

## A Critical Review of Impact of Purpose of Life

Monica Pandey<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

An individual's sense of purpose has been the subject of various studies in the field of Psychology since many years. There exists a definite link between purpose and an individual's quality of life. People's perception of events influences their emotion processing which in turn influences the way they experience life. A sense of purpose is a powerful tool to alter thinking processes in order to change perceptions in favor of healthier ones that improve coping. The aim of this article is to enable understanding of the role of purpose and its application to the improving the quality of life.

**Keywords:** *Purpose in life, Quality of life, Eudaimonia, depression, Role of purpose, psychological well-being, sense of purpose, self-actualization, needs theory, purpose anxiety.*

It is fascinating to see the evolution of mankind from the prehistoric ages to the current modern age. Human beings have evolved as a race leaving behind all other species. From evolution in physical form to mental cognitive capabilities, human beings have come a long way. What must have been the life of the prehistoric man? The only focus must have been on survival – one day at a time. In contrast today's man is preoccupied with several factors ranging from job to relationships to finances and health. In these modern ages, we live lives filled with worries, anxieties, and stressors leading to negative affect and poor quality of life. The more we progress, the more complicated life becomes. What then happens to the levels of stress and the subsequent depression we experience as a society? Or what about the quality of life we experience as a race? This paper purports to explore the role a strong sense of purpose can play on enhancing our mental wellbeing and help us derive more satisfaction out of life.

### What is Purpose?

*“The purpose of life is a life of purpose.” -Robert Byrne*

### Needs

When discussing purpose, it is important to understand human motivation. Human beings are motivated by needs. As controversial as Maslow's hierarchical needs theory (1943) may be, it is one of the most basic and excellent theories when it comes to understanding motivation. According to Maslow, unless one achieves needs at a certain level, one cannot progress up the hierarchy. This may explain why the prehistoric man remained at the base level since the

<sup>1</sup>MGM University, Aurangabad

\*Corresponding Author

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struggle was for survival itself. Modern society is afflicted by deeper evils, most importantly the more we progress in terms of base level needs, the more we face mental health issues. During early evolution, our hunter-gatherer ancestors began living in groups as a community (Washburn, Lancaster, 1968). Maslow proposed social affiliation as a fundamental motive. Maslow went on to categorize self-esteem needs into two broad areas, the first catering to self and consisting of need for strength, achievement and mastery; and the second catering to esteem of others consisting of need for reputation, status, dominance, and glory. Taormina and Gao's study (2013) lends empirical support to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If we consider the modern-day lifestyle related ailments, a majority of them have a connection with mental maladaptation. Thus, it may be accurate to posit that modern day stress has given rise to diseases and thus calls for exploration. If we consider the large number of suicides, many can be pinned to needs arising out of social affiliation or self-esteem. Thus, a lack of fulfillment in these areas can cause stress and anxiety and lead to various diseases, in turn impacting the quality of life.

### **Self-actualization**

Till date, self-actualization remains a slippery concept. Maslow (1987) described it as "people's desire to become self-fulfilled or actualized in what they potentially are". This can mean doing something over and beyond and testing the true self to the utmost by tapping one's inner potential. Many a times, this is linked with the experience of contributing meaningfully to the society and may beget the question of is it really self-actualization then or is it altruism motivated by the desire to be liked by others, once again circling back to self-esteem needs. Irrespective, various studies have found a positive correlation between this sense of meaning and experience of life. Kenrick et al (2010) agree with Maslow that much of the operation of fundamental motives occurs at a non-conscious level. If we tie this with Locke's Goal Theory (1968, 1996) which suggests that SMART goals lead individuals to be more motivated and thus more efficient, then instead of non-conscious level motives, setting SMART self-actualization goals may lead to higher sense of purpose and thus better quality of life.

### ***Purpose and Meaning of life***

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), Viktor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, writes about his experience as a concentration camp prisoner during World War II. He goes on to state that be it in suffering or death, life continues to have meaning. A survivor, Frankl goes on to state that it is a positive attitude that enabled his survival and eventually the erasure of his horrific memories of the camp, thus begetting the question that is that the fundamental difference between an active search for hope and meaning and a passive surrender to difficulties that then impacts the experience of life making it dull and listless in case of the latter.

According to Steger (2009), humans strive to make sense of the meaning of their lives. It is this quest that enables them to experience a sense of self-worth and channelize their energies effectively. He defines meaning as the sense of significance of life as experienced by an individual. Crumbaugh & Maholick (1964) designed an instrument, the Purpose in Life Test, and cross validated it against Frankl's noogenic neurosis and existential vacuum finding data to support his theory that in the absence of meaning, the experience would be of an existential void. Frankl posits that this neurosis is caused by a lack of meaning and purpose leading to the creation of a huge void in an individual's life. The PIL is the first instrument designed to measure purpose and meaning in life and checks if an individual suffers from an existential vacuum.

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While meaning of life can be an emotional construct intending to signify what one feels about one's life, purpose can be described as the effect of having meaningful goals in life. Through a lifetime of extensive study, Ryff (1989) has proposed a model of psychological well-being that is built on the pillars of purpose. She states that higher the sense of purpose, the more an individual is likely to experience a sense of direction and positivity. Her studies identify dimensions of purpose, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance as key dimensions of well-being. The root of her model can be traced to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia.

Who does not want to be happy? Every single individual is striving to find happiness. The various gurus and coaches thriving on You Tube have their million likes because they are all engaged in sharing happiness mantras with the public. In their 2016 book *Eudaimonia as a way of living: Connecting Aristotle with self-determination theory*, Ryan and Martela argue that, "eudaimonia should not be understood as referring to any kind of subjective experience or 'richer feeling of happiness' but is rather about a good and valued way of living that can produce happiness, vitality and wellness as its byproducts. Furthermore, eudaimonia is especially found in those manners of living and pursuits that reflect our positive human nature." On the basis of self-determination theory (Deci, Ryan 1985, 2000), they further state that pursuing intrinsic goals, living autonomously, being mindful, and being benevolent can lead to an experience of eudaimonia. While once upon a time hedonistic pleasure was associated with happiness, increasingly it has been proven that materialistic pleasures cannot give long-term joy and one must actively engage in higher pursuits to experience and sustain levels of happiness.

### ***Lack of Purpose and Depression***

Wood and Joseph (2010) published a decade long cohort study to understand whether the absence of positive psychological (eudaimonic) well-being posed a risk factor for depression. A large cohort of 5566 people completed a survey at two time points, aged 51–56 at Time 1 and 63–67 at Time 2. They used Ryff's scales to measure positive psychological well-being, Big 5 for personality and CES-D for depression. Their findings were astounding. People with low positive well-being were 7.16 times more likely to be depressed 10-years later. Current times afford us increased life spans and an abundance of choices. This infinite array of choices could lead to confusion and even cause purpose anxiety. Seligman (2013) states that merely a sense of purpose is insufficient. He states that it is equally important to have optimistic, not pessimistic, tendencies, in order to avoid purpose anxiety.

### ***Impact of Purpose***

Various studies have been undertaken to understand the impact of purpose in life on individuals from different walks of life. Hedberg et al (2010) found that very old people feel indecisive about their purpose in life and that these feelings are linked with poorer psychological health. For this reason, the purpose in life must be discussed and taken into consideration in the care of the elderly.

A 2001 study by Lyon et al found that among HIV patients, as compared to normative samples, depressive symptoms were greater and purpose in life lower. Furthermore, they suggested that purpose in life was more important than laboratory markers of disease and should be used to screen for depressive symptoms. Reker (1997) found evidence suggesting that inmates had lower scores on purpose and meaning in life. Rhoades and McFarland (2000) found that caregivers of mentally ill patients experienced high levels of purpose of life, possibly owing to the altruistic feeling they experienced in their role. Stoddard et al (2019)

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concluded that purpose in life and mastery were associated with better-perceived health and fewer negative consequences of drug use via lower perceived stress and coping. Rappaport et al (2007) found a negative correlation between purpose of life and death anxiety.

### *Implications of Purpose of Life*

A 1993 study by Taylor et al with cancer patients found that adjustment with the disease was directly correlated to the perception of purpose of life. Thus, they went on to suggest that nurses of these patients must focus on caring for those who search for meaning in order to increase treatment efficacy.

In the US, a cohort study was conducted for adults aged 51-61 and a sample of 6985 individuals was analyzed. Alimujiang et al (2019) published a paper with the findings of this study stating that stronger purpose in life was associated with decreased mortality and multiple health benefits. They suggested further research on life purpose interventions and health outcomes.

### *Limitations*

While many studies have focused on the role of purpose of life on the wellbeing on individuals and have established a conclusive link, few studies are gender specific. Even fewer studies focus on education and occupations of individuals and the sense of purpose. More research in these areas is needed. Also, while the link is undeniable, further actions and applications in terms of interventions need to be arrived upon.

## **CONCLUSION**

Schippers et al (2019) suggest life crafting as an intervention to finding purpose in life. They describe life crafting as an exercise in discovering passions and values, identifying gaps between present self and desired future self; and setting goals to reach there. They conclude that it is never too late to find a purpose.

Thus, future research needs to focus on groups where such intervention strategies can be implemented and the results of the same can be studied. In these troubled times, developing coping capabilities will lead to a positive outlook towards life and society will benefit with happier and healthier individuals.

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