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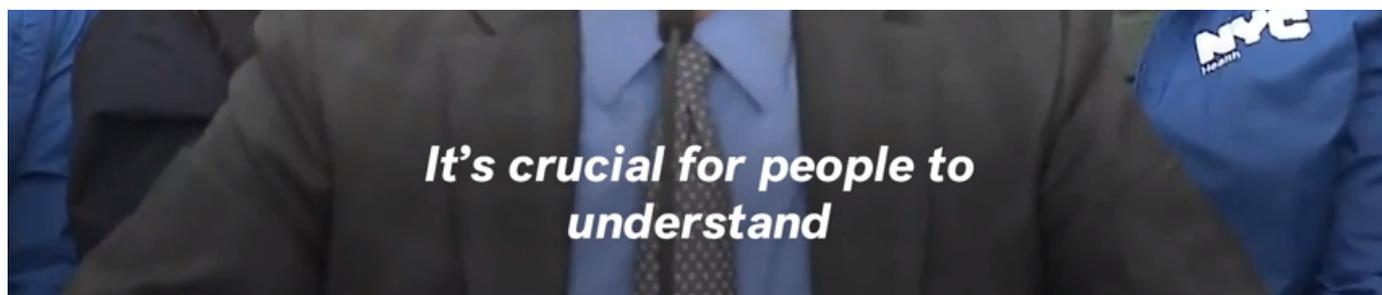
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HEALTH

PEOPLE WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE LIVE LONGER, STUDY SUGGESTS

BY **KASHMIRA GANDER** ON 5/24/19 AT 11:10 AM EDT





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People who have a sense of purpose in life appear to live longer, according to the latest research linking this outlook to a person's quality of life and to better physical and mental health.

The authors of the study published in the journal *JAMA Network Open* looked at data collected from 6,985 adults who were signed up to the Health and Retirement Study on people ages 50 and above in the U.S. The team looked at a group who completed a questionnaire in 2006 about their purpose in life, and used it to come up with a score. On average, the participants were 68.6 years old. Next, the scientists looked at causes of death in the group between 2006 and 2010. Variables, including their demographic, marital status, race and education level. Lifestyle choices like smoking and drinking were also noted.

Purpose was defined by the authors as a self-organizing life aim that stimulates goals, promotes healthy behaviors and gives meaning to life.

The data revealed that the stronger the participants felt they had a purpose in life, the lower their risk of dying. This result remained even when the scientists adjusted their calculations for factors that could affect their score, such as a participants' sociodemographic status and their health.

But scientists don't know why there seems to be a link between purposefulness and the length of life. One explanation is that the attitude and overall well-being could prevent genes linked with inflammation from being expressed in the body. Meanwhile, lacking a purpose could dampen a person's motivation to be healthy and active, the authors suggested.

Study co-author Celeste Leigh Pearce, Associate Professor in the Department of Epidemiology at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, told *Newsweek*: "The

association between life purpose and health outcomes is becoming increasingly clear.

“Life purpose may be derived from family, community, work, religion or other domains, and so it is accessible to everyone,” Celeste said. “Our view is that life purpose can change over time. There is research to suggest that activities such as volunteering may have a positive impact on life purpose. There are eHealth applications that have been designed to help users define and strive toward increasing their life purpose. We are studying an eHealth application to determine whether it can help increase life purpose and quality of life among cancer survivors.”

Andrew Oswald, a professor of economics and behavioral science at the University of Warwick, in the U.K., who studies human happiness and who was not involved with the research, told *Newsweek*: “I was surprised that an effect could be found over and above the effect coming from greater happiness itself. Purpose itself appears to be valuable, in some mysterious way.”

However, he said the study was limited because there is a possibility some of the participants knew at the start they had some subtle illness, but it wasn’t detected in the study. Those who knew they might die early did indeed go on to die early. “But the authors do go to some lengths to reduce the chance of this bias,” Oswald said.

“We should always be cautious about one study. But this is another piece of evidence in a growing jigsaw puzzle,” he said.

“It is as though the mind and body can draw on a pool of immune responses, and a healthy mind allows the body more immune response, in some way that we simply do not understand in 2019. Remarkably, a number of studies seem to show that happy people and people with a sense of purpose live longer.”

“Fixing people's minds might be the best and most inexpensive way to fix their bodies,” Oswald concluded.

As the study was not a randomized trial, in which a treatment is tested, the research can’t answer whether finding a purpose in life might extend our lives, said Oswald.

“But this work certainly suggests that if you retire early, it is sensible to have a deep purpose in life. Boredom may be dangerous for your health,” he said.

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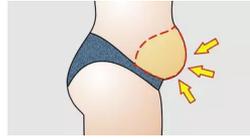
Professor Andrew Steptoe, who has researched life purpose and longevity at University College London's Department of Behavioral Science and Health and who was not involved in this study, praised the team for looking at factors such as anxiety, depression and optimism in their data modeling.

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Steptoe noted the work had a relatively short follow-up period of five years, meaning the study is looking at reduced sense of purpose toward the end of people's lives.

"Whether associations would be the same if purpose was measured 10 or 20 years earlier is not clear," he said.

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