren’t, we’ll experience unpleasant cognitive dissonance and try to resolve that, somehow. “Our brains have evolved what I term a sense-making system, which ensures that we feel what we are doing is meaningful and makes good sense. . . . and directs us to make efforts to correct matters whenever it senses anything that no longer makes sense,” he writes. Though we have tools at our disposal, the path to more meaning is not necessarily straight or narrow, Heine writes, but one involving personal choice and many possible detours. Our personal sense of meaning will be affected by our culture and the events in our lives—how we managed them and what they taught us. The trick is to recognize this and use it to our advantage. “Everything we encounter is wrapped up in layers of meanings, many of which are subjective and personal, and those meanings determine the ways that we make sense of our situation and the ways we act,” writes Heine. In other words, we have some power over the meaning we attribute to events and how these come together to shape the meaning of our lives overall. How to infuse life with more meaning The keys to a meaningful life generally stem from three things: our close personal relationships and communities, our work, and being connected to something greater than ourselves. Each of these can have a huge effect on our well-being through the meaning they impart. While there isn’t necessarily a one-size-fits-all approach, here are some tips Heine suggests for finding meaning: Ground yourself in your personal values. When people encounter problems in their lives, they can react in different ways depending on how grounded they feel, says Heine. “When people are grounded, they feel that the key connections in their lives that provide the foundation of a sense of meaning are solidly intact,” he writes. “They know who they are, who their important relationships are, and what they stand for, and they are in a better position to confront any new threats they might encounter.” A simple exercise of writing about what you value and why it’s important has been found to benefit people in many situations. Heine writes Heine. He points to studies suggesting that doing so can help people change their lifestyle in healthy ways, do better in school when disadvantaged, and accept their choices in life and their mortality more easily. Use nostalgia to reflect on your life. Engaging in nostalgia can help us see parts of ourselves that have remained steadfast, despite the passage of time. By reflecting on past experiences and how we dealt with them, we can boost our sense of continuity and authenticity. To stimulate nostalgia, you can look through old photos, listen to favorite songs from the past, or go through old keepsakes and recall what was happening at that time of your life, says Heine. Or you can contact an old friend and reminisce about the past. It can be especially powerful to recall times when you were socially connected with others, he adds, since relationships are so meaningful. “By making your past memories more accessible, you will be better able to connect the path of your current life with the events that occurred along the way, writes Heine. “You will be reminded about how the events of your path have shaped who you are today.” Research has found that reflecting on our lives through nostalgia can help us increase our sense of meaning, feel more socially connected, have a greater sense of authenticity, and be motivated to pursue important goals, among other benefits. Pursue self-transcendent experiences. There is a reason many people find meaning in religion—it can give us a sense of self-transcendence or being connected to something bigger than ourselves. But for nonbelievers, there are other ways to seek transcendent experiences that inspire awe and wonder—and these, too, bring meaning to our lives. For example, watching a beautiful sunset or a starlit sky, witnessing people doing supremely moral acts, encountering deep states of meditation, or seeing incredible architecture or art can all inspire awe. When we have these kinds of mind-expanding experiences, they challenge our view of everyday existence in a way that forces us to think about what life means and what matters. “During . . . awe experiences, people’s lives often feel more significant and meaningful, as they have the sense that they are connected to something much vaster than themselves and that their existence extends beyond the material world,” writes Heine. Enhance your relationships. “One of the most reliable sources of meaning in our lives is the interpersonal connections that we have—in particular, those of our closest relationships,” writes Heine. For that reason, it’s good to spend time with those we love—whether that means our families, friends, or romantic partners. Nurturing these relationships brings a sense of meaning in life, even when they are challenging, our sense of meaning can help us maintain them in the long run. For example, a parent who finds taking care of their kids to be tedious or difficult may be able to persevere and find joy because of the meaning it provides in their lives. Another way that relationships can imbue meaning is when we are part of a group or community with shared interests and values. If you lack this sense of belonging in your life, it could help to volunteer for a cause you believe in—perhaps providing help to others in need or working toward preserving a green space in your community—which can help connect you with others. Find meaning and purpose in your work. The work we do in the world is a primary way we fulfill existential needs, writes Heine. “When people think about who they are, a big part of their answer comes from what they do for a living or whatever organizations they belong to.” Work provides a sense of identity and self-worth, and it allows us to contribute to something greater than ourselves, which feels purposeful. Work can also bring us meaning if the money we earn is used to provide for others (e.g., our families). Simply recognizing this can help us see the meaning behind what we do for a living, making our lives richer. Some careers lend themselves easily to finding meaning—such as those serving the needs of others, like teachers, health care workers, or the clergy, writes Heine. However, it can be challenging to find meaning in work for many people. Part of that comes from changing trends in the work world itself—like more remote work and less stable employment. But some of it comes from not keeping in mind the greater purpose of our work—how it contributes to something bigger than ourselves and to our sense of self-efficacy. If you find it hard to find meaning in work—or if you’ve retired and have lost the everyday meaning work supplied—it’s still possible to find meaning in volunteering, participating in groups that interest you, or taking classes, writes Heine. Seek psychologically rich experiences. While there are many roads to happiness and meaning, one commonly recognized is what psychologists call a “psychologically rich life.” This means seeking experiences that are novel and different—ones that challenge our way of thinking, offer us new perspectives, or stimulate deep feelings in us. While these can be large in scope (like living abroad for a year), they can also be simple and easy to do, writes Heine. For example, he suggests things like trying out a new ethnic cuisine, visiting an art gallery, or trying out an escape room with friends. “Psychologically rich experiences present people with complex challenges, and they provide opportunities for learning and discovery, all of which tend to be associated with enhanced feelings of meaning,” he writes. Recognize your own heroic journey. All of us have had to face obstacles at some point in our lives. If we can reflect on how we overcame those obstacles—whether by pulling on our personal resources, learning new ways of thinking or behaving, creating allies to help us in our quest, or something else—we can tap into our own heroic narrative and find a sense of meaning in our existence. Of course, writing about the heroic thread in your life story may not grab you. Nor might some of the other ways to find meaning that Heine suggests. But it doesn’t hurt to assess where you’re at in each of these areas of life and see what you may be missing, he says. “If you can shore up any of the underpinnings of meaning that you find are lacking, you’ll likely start to feel that your life is more meaningful.” What’s your purpose in life? It’s a daunting question. But your answer may say a lot about your well-being. Studies link a sense of purpose to better physical and mental health. But your purpose isn’t just about you. According to researchers, a true purpose is one that is both personally meaningful and also makes a positive impact on the lives of other people—your family, friends, neighbors, city, country, or even the whole world. How strong is your sense of purpose? To find out—and discover steps for strengthening it—take this quiz, which is primarily based on the Claremont Purpose Scale developed by psychologists Kendall Bronk, Brian Rieches, and Susan Mangani. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible; there are no right or wrong answers. The last seven questions are about you, and will be used to explore how purpose relates to factors like age and gender. Individual responses to this quiz are anonymous and will not be shared. When you’re done, you’ll get your score, learn more about the benefits of purpose, and find resources for identifying and cultivating your own life goals. Any responses submitted here will never be shared with any organization outside the Greater Good Science Center under any circumstances, ever. All responses are anonymized and only used in aggregate for evaluation purposes. Source: Many of the people I know seem to have a deep sense of purpose. Whether working for racial justice, teaching children to read, making inspiring art, or collecting donations of masks and face shields for hospitals during the pandemic, they’ve found ways to blend their passion, talents, and care for the world in a way that infuses their lives with meaning. Luckily for them, having a purpose in life is associated with all kinds of benefits. Research suggests that purpose is tied to having better health, longevity, and even economic success. It feels good to have a sense of purpose, knowing that you are using your skills to help others in a way that matters to you. But how do you go about finding your purpose if it’s not obvious to you? Is it something you develop naturally over the course of a lifetime? Or are there steps you can take to encourage more purpose in your life? Likely both, says Kendall Bronk, a researcher who directs the Adolescent Moral Development Lab at Claremont Graduate University. People can find a sense of purpose organically—or through deliberate exercises and self-reflection. Sometimes, just having someone talk to you about what matters to you makes you think more intentionally about your life and your purpose, says Bronk. In her work with adolescents, she’s found that some teens find purpose after experiencing hardship. Maybe a kid who has experienced racism decides to become a civil rights advocate. Or one who’s suffered severe illness decides to study medicine. Of course, experiences like poverty and illness are extremely hard to overcome without help from others. But Bronk’s research suggests that having a supportive social network—caring family members, like-minded friends, or mentors, for example—helps youth to reframe hardship as a challenge they can play a role in changing for the better. That might be true of adults, too. While hardship can lead to purpose, most people probably find purpose in a more meandering way, says Bronk—through a combination of education, experience, and self-reflection, often helped along by encouragement from others. But finding your purpose can be jump-started, too, given the right tools. In a paper titled “Fostering Purpose Among Young Adults,” she and her colleagues found that exercises aimed at uncovering your values, interests, and skills, as well as practicing positive emotions like gratitude, can help point you toward your purpose in life. Here are some of her recommendations based on her research on purpose.
1. Identify the things you care about Purpose is all about applying your skills toward contributing to the greater good in a way that matters to you. So, identifying what you care about is an important first step. In Greater Good’s Purpose Challenge, designed by Bronk and her team, high school seniors were asked to think about the world around them—their homes, communities, the world at large—and visualize what they would do if they had a magic wand and could change anything they wanted to change (and why). Afterward, they could use that reflection to consider more concrete steps they might take to contribute toward moving the world a little closer to that ideal. A similar process is recommended for older adults by Jim Eberman of Encore.org, an organization that helps seniors find new purpose in life. Instead of envisioning an ideal future world, though, he suggests posing three questions to yourself: What are you good at? What have you done that gave you a skill that can be used for a cause? What do you care about in your community? By reflecting on these questions, he says, older adults can brainstorm ideas for repurposing skills and pursuing interests developed over a lifetime toward helping the world.
2. Reflect on what matters most Sometimes it can be hard to single out one or two things that matter most to you because your circle of care and concern is far-ranging. Understanding what you value most may help you narrow down your purpose in life to something manageable that also truly resonates with you. There are several good values surveys to choose from, including these three recommended by PositivePsychology.com: the Valued Living Questionnaire, the Portrait Values Questionnaire, and the Personal Values Questionnaire. All have been used in research studies and may be helpful to those who feel overwhelmed by all they want to change. Bronk found that helping people prioritize their values is useful for finding purpose. The survey used in Greater Good’s purpose challenge—where students were asked to look at common values and rank which were most important, least important, and in between—has been shown to be effective in helping people clarify their purpose. Once you’re clearer on your deepest values, Bronk recommends asking yourself: What do these values say about you as a person? How do these values influence your daily life? How might they relate to what you want to do with the rest of your life? Doing this exercise can help you discover how you can put your values to use. frameborder=“0” allow=“accelerometer; autoplay; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture” allowfullscreen>
3. Recognize your strengths and talents We all have strengths and skills that we’ve developed over our lifetimes, which help make up our unique personalities. Yet some of us may be unsure of what we have to offer. If we need help, a survey like the VIA Character Strengths Survey can be useful in identifying our personal strengths and embracing them more fully. Then, you can take the results and think about how you can apply them toward something you really care about. But it can also be helpful to ask others—teachers, friends, family, colleagues, mentors—for input. In the Purpose Challenge, students were asked to send emails to five people who knew them well and to pose questions like: What do you think I’m particularly good at? What do you think I’ll really enjoy? How do you think I’ll leave my mark on the world? Adults can do this if they need feedback, too—either formally or informally in conversation with trusted others. People who know you well may be able to see things in you that you don’t recognize in yourself, which can point you in unexpected directions. On the other hand, there is no need to overly rely on that feedback if it doesn’t resonate. Getting input is useful if it clarifies your strengths—not if it’s way off base.
4. Try volunteering Finding purpose involves more than just self-reflection. According to Bronk, it’s also about trying out new things and seeing how those activities enable you to use your skills to make a meaningful difference in the world. Volunteering in a community organization focused on something of interest to you could provide you with some experience and do good at the same time. Working with an organization serving others can put you in touch with people who share your passions and inspire you. In fact, it’s easier to find and sustain purpose with others’ support—and a do-gooder network can introduce you to opportunities and a community that shares your concern. Volunteering has the added benefit of improving our health and longevity, at least for some people. However, not all volunteer activities will lead to a sense of purpose. “Sometimes volunteering can be deadening,” Stanford University researcher Anne Colby. “It needs to be engaging. You have to feel you’re accomplishing something.” When you find a good match for you, volunteering will likely “feel right” in some way—not draining, but invigorating.
5. Imagine your best possible self This exercise if particularly useful in conjunction with the magic-wand exercise described above. In Greater Good’s Purpose Challenge, high school students were asked to imagine themselves at 40 years of age if everything had gone as well as it could have in their lives. Then, they answered questions, like: What are you doing? What is important to you? What do you really care about, and why? The why part is particularly important, because purposes usually emerges from our reasons for caring, says Bronk. Of course, those of us who are a bit older can still find these questions valuable. However, says Bronk, older folks may want to reflect back rather than look ahead. She suggests we think about what we’ve always wanted to do but maybe couldn’t because of other obligations (like raising kids or pursuing a career). There seems to be something about seeing what you truly want for yourself and the world that can help bring you closer to achieving it, perhaps by focusing your attention on the people and experiences that matter most to you.
6. Cultivate positive emotions like gratitude and awe To find purpose, it helps to foster positive emotions, like awe and gratitude. That’s because each of these emotions is tied to well-being, caring about others, and finding meaning in life, which all help us focus on how we can contribute to the world. In her study with young adults, Bronk found that practicing gratitude was particularly helpful in pointing students toward purpose. Reflecting on the blessings of their lives often leads young people to “pay it forward” in some way, which is how gratitude can lead to purpose. There are many ways to cultivate awe and gratitude. Awe can be inspired by seeing the beauty in nature or recalling an inspirational moment. Gratitude can be practiced by keeping a gratitude journal or writing a gratitude letter to someone who helped you in life. Whatever tools you use, developing gratitude and awe has the added benefit of being good for your emotional well-being, which can give you the energy and motivation you need to carry out your purposeful goals.
7. Look to the people you admire Sometimes the people we admire most in life give us a clue to how we might want to contribute to a better world ourselves. Reading about the work of civil rights leaders or climate activists can give us a moral uplift that can serve as motivation for working toward the greater good. However, sometimes looking at these larger-than-life examples can be too intimidating, says Bronk. If so, you can look for everyday people who are doing good in smaller ways. Maybe you have a friend who volunteers to collect food for the homeless or a colleague whose work in promoting social justice inspires you. You don’t need fame to fulfill your purpose in life. You just need to look to your inner compass—and start taking small steps in the direction that means the most to you. This article is part of a GGSC initiative on “Finding Purpose Across the Lifespan,” supported by the John Templeton Foundation. In a series of articles, podcast episodes, and other resources, we’ll be exploring why and how to deepen your sense of purpose at different stages of life. Scroll To Top To psychologists, purpose is an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world. The goals that foster a sense of purpose are ones that can potentially change the lives of other people, like launching an organization, researching a disease, or teaching kids to read. 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. 百度知道>提示信息 知道宝贝找不到问题了>