



Having a Sense of Purpose May Preserve Your Memory and Improve Your Mood

Finding fulfillment in whatever you do can keep your thinking skills sharp and contribute to a longer, healthier life.

What does it mean to have a sense of purpose? Is it having a job to go to each day? A spouse or other family member to care for and support? A meaningful hobby? Volunteering?

The idea of life's purpose is defined differently across languages and cultures. The French, for example, refer to *raison d'être* or a "reason for living." In Japan, the idea is embodied in the concept of *ikigai*. And while there isn't a direct English translation, *ikigai* also refers to an individual's sense of purpose—the thing that gets you out of bed in the morning. But more than that, *ikigai* is about finding fulfillment in living, as opposed to simply fulfilling obligations.

Whatever you call it and however exactly you define it, a sense of purpose is an important factor in maintaining cognition and mental health throughout

life, but especially as we get older and the risks of cognitive decline and mood disorders increase. "Having a sense of purpose is important when it comes to cognition, because it's about having goals and it gets people to be self-driven to achieve those goals," says neuropsychiatrist Zeina El-Chemali, MD, director of Neuropsychiatry Clinics and Training at Massachusetts General Hospital, adding that studies have shown that people who practice *ikigai* tend to live

"*Ikigai* is also associated with happiness and being able to give back to your community," Dr. El-Chemali says. "It's not the job you have, but it's actually about finding something that gives your life meaning."

Purpose and Brain Function

Though the mechanism that associates a sense of purpose with robust cognition and memory isn't entirely understood, numerous studies in recent years continue to make the case that your brain benefits when you feel your existence is a rewarding one that has meaning to you and those around you. A study published recently in the journal *Memory*, for example, suggests that people with a higher sense of purpose reported that their

memories were more accessible, coherent and vivid, compared with those with less purpose. The researchers also found that depressive symptoms seemed to have little impact on recalling vivid details, suggesting that the connection between a higher sense of purpose and better recall is not due to fewer depressive symptoms.

As part of that same research study, scientists also noted that individuals with a strong sense of purpose maintain better cognition and have a lower dementia risk. That study, published in *Trends in Cognitive Science*, also found that the connection between purpose and cognition held true across diverse demographic groups. "People with a sense of purpose know what they want to do, and they know how to take multiple paths to accomplish those things," says Dr. El-Chemali, suggesting that a brain occupied by rewarding activities may remain healthier longer.

Purpose and Happiness

Other studies have also found a strong association between a sense of purpose and fewer depression symptoms, a greater sense of well-being, and a more optimistic outlook.

“You often hear people say that their purpose involves helping others or helping with something beyond longer and have greater cognition later in life.

“Ikigai is also associated with happiness and being able to give back to your community,”

“They have an altruistic feeling that makes them feel happier than if they’d won the lottery, for example.” She adds that while winning the lottery or having other good fortune that benefits you personally may lift your spirits temporarily, without a sense of purpose and a life of fulfillment, those feelings often fade.

And even if you have worked hard to achieve financial success and a comfortable lifestyle, you shouldn’t ignore the importance of the rewards money can’t buy. “Often what people do is bring objects of value into their life, only to realize later that it’s your own life that has to be of value,” Dr El-Chemali says. “People who practice ikigai are pushing forward to feel alive. They know that a new day means new opportunities to feel fulfilled.”



Volunteering or doing any kind of activity that benefits others can instill a sense of purpose and help you find a new perspective about your own problems and concerns.

Finding Your Purpose

If you ask yourself about your sense of purpose, your ikigai, you may be able to define it easily. But if an answer or answers don’t come immediately to mind, Dr. El-Chemali advises some deep,

reflective thinking. What would give your life more meaning and purpose? Climbing Mount Everest? Writing a novel?

Of course, working a job to support your family or caring for a relative who needs assistance are essential for many of us. But can you think of those responsibilities as rewarding rather than necessary obligations? In many cases, reframing your thoughts and attitudes about work can make it more enjoyable and meaningful.

For many people, especially those who are retired and don’t have the responsibilities of a full-time job anymore, volunteering can provide a sense of purpose and much more. Studies have shown that helping others not only benefits them, but brings rewards and a healthy outlook to the lives of the volunteers. Forgetting your own worries for a while to assist someone in need can help you put your concerns in perspective. It’s easy to get caught up in your own problems, but when you see others with even greater struggles or understand that you have the time and talents to make a positive impact in your community, those problems can often seem more manageable.

At the same time, it’s also important to look at your own life and think about what’s missing, if anything, or what is left undone. Are there creative pursuits you’ve put off for whatever reason? Are there family members or friends you’d like to make more a part of your everyday life? Or, as is often the case in our go-go-go society, are you spending time doing things

that aren’t fulfilling? Are you doing things that are actually interfering with finding a sense of purpose and living a life of meaning?

Interestingly, one unexpected consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it led many people to ask those same questions. Dr. El Chemali explains that for many people who defined themselves by their jobs, losing a job, leaving a job, or changing careers caused them to consider the bigger questions.

“The pandemic not only made us think about what’s most important,” she says. “It made us realize you don’t need much to be happy. It’s important to reflect on what’s the purpose of your life. It can’t be just work, work, work. It’s time to really put your frontal lobe to work and come up with the best life decisions for you. Ask yourself if there’s something else you should be doing. It’s a personal journey, but you may end up living happier longer.” **MMM**

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