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Five on Friday

Musings on Mental Health

Purpose

“Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how,’” wrote Viktor Frankl in his book, [*Man’s Search for Meaning*](#).



[Photo Credit](#)

Equally, the absence of ‘why’ can make unbearable almost any ‘how.’ We live in a world where it is easy to be busy. The challenge before us is not doing; the challenge before us is being sure that we have a sense of purpose that guides our doing. What’s the connection to mental health?

1. A Sense of Purpose. We engage in many activities all day long that are constructive. We rid the garden of weeds and plant flowers. We study chemistry to pass our test. The list of goal-directed behaviors is practically endless. These behaviors help us shorten our “to-do” list, but they don’t create a sense of purpose in life unless they are guided by a higher set of aims and ideals. We find purpose in gardening when we are committed to counteracting climate change and believe that we have strategies and agency to be effective. We find purpose in studying for our chemistry test when we understand that behavior to be part of preparing to become a researcher committed to developing new cancer treatments.

2. Purpose and Cognitive Functioning. A [survey](#) of 3,489 adults between the ages of 32 and 84 found that purpose in life was associated with higher scores for memory, executive functioning, and overall cognition. A [longitudinal study](#) of older adults with Alzheimer disease found that individuals who reported higher levels of purpose in life exhibited better cognitive function. On post-mortem analysis, higher levels of purpose in life were also associated with reduced tangles typical of Alzheimer disease and also reduced the effect of Alzheimer disease on cognitive decline.

3. Purpose and Life Satisfaction. [Studies](#) suggest that for adolescents, emerging adults, and adults, having identified a purpose in life is associated with greater life satisfaction. Among older adults, social connection and supportive social relationships appear to be positively associated with having a sense of purpose. Having supportive relationships may facilitate the ability to pursue a purpose, and purposeful activity promotes engagement with those around oneself.

4. Purpose and Resilience. When we have a sense of purpose in life, it appears that we are more agile in recovering from stress and trauma. Findings from the [MIDUS](#) study (Midlife in the U.S.) indicate that having a purpose in life may serve as an underlying mechanism that supports the development of resilience. This [study](#) suggests that individuals who report a higher sense of life purpose are more likely to apply positive mindsets to adverse life experiences, which affords protection from negative events and confers resilience through enhanced emotion regulation.

5. Purpose and The Recovery Movement. Loss of life purpose is commonly reported by individuals with serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia and major depression. [The Recovery Movement](#) provides a vision and framework for rethinking what recovery means. By incorporating the voice of individuals with lived experience, the Recovery Movement calls on us to rethink the delivery of mental health services to ensure that care is provided

in a way that is person-centered, supporting people's capacity to regain quality of life and mental and emotional balance - even if clinical symptoms persist. This is achieved, in part, by focusing on overall wellness, including social connection and self-care and reconnecting to meaningful activity that aligns with one's personal sense of purpose.

Many of the studies on life purpose and well being are correlational in nature so causal relationships are still somewhat elusive. What is clear is that life purpose matters to all of us. Adopting strategies outlined by the Recovery Movement makes it possible to make life purpose and the attendant benefits a possibility for all of us whether we have a serious mental illness or not.