**The Science Of Giving Back: How Having A Purpose Is Good For Body And Brain**

[**Alice G. Walton**](https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/)Contributor

[Pharma & Healthcare](https://www.forbes.com/healthcare/old)*I cover health, medicine, psychology and neuroscience.*

Most philosophies and religions, not to mention common sense, include a strong belief in giving back to the world. Not only does it have the obvious benefit of helping others, but it’s apparently one of the most therapeutic things we can do for ourselves. Mahatma Gandhi is quoted as saying, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” Even MassMutual’s new ad campaign proclaims, “Our happiness is gained through others.” There’s definitely something to all of this. A new study from Northwestern, for example, finds that people who have a purpose in life have an unwitting benefit: They sleep better at night. But lots of previous research has confirmed that having a purpose outside yourself is good not only for your mental health, it’s also good for your physical health, longevity and even your genes.

Here’s a bit about the new study: The team asked older people to fill out questionnaires that got at their level of purpose and meaning in life—for instance, they rated sentiments like "I feel good when I think of what I've done in the past and what I hope to do in the future.” They were also asked about their sleep quality, and sleep-related health problems. It turned out that those with meaning in life slept a lot better at night: They were 63% less likely to report sleep apnea, 52% less likely to have restless leg syndrome, and had moderately better sleep quality overall.

"Helping people cultivate a purpose in life could be an effective drug-free strategy to improve sleep quality, particularly for a population that is facing more insomnia," said senior author Jason Ong in a news release. "Purpose in life is something that can be cultivated and enhanced through mindfulness therapies."

Or it can be cultivated simply by thinking about what’s important to you—what problem you’d like to be a small part of helping solve, or what volunteer opportunities are available to you.

But this is just one of many studies that have explored how meaning in life affects us, both physically and mentally. A study last year found that having purpose in life was linked to some measurable cognitive benefits in people who were in their 30s up through their 80s. The participants rated how much they agreed with statements such as “I live life one day at a time and don’t really think about the future” and “Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.” They also took tests of memory, executive function and cognitive function. Those with a greater sense of purpose, no matter what age or education level, scored better on these measures than people with less purpose.