

**SKILLS
FOR LIFE**
S E R I E S

PURPOSEFULNESS

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What is Purposefulness?

Purposefulness is finding a meaningful direction in life. Being purposeful is having a goal that has significance beyond oneself, so there is motivation to strive for and advance toward that goal (Damon et al., 2003). That is why sometimes researchers call it “meaning in life.” It is the extent to which one’s life is experienced as making sense, driven and motivated by valued goals, and significant in the world (George & Park, 2017; Martela & Steger, 2016).

Even though there are multiple ways of characterizing purposefulness, the most common descriptors are listed in below.

- ▶ Personal meaning
- ▶ Orientation beyond the self
- ▶ Goal orientation

Personal meaning

- ▶ A. Understanding or knowing what gives your life meaning.
- ▶ Constantly seeking a purpose or mission for your life.
- ▶ Having a clear and satisfying purpose in your life.

Orientation beyond the self

- ▶ Working to make a meaningful contribution to the broader world.
- ▶ Hoping that your work positively influences others.
- ▶ Seeking to serve society in many ways.
- ▶ Making efforts to promote other people's well-being.

Goal orientation

- ▶ Working hard to make your long-term aims a reality.
- ▶ Devoting a portion of your daily activities to move closer to your long-term aims.
- ▶ Enjoying making plans for the future and working to make them a reality.

As a 21st century citizen with purposefulness skills, you should be able to do the following:

- ▶ Find motivation in daily activities that are related to your purpose
- ▶ Create and accomplish short-term goals that contribute to achieving your main goal in the future
- ▶ Connect what you do with your purpose in life
- ▶ Work consistently to affect the world in the way you want
- ▶ Have a well-defined sense of direction and know what you want to achieve based on your core values and beliefs

Why Purposefulness?

Having a purpose contributes to optimal personal development in a variety of ways. It is linked with higher levels of happiness, resiliency, and life satisfaction from adolescence to adulthood (Bronk et al., 2009). People with a purpose in life show lower psychological distress (Debats, 1998) and maintain or improve mental abilities such as memory, attention, and problem solving (Lewis et al., 2017); experience a slower rate of deterioration in these abilities as they age (Kim et al., 2019); and are less likely to be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease (Sutin et al., 2023; Pfund et al., 2024).

Besides having a positive relationship with well-being and healthy development, purposefulness seems to be related to financial success. People with a sense of purpose tend to have better financial outcomes, such as family income and net worth (Hill et al., 2016). That is why managers can effectively improve their employees' work experiences and well-being by helping them connect to a job-related higher purpose (Arnold et al., 2007).



In school settings, evidence shows that students benefit from purposefulness because it relates to motivation, improving learning outcomes and school retention. When adolescents see their schoolwork as part of a long-term goal, they shift their orientation toward an intrinsic learning goal by realizing that knowledge, not a credential, is necessary for goal attainment (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Evidence has also shown that students at risk of dropping out of high school improved their learning outcomes in core academic courses after participating in online sense-of-purpose intervention (Paunesku et al., 2015).

Moreover, purposefulness commits people to goals beyond the self, for instance, fostering a capacity for action on current climate change issues. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, climate education promotes fostering green citizenship among children and youth. It provides key knowledge about the environment, biodiversity, and climate change and provides the capacity to understand and address the impacts of the climate crisis. It instills essential values such as solidarity, empathy, and a sense of justice, enhancing students' connection to nature and commitment to protecting it (Bos & Schwartz, 2023). A sense of purpose empowers students to adopt pro-environmental behaviors, innovate solutions to environmental challenges, and pursue green jobs. Purposefulness can not only drive individuals to engage in sustainable practices but also help them to acquire the skills and mindsets needed to build resilient and adaptable societies in the face of climate change.

How to Develop Purposefulness?

Compared with most other 21st century skills, purposefulness is a relatively late-developing skill since it is frequently found in adolescents and emerging adults (Damon & Malin, 2020). Therefore, its development can be promoted at any time.

Sense-of-purpose interventions in educational settings invite students to reflect on how working hard and learning can help them accomplish significant goals beyond themselves, such as contributing to their communities or being role models for others (Yeager & Bundick, 2009; Yeager et al., 2014). By encouraging students to think about what they want to accomplish and how their present education prepares them to contribute to the future, teachers and mentors may support students in discovering their purposes. For example, U.S. youth consider their future career goals a significant source of purpose (Damon, 2008) and they state that their high school experiences are influenced by the desire to contribute to the world later (Yeager & Bundick, 2009).

Ensuring that youth participate in potentially purposeful activities throughout childhood and adolescence, such as helping at home, volunteering in the community, taking part in faith-related activities, and engaging in the arts, is another crucial step in promoting the formation of purpose. These pursuits take on greater significance with time, frequently because young people discover they have unique abilities, aptitudes, or capabilities that make them suitable for the jobs they are called to do (Bronk, 2014b).

Speaking with young people about their goals and motivations is another way to support the development of their sense of purpose. Asking young people about their priorities and life goals is a good way for adults to get to know them. Young people are better equipped to carefully explore what they want to accomplish when these conversations are encouraged. They may utilize this information to set priorities and develop plans (Damon, 2008).

A background image showing a close-up of hands holding various colored markers (pink, orange, green, blue, yellow) over an open notebook with blank pages. The image is slightly blurred, creating a soft, artistic effect.

School Well-being Therapy

Well-being therapy is a program aimed at middle school and high school students. It consists of four to six sessions, held once a week in the school, to increase students' sense of purpose (Ruini et al., 2009, 2023). In the first session, students are taught to identify and express a broad spectrum of emotions. Then, through facial expressions and body language, they communicate their emotions to the class through role-playing. The second session focuses on the link between thoughts and emotions. Students report their daily situations in a diary and are asked to recognize how their interpretation of situations influences their emotions.

In the third session, students are taught to identify and differentiate negative thoughts and helpful thoughts, taking their daily activities as examples. They are encouraged to replace their negative thoughts with alternative and more positive interpretations. During the fourth session, students are invited to list some of their own and their classmates' best qualities before complimenting one another. Then the students report in their diaries the compliments they received. The fifth session focuses on future planning and goal achievement. Students project their lives for the next 10 years and present themselves as adults to their classmates. In the last session, students are asked to share with their schoolmates some positive moments they have experienced and recognize daily positive moments (Ruini et al., 2009).



How to Assess and Measure Purposefulness?

Like the tools that measure many 21st century skills, most of the tools that measure purposefulness are self-reported, such as the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969) for fourth graders and older children, the Claremont Purpose Scale (Bronk et al., 2018) for teenagers, and the Purpose in Life subscale of the Scales of Psychological Well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) for adults.

Interviews also are used to measure purpose. An example is the Revised Youth Purpose Interview (Andrews et al. 2006), which uses a semi structured protocol to elicit what matters most to the interviewee and the function this possible driver plays in the person's life. Although less common and more time consuming, interviews shed light on the motivations behind someone's purposeful aims (Bronk, 2014a).

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