



# LITERATURE REVIEWS

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## POSITIVE PURPOSE

**“THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS TO INCREASE THE WARM HEART. THINK OF OTHER PEOPLE. SERVE OTHER PEOPLE SINCERELY. NO CHEATING.”** *The Dalai Lama*

Within the model of positive education, positive purpose is defined as understanding, believing in and serving something greater than yourself and deliberately engaging in activities for the benefits of others. The intrinsic value of contributing to others and the community provides a strong rationale for a focus on purpose within schools. Instilling students with a sense of responsibility to the world and a commitment to helping others is a valuable objective. In addition to being worthy in their own right, there is evidence that doing things for others, and having a sense that life is purposeful and meaningful, contributes to students' psychological and physical health. The objective of this summary is to provide an overview on research on purpose in life. Meaning, altruism, and spirituality will be explored as pathways to a purposeful and flourishing life.

## POSITIVE PURPOSE

The study of purpose dates back to the time of Aristotle who wrote of human potential and the importance of meaning in life (as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2001). Philosophical roots of meaning and purpose come from the historical study of eudaimonia which is defined as living life in accordance to one's daimon or true nature (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Eudaimonic conceptualisations of wellbeing are reflected in Maslow's (1968) conceptualisation of the self-actualising individual and Roger's (1961) concept of the fully functioning person. Eudaimonia is often contrasted with hedonism which is associated with the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment or the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Central to the idea of living a life according to one's eudaimonia is the concept of purpose. Kosine, Steger and Duncan (2008) define purpose as the identification of valued, overarching goals which provide fulfilment and help people to grow and attain their potential. Purpose provides people with a central mission or vision for life and a sense of directedness (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). It can be viewed as a framework around which other goals and behaviours can be arranged (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Purpose frequently involves a prosocial or altruistic intent such as a commitment and passion for helping others or improving the world (Hill, Burrow, Amanda, & Thornton, 2010).

Purpose in life is important for physical health. A sense of purposelessness is a risk factor for depression, risk taking behaviours, somatic complaints, and poor social relationships (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). The benefits of purpose for physical health are supported by a large and innovative study conducted with Japanese adults (Sone et al., 2008). Within Japanese culture, *Ikigai* is a term used to refer to having a purpose or identified reason for living. In a seven year study of 43,391 Japanese adults, Sone et al. found that being able to articulate an *Ikigai* was related to all-cause mortality and an especially strong predictor of mortality due to cardiovascular disease, pneumonia, and external causes including suicide. It appears that people with a strongly identified reason for living engage in more protective health behaviours, fewer risk behaviours, and also experience positive emotions that have a beneficial impact on health (Hassed, 2008).

Feeling life is purposeful also provides benefits for psychological health. Purpose in life is one of the six components of Ryff's model of psychological wellbeing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). McKnight and Kashdan (2009) propose that purpose is related to resilience, successful coping with stressful life events, and the ability to pursue goals despite hardships. Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, and Finch (2009) conducted a study of purpose in life in three age groups: adolescents, emerging adults, and adults aged 25+ (N = 806). Having an identified purpose in life was associated with high life satisfaction in all three age groups. Additional findings were that searching for purpose was associated with high life satisfaction for adolescents and emerging adults but not for 25+ adults. This suggests that actively exploring sources of purpose may be developmentally adaptive for adolescents and young people; but individuals who reach adulthood with unresolved questions about their life direction and purpose may be less satisfied with their lives. Other researchers agree that adolescence is an important time for exploring and cultivating purpose (Damon et al., 2003). Kashdan and McKnight (2009) propose that the development of purpose takes four forms: proactive, reactive, social learning, and hybrid. Proactive development is a gradual process that involves active and effortful exploration. Purpose results from cultivating areas of interest and curiosity and by being exposed to new experiences and ways of thinking. Reactive development occurs as a result of chance events, especially events that are traumatic and transformative such as illness or bereavement. Such events lead to a re-evaluation of priorities and goals and contribute to a stronger sense of purpose. Kashdan and McKnight propose the third form of purpose development, social learning development, involves observing others who epitomise certain values and vocations. From this perspective, developing purpose is a vicarious experience which involves modelling the behaviour of admired others. Hybrid development involves combinations of

proactive, reactive, and social learning development and recognises that purpose development is a complex, dynamic, and evolving phenomenon. The implication for schools is that students should be encouraged to explore, investigate, and question purpose in life. Exposing students of all ages to different experiences and philosophies can widen their knowledge and help them identify goals and philosophies that resonate with them. Exposure to a wide range of role models can also help students identify areas of passion and interest and help with the development of a strong sense of purpose.

## MEANING

Life meaning provides an important path to purpose. Meaning is defined having a sense of where one fits in the world (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Steger et al. posit that people experience meaning when they: (1) understand and accept themselves, (2) understand the world around them, and (3) understand where they fit within the world and with others. Meaning is closely related to purpose and there is a lot of overlap between how the constructs are defined and operationalised (Damon et al., 2003; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan et al., 2008). One useful distinction is that meaning is often associated with intrinsic factors that represent personal significance, worth, or value, whereas purpose is associated with an overarching mission in life that is both meaningful to the self and that has external components such as a desire to help others (Damon et al., 2003).

In his seminal book *Man's search for meaning* Frankl (1948) proposed that humans have a will to meaning or an innate drive to experience their lives as meaningful and significant. Frankl proposed that this need for meaning provides a basis for a strong and resilient life and that failure to achieve meaning in life leads to distress. Empirical research supports the importance of meaning for wellbeing. In two daily diary studies, Steger, Kashdan, and Oishi (2008), compared the impact of activities associated with meaning (eudaimonic activities) such as volunteering or expressing gratitude, with activities associated with pleasure (hedonic activities), such as buying jewellery or electronics. In both studies, regular engagement in meaningful activities was associated with higher reports of life satisfaction, positive affect, and meaning relative to hedonic activities leading the authors to conclude that a lifestyle high on meaningful activities leads to enhanced wellbeing.

Steger et al. (2009) conducted a study of the presence of meaning and the search for meaning (N = 8,756) in four age groups: emerging adults, young adults, middle-aged adults, and older adults. The presence of meaning was positively associated with life satisfaction and positive affect and negatively associated with negative affect, depression and anxiety at all four life stages.

Searching for meaning was highest in the youngest two age groups. Searching for meaning later in life was associated with higher distress and lower wellbeing. This finding provides further support for the developmental trajectory of purpose found by Bronk et al. (2009) as it seems that searching for sources of meaning and purpose is adaptive for youth but can be distressing for people once they reach maturity.

Schools can play a valuable role in helping students to cultivate meaning in life. Students can be encouraged to explore important sources of meaning including family, friends, relationships, spirituality/religion, and educational/vocational pursuits (Lambert et al., 2010). Strategies towards living a life high on meaning include acting in consistence with one's values (Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008) and using signature strengths in the service of others (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). Encouraging students to participate in eudaimonic and hedonic activities, and to compare their impact is posed as a valuable strategy for cultivating meaning (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Students can be encouraged to be curious which is believed to motivate exploration of self, others, and the world and to lead to increased knowledge and understanding of what truly makes life meaningful (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). In sum, schools play a unique role in exposing students to different experiences and knowledge that help them to construct meaning through making sense of the world and their place in it.

## ALTRUISM AND KINDNESS

Prosocial behaviours are actions and emotions that have a high focus on others such as generosity, empathy, forgiveness, kindness, and gratitude (Post, 2005). The prosocial behaviours of altruism and kindness play integral roles in the model of positive education as important routes to purpose and meaning. Altruism is defined as behaviours aimed at helping others without egotistical or selfish intent (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Post (2005) conducted a review of the literature and found altruism has benefits for health including increased physical health, longevity, and life satisfaction and reduced mortality, depression and anxiety. Post suggests that reasons that altruism and kindness are powerful are that they distract the individual from personal problems, lead to increased connectedness and social interaction, and result in positive emotions that have powerful psychological and physiological effects. However, an important caveat is that helping can be detrimental if it requires more than the individual's available resources, as evident by low wellbeing and high stress experienced by people who are primary carers for a significant other without adequate support and assistance (Cummins et al., 2007).

Closely related to altruism, kindness is one of the 24 Values in Action (VIA) character strengths and involves a high focus on the importance and worthiness of others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). A kind act is motivated by charitable and empathetic desires and not by selfish motives. The benefits of kindness have been empirically supported. Otake, Shimai, Tanaka-Matsumi, Otsui, and Fredrickson (2006) conducted two studies on the impact of kindness for mental health in samples of Japanese students. In the first correlational study, male and female students with high reports of happiness reported higher motivation to perform kind acts than students with low reports of happiness. In the experimental study (N = 71) female students were divided into a group that recorded their kind acts for one week or a comparison control group. Counting kindness was found to lead to increased reports of happiness relative to the comparison condition. Similar results supporting the impact of acts of kindness were found in an experimental study of 96 adults where kind behaviours were associated with enhanced life satisfaction (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010). Further support for altruistic and kind behaviours comes from research on volunteering and community service. In a longitudinal study over a three year time frame (N = 2,681) Thoits and Hewitt (2001) found that volunteer work was related to self reported happiness, physical health,





life satisfaction, self-esteem, depression, and a sense of control over life. Positive benefits of volunteering have also been found in samples of adolescents (Moore & Allen, 1996). For example, Froh et al. (2010) posit that, along with immersion in activities, passion for helping others is a core component of engaged living. In five studies Froh et al. found that engaged living was associated with wellbeing benefits in adolescents (see the engagement domain for more information). This research not only supports the importance of helping others but suggests an important link between meaning and purpose and student engagement.

## SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is one of the 24 character strengths included in the VIA framework and is included under the virtue of transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Spirituality is defined as beliefs, practices, and behaviours associated with the conviction that there are transcendent, suprahuman, and non-physical aspects of life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). While spirituality shares substantial overlap with religiousness, spirituality it is believed to represent internal beliefs and values whereas religiousness represents the outwards expression of such beliefs including religious practices, rituals, and traditions (Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthal, Tsevat, & Drotar, 2006).

There is evidence that spirituality has beneficial outcomes. Cotton et al. (2006) conducted a review of the outcomes of spirituality and religiousness in adolescents (aged 12 to 20) and found evidence that spirituality had: (a) a protective influence against at-risk behaviours (e.g., substance abuse, sexual activity); (b) a positive impact on coping with bereavement and physical illness; and (c) mental health benefits such as reduced depressive symptoms. Similarly, Wong, Rew, and Slaikeu (2006) conducted a systematic study of 20 studies that explored adolescent religiousness/spirituality and both positive (e.g., wellbeing) and negative (e.g., symptoms of depression and anxiety) indicators of mental health and found spirituality to have beneficial impacts in 18 out of 20 studies. As a specific example, in a study of 124 adolescents, high spirituality was found to demonstrate a significant, inverse relationship with symptoms of depression and participation in risk behaviours (Cotton, Larkin, Hoopes, Cromer, & Rosenthal, 2005).

Spirituality is believed to be linked with physical and mental wellbeing due to several reasons. Hassed (2008) proposes that religious communities are an important source of connectedness and social support and that spirituality is often related to positive health behaviours such as meditation and reflection and to the avoidance of negative health influences such as exposure to violence, and problematic drug and alcohol use. Furthermore, spirituality is a source of purpose and meaning in life. In a sample of 512 adults, Steger and Frazier (2005) found

that independent of religious denomination, religiousness contributed to meaning in life, which in turn contributed to psychological health including life satisfaction, self esteem, and optimism. This finding suggests that many people derive meaning and purpose from their spiritual beliefs.

It is essential to recognise that students and schools vary greatly in their religious denominations, beliefs, and practices. Within the model of positive education, all spiritual beliefs are viewed as equal and respectful acceptance of the spectrum of religious beliefs and traditions is promoted. The fit of spirituality with each school is a key example of how there is not a one size fits all approach to positive education and that what is appropriate will vary substantially for each school, and for each student.

## CONCLUSION

The central tenant of positive purpose is that people flourish when they believe in and serve things greater than themselves and when they frequently engage in behaviours that help others. Purpose is defined as an overarching goal or vision that gives life a sense of mission and direction (Damon et al., 2003). Closely related to purpose is the notion of meaning or having a strong sense of the self and where one fits in the world (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan et al., 2008). Research suggests that purpose and meaning are linked with wellbeing throughout the lifespan and that searching for and exploring sources of purpose and meaning is developmentally adaptive during adolescence (Bronk et al., 2009; Damon et al., 2003; Steger et al., 2009). Altruism, kindness, and spirituality, are important components of a fulfilling and purposeful life and important pathways to student engagement (Froh et al., 2010).

It is proposed that schools can help students cultivate purpose in life by providing a forum through which different ideas, experiences, and philosophies can be considered and explored. Role models who exemplify certain values and missions provide information about life purpose (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Helping students to engage in prosocial behaviours such as altruism, kindness, and service to others may help them develop lifelong patterns of making positive contributions to the community. Such behaviours may benefit the student as well others (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). The focus on positive purpose within the model of positive education emphasises that flourishing in life comprises of more than feeling good but also in engaging in meaningful and regular activities that contribute to others and the community.





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