



Finding the Meaning of Life Is Easier Than You Think

Arthur C. Brooks | October 21, 2021

You can make your quest for meaning manageable by breaking it down into three bite-size dimensions.

Want to live in a directed, resolute way? To always know why you're doing what you're doing? There's a simple way to make your dreams come true: Go find the meaning of life!

People who believe that they know their life's meaning enjoy greater well-being than those who don't. One 2019 study found that agreeing with the statement "I have a philosophy of life that helps me understand who I am" was associated with fewer symptoms of depression and higher positive affect.

Lucky you if you were born already knowing what the meaning of your life is. For the rest of us, the search can be difficult and frustrating. Philosophy is often unhelpful, offering abstract ideas such as Aristotle's human function or Kant's "highest good" that are hard to comprehend, let alone put into action.

Throwing up your hands and concluding that the question of the meaning of life is simply unanswerable—by you, at least—is the easy response. But you can make your quest for meaning manageable by breaking it down into three bite-size dimensions, and then considering each one in turn.

Many psychologists call knowing your life's meaning "presence," and the drive to look for it "search." They are not mutually exclusive: You might or might not search, whether you already have a sense of meaning or not. Some people low in presence don't bother searching—they are "stuck." Some are high in presence but keep searching—we can call them "seekers."

Presence is highly correlated with well-being, but search seems to have no bearing on it—and pondering your meaning in life too much could even lead you to dissatisfaction. Consider how the paradox of choice leaves people unsatisfied when they're given too many options in consumer items. Or in love, for that matter: A 2009 study in the journal *CyberPsychology & Behavior* tells a whole story in its title: "More Options Lead to More Searching and Worse Choices in Finding Partners for Romantic Relationships Online." Though no study I have seen has specifically examined the issue, we can guess that peripatetic meaning-seekers would suffer in a similar way.

If you haven't yet found a sense of meaning at all, how do you go about searching for it without searching too much? The answer is to take a sprawling philosophical question and make it manageable. You can do so most effectively—and without too much obsessing—by assessing your life along three dimensions, which the psychologists Frank Martela and Michael F. Steger defined in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2016:

- **Coherence:** how events fit together. This is an understanding that things happen in your life for a reason. That doesn't necessarily mean you can fit new developments into your narrative the moment they happen, but you usually are able to do so afterward, so you have faith that you eventually will.

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- **Purpose:** the existence of goals and aims. This is the belief that you are alive in order to do something. Think of purpose as your personal mission statement, such as “the purpose of my life is to share the secrets to happiness” or “I am here to spread love abundantly.”
 - **Significance:** life’s inherent value. This is the sense that your life matters. If you have high levels of significance, you’re confident that the world would be a tiny bit—or perhaps a lot —poorer if you didn’t exist.

You can think of these three dimensions as macronutrients: the elements that we need for a balanced and healthy sense of meaning in life. They might already be part of your spiritual diet. For example, Christians believe that life is significant because God loves us; that our purpose is to love and serve God and other people; and that God has a coherent plan for our lives, whether it is clear to us or not.

Balancing your macronutrients doesn’t require traditional religion—many secular and even atheist philosophies offer a way to cultivate them as well, focusing on ethical and moral behavior.

To begin the process of discovering the meaning in your life—or to adjust a search that’s gone slightly off course—I recommend following three steps.

1. Check your diet.

If you told me you had just changed your eating habits and weren’t feeling well, I would ask about your macronutrient profile: whether you are consuming enough fats, protein, and carbohydrates—and in the right balance. Similarly, a sense that your life lacks meaning should provoke the question of whether you have a deficit in coherence, purpose, or significance. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you feel out of control—tossed about in life without rhyme or reason? If so, you need a better grasp on coherence.
- Do you lack big plans, dreams, or ideas for your future that excite you? This is a purpose issue.
- Do you feel like it wouldn’t matter if you disappeared, like the world would be no worse—or maybe better—if you did? This is a problem of significance.

2. Search in the forest.

If you find a deficit in a particular area of meaning, search for it in a productive way. Fortunately, you don’t have to figure out how to do it on your own—philosophical and religious traditions have been doing exactly that for millennia. One of the best organized strategies comes from Hinduism’s concept of the ashramas, or the four stages of a balanced life. The third is Vanaprastha—literally “retiring to the forest,” in Sanskrit—which ideally begins at about age 50 and entails stepping back from day-to-day demands to focus more on life’s deep meaning through reflection, meditation, and study. You can do a version of this at any stage of life by dedicating time each day to the search. For some, this means meditation or prayer. For others, it requires the study of texts or working with masters. It might even involve therapy. But you have to approach it as you would any other important goal—by doing the work.

3. Make sure you don't search too hard.

Your quest for meaning will be counterproductive if it hinders your happiness. To make sure you're in the Goldilocks zone, you can take a survey that tells you your levels of presence and search, and compare your scores with others' on the website of the University of Pennsylvania's Authentic Happiness program. If you find that your presence is all right but you are a hyperactive seeker, this is a signal to enjoy the sources of meaning you already have, as opposed to constantly looking for new ones. In this situation, I sometimes offer what I call the "Dorothy Strategy," based on Dorothy's famous line from *The Wizard of Oz*: "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard; because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with." If you feel lost in your search for meaning, cut yourself some slack and go back to the basics.

All of this advice relies on one very strong assumption—that life actually has meaning. Not everyone agrees with this. Some have built entire schools of thought on the assumption that life is inherently meaningless, and that we can be truly free only when we embrace this truth. "If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever," the philosopher Albert Camus wrote in *The Rebel*, "then everything is possible and nothing has any importance."

Each of us has to decide whether we believe this is true. I cannot say for certain; it is, as we say in my business, an "untestable hypothesis." The paradox of the untestable hypothesis is that even if we seek, we can never be sure that we have found what is real and true. But one thing is certain: We will not find anything unless we look.