

# Meaning

**THEWELLBEINGLAB**

A MICHELLEMCQUAID PROGRAM

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# “Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim, and end of human existence.”

Aristotle

Humans are not only wired to be social, but to seek or make meaning of our lives. Aristotle said happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim, and end of human existence. He makes a useful distinction between *hedonia* (pleasure) and *eudaimonia* (meaning).

While the meaningful life and the happy life overlap in certain ways and feed off each other, they have some substantially different roots. For example, in one study, Veronika Huta and Richard Ryan (2010) instructed a group of students to pursue pleasure or meaning over a ten-day period by doing at least one thing each day. Students in the meaning group reported forgiving a friend, studying, thinking about one’s values, and helping or cheering up another person. Those in the pleasure condition, by contrast, listed activities like sleeping in, playing games, and going shopping.

What they found was that students in the happiness condition experienced more positive feelings which faded after three months. The meaning group did not feel as happy right afterwards, though they did rate their lives as more meaningful. But three months later, they said they felt more “enriched,” “inspired,” and “part of something greater than myself.” They also reported fewer negative moods.

Over the long term, it seemed, pursuing meaning actually boosted their psychological health and wellbeing more than pursuing pleasure or just happiness. Dr. Michael Steger (2012) finds people who report having a sense of meaning are more satisfied, less depressed and anxious, and more committed to their careers, organizations, and community.

To Aristotle, leading a eudaimonic life required cultivating the best qualities within you, both morally and intellectually, and living up to your potential. It is an active life—a life in which you do your job and contribute to society, are involved in your community, realize your potential, and do not squander your talents. To do this, put together the pieces of your unique meaning puzzle:

- **Start with your Signature Strengths** – Go back to the results of your VIA Survey. Your strengths are your positive personality traits that might tell you something about your values in action (VIA). Our strengths help us feel alive.
- **Move to your Skills and Talents** – Talents are often innate and have a strong biological loading, e.g. spatial reasoning, musical ability, interpersonal ability, and so on. Skills are what you consciously develop. What do you do well? What gives you energy? Our skills and talents help us to feel confident.
- Highlight your Passions – Passions are those things that you love spending time on. Our passions help us feel energized.
- **Identify your Values** – Values are your guiding principles, the ideals and beliefs you hold most true in your life. Values are your “true north” compass to guide you even in the most turbulent of times. Our values help us feel motivated.

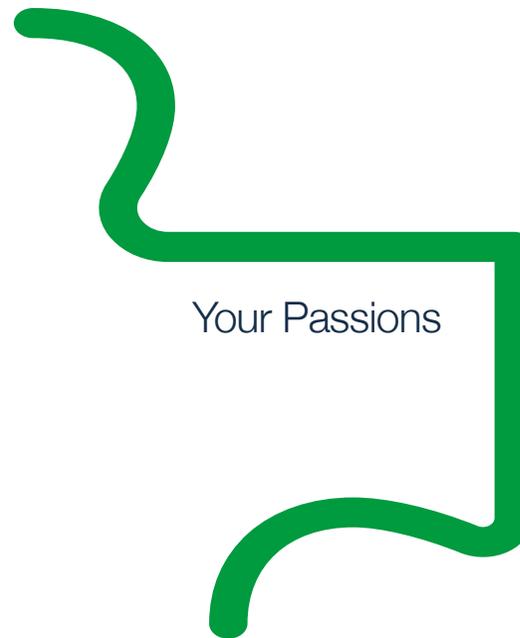
Uncovering (not finding) your purpose is like putting together pieces of a puzzle. Stay curious as you put together the pieces. Dig deeper to reach the nuances between these pieces. Let yourself be affirmed and surprised.

Alive



Your Strengths

Energized



Your Passions

Competent



Your Skills

Motivated



Your Values

# “There are four pillars to meaning: belonging, purpose, storytelling and transcendence.”

*Emily Esfahani Smith*

In her book, *The Power Of Meaning: Crafting A Life That Matters*, Emily Esfahani Smith (2017) explains that in 1929, the year of the stock market crash that led to the Great Depression, the historian and philosopher Will Durant decided to write to the great literary, philosophical, and scientific luminaries of his day, from Mohandas Gandhi to Mary E. Woolley, to ask them how they found significance and fulfillment in their own lives during that disruption.

In 1988, some fifty years after Durant published the answers to his letters, *Life* magazine undertook a similar venture. The editors wrote to over one hundred influential individuals of the time—from the Dalai Lama, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Ruth to John Updike, Betty Friedan, and Richard Nixon—asking them about the meaning of life, and like Durant, they found that their respondents drew meaning from a wide variety of sources. While each of the responses to Durant’s letters and *Life*’s survey were distinct, reflecting the unique values, experiences, and personalities of the respondents, there were some themes that emerged again and again.

When people explain what makes their lives meaningful, they describe connecting to and bonding with others. They discuss finding something worthwhile to do with their time. They mention creating narratives that help them understand themselves and the world. They talk about mystical experiences of self-loss. Those categories were also present in the definitions of a meaningful life offered by Aristotle and psychologists.

And so, Smith argues there are four pillars to meaning:

- **Belonging** – We all need to feel understood, recognized, and affirmed by our friends, family members, colleagues, and romantic partners. We all need to give and receive affection.
- **Purpose** – A goal toward which we are always working that motivates our behavior, serves as the organizing principle of our lives, and involves making a contribution to the world.
- **Storytelling** – Stories help us make sense of the world, our place in it, and why things happen the way they do. We are constantly taking pieces of information and adding a layer of meaning to them; we couldn’t function otherwise.
- **Transcendence** – A brush with mystery—whether underneath the stars, before a gorgeous work of art, during a religious ritual, or in a hospital delivery room—can lift us above the everyday world to experience a higher reality.

The beauty of these pillars, Esfahani-Smith concludes, is that they are accessible to everyone. Both with and without religion, people can build up each of these pillars in their lives. We can find belonging at work or experience transcendence while taking a walk through the park. We can choose a career or hobby that helps others or draft our life story to understand how we got to be the way we are. We may move cities, change jobs, and lose touch with friends, but we can continue to find meaning by harnessing the pillars in new ways, in our new circumstances.

## “Expressive writing can help you come to a new understanding of your emotions and thoughts about events.”

*Professor James Pennebaker*

We all want to understand and find meaning in our worlds. This can be difficult when you're faced with complex, overwhelming, or traumatic experiences. However, by changing the difficult thoughts, feelings, or behaviors associated with the experience, you can better put the trauma behind you (Pennebaker, 2019). Expressive writing can help you come to a new understanding of your emotions and thoughts about events. The active ingredients for why expressing writing can be so powerful include the following:

- Merely labeling or acknowledging that something was upsetting in your life can be beneficial. Sometimes you may fool yourself by saying it wasn't a big deal, but in reality, it was.
- Putting an upsetting image of events into words can help you organize and then share it. Often you may not want to talk about an upsetting experience with others as you may think it will make you look bad, offend others, or affect your social network. So instead, you keep it a secret and start obsessing.
- Writing helps you understand and gain a broader perspective on your experience. Constructing a story that ties in other aspects of the experience makes it more coherent.
- You're less likely to toss and turn at night, and so sleep much better, which is associated with less depression and stress.
- It improves your working memory as your mind is no longer still processing the upsetting experience.
- It improves your connections and relationships as you can pay attention to others, rather than being distracted by your stress.

Care needs to be taken that you don't engage in expressive writing when you're not ready for it, for example, in the midst of, or immediately after, a major traumatic experience, or when you're deeply depressed. When you are ready, you can try the following:

- **Set your pace** – If you've found it difficult to cope with a situation or transition, try to find some time each day, for a few days in a row, to write whatever comes to mind without overthinking or editing what you write. Studies suggest that writing, even for as little as five minutes a day, can be beneficial.
- **Write with others** – Find a group of people who can set aside the last ten minutes at the end of the day, for two or three days a week, to sit down and write about your deepest thoughts and feelings about the issues that you're dealing with. This writing needs to be personal and deeply relevant just for you, and for no one else to see—you might even put it through a paper shredder when you've done. Expressive writing in workplaces can be helpful during times of transition, such as changing job roles, changing locations, changing teams, changing strategy, or personal transitions such as preparing or returning from maternity leave.
- **Experiment with alternatives** – If you don't like writing, you may be more comfortable talking into a tape recorder. Or you may find that it's more powerful if you write with your non-dominant hand. You could also try finger writing by putting your finger in the air when you're by yourself. This can work well if you want to ensure that there's no trace of what you write anywhere on earth. Be prepared to experiment and find what works for you.

# Lost Self Exercise

Think about your life and the people, things, or opportunities that you have lost. What did these changes cost you? What would your “happily ever after” have been if you hadn’t had to forego these hopes?

Write your answers below and be as specific and detailed as you can. Give yourself permission to explore the disappointments and pain that came with these losses.

“We don’t have to be perfect, just engaged, and committed to aligning values with actions.”

*Professor Brené Brown*

Values are the beliefs and ideals that guide you. Literally, everything you do in life is connected to your values.

Values are broadly defined as your guiding principles, the ideals and beliefs you hold most true in your life. Values are your “true north” compass to guide you even in the most turbulent of times.

The value theory (Schwartz, 1992, 2006a) adopts a conception of values that specifies these features of values:

- **Values are beliefs linked to emotions.** When values are activated, you become infused with feeling. If independence is an important value, you become aroused if independence is threatened, despair when you are helpless to protect it, and happy when you can enjoy it.
- **Values refer to desirable goals that motivate action.** If social order, justice, and helpfulness are important values to you, you are motivated to pursue goals that support them.
- **Values transcend specific actions and situations.** You have one set of unique values that carry you everywhere.
- **Values serve as standards or criteria.** Values guide the selection or evaluation of actions, policies, people, and events. But the impact of values on everyday decisions is rarely conscious.
- **Values are ordered by importance relative to one another.** Your values form an ordered system of priorities that characterize you as unique. Do you attribute more importance to achievement or justice, to novelty or tradition?

Living into your values means you do more than just espouse them, you live by them. When you walk your talk, you are clear about what you believe and hold important. You say what you mean and mean what you say. You take care that your intentions, words, thoughts, and behaviors align with your values. This is integrity.

If you say you value family, you will choose to honor the family dinner ritual in lieu of working late. When you are successful at living your values, you feel congruent and whole. This is integrity.

We can’t work to stay aligned with values when we haven’t spent any time getting curious about or naming them. Explore your values by reflecting on the following questions:

- Think of a time when everything was working/feeling good. What value(s) were you honoring?
- Who inspires you? What are their qualities?
- What do you want to be your legacy? What values relate?
- What makes you crazy or feel stomped down? What values are you expressing in those moments?

Once you have a sense of your core values, you might consider what behaviors help you live these values and which behaviors hinder you. Another way of thinking about this is in terms of “feeding” and “starving” your values.

# Are You Feeding Or Starving Your Values?

	<b>Family</b>	Feeds: Prioritizing meaningful time together; FaceTiming relatives and reaching out	Starves: Not coming home on time or at all; Choosing the gym in lieu of family dinner
	<b>Respect</b>	Feeds: Staying open minded; Correcting others when they make inappropriate jokes/comments	Starves: Spreading rumors; Violating boundaries; Excluding others from contributing
	<b>Service</b>	Feeds: Donating blood; Volunteering in your community	Starves: Taking team credit for yourself; Avoiding what's hard; Letting others take the fall for you
	<b>Integrity</b>	Feeds: Being dependable; Keeping commitments; Owning mistakes	Starves: Breaking your word; Avoiding hard choices because it is not popular; Airing grievances on social media
	<b>Health</b>	Feeds: Eating, moving, and sleeping well; Resting and recharging	Starves: Skipping your workout; Unhealthy coping strategies

# What Do You Value?



Identify someone in the community you admire. Who is that person? Why do you admire him or her? Can you tell a story that illustrates this in action?



Use the list of values on the following page. Circle the values that you see this person demonstrating, and that inspire you most.



Put an asterisk (\*) next to the three values on this list that overlap strongly with your own. You may find there are more than three, so select just the three that are most important in your life when it comes to the positive difference you want to make for others.

# Values

- Accountability
- Achievement
- Adaptability
- Adventure
- Altruism
- Ambition
- Authenticity
- Balance
- Beauty
- Being the best
- Belonging
- Career
- Caring
- Collaboration
- Commitment
- Community
- Compassion
- Competence
- Confidence
- Connection
- Contentment
- Contribution
- Cooperation
- Courage
- Creativity
- Curiosity
- Dignity
- Diversity
- Environment
- Efficiency
- Equality
- Ethics
- Excellence
- Fairness
- Faith
- Family
- Financial stability
- Forgiveness
- Freedom
- Friendship
- Fun
- Future generations
- Generosity
- Giving back
- Grace
- Gratitude
- Growth
- Harmony
- Health
- Home
- Honesty
- Hope
- Humility
- Humor
- Inclusion
- Independence
- Initiative
- Integrity
- Intuition
- Joy
- Justice
- Kindness
- Knowledge
- Leadership
- Learning
- Legacy
- Leisure
- Love
- Loyalty
- Making a difference
- Openness
- Optimism
- Order
- Parenting
- Patience
- Patriotism
- Peace
- Personal fulfillment
- Power
- Pride
- Recognition
- Resourcefulness
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Risk-taking
- Safety
- Security
- Simplicity
- Success
- Time
- Tradition
- Trust
- Truth
- Wealth
- Wellbeing
- Wholeheartedness
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# “The secret to effective crafting is recognizing and working with, rather than against, your motivation, circumstances and freedom.”

*Dr. Rob Baker*

The chances are good that at some point, you have changed an aspect of a task so that it better suited you. Whether you took a different approach, changed an interaction pattern, or refined how you thought about a task in a more general sense, you were crafting more meaning and purpose into the task.

Studies have found that crafting more meaning and purpose into tasks enables and encourages you to bring your diverse, whole and best selves to tasks each day in ways that boost engagement, satisfaction, resilience, and thriving. Crafting is a research-informed and evidence-based approach to personalizing tasks and the research into this practice is compelling—it boosts innovation, nurtures health and wellbeing, and amplifies meaning, purpose, and productivity (Baker, 2019).

Crafting comes in different types, shapes, and sizes. Five core factors of crafting include:

- **What (Task Crafting)** – What are the different tasks and activities you prioritize? How are you aligning these tasks to your strengths—your neurological superpowers—to make these tasks more engaging?
- **Who (Relational Crafting)** – Who do you interact and connect with during the course of a task? How do these people energize you, support you, teach you new ways of tackling the task?
- **Why (Purpose Crafting)** – Why does the task make a positive difference for others? Who does this task help? Why does it matter to them?
- **Where (Location Crafting)** – Where is the most effective location to do

this task? What might make where you do this task more joyful for you?

- **When (Temporal Crafting)** – When might doing this task maximize your energy? What time of day might suit you and the task best?

Whilst most of us often quickly grasp the idea of crafting, we frequently become unstuck when it comes to making it a reality. How do you find the opportunity to craft more meaning into tasks when there are so many other competing demands, deadlines, and priorities?

Fortunately, crafting does not involve adding more hours to your day. In fact, effective meaning-crafting strategies might actually be the key to finding and unlocking both your time and energy. The secret to, and science of, making crafting a sustainable habit and routine way of tackling tasks is to pause when you plan—particularly for the tasks you are dreading—to ask yourself: what, who, why, where, and when might this task be more meaningful?

As with any behavior change, the key is to:

- **Start tiny.** Create a tiny meaning-crafting habit and choose one task each day to make more meaningful.
- **Experiment.** Be willing to play with the different forms of crafting. You don't need to tick every factor. Try aligning your strengths one day, then change locations another day.
- **Learn and adjust.** As you continue crafting, run a learning loop to discover what's working well, where you're struggling, what you're learning and how you want to adjust your crafting approach.



**My Task:**

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“I put my heart and my soul into my work and have lost my mind in the process.”

*Vincent Van Gogh*

While studies have found that finding meaning in your work brings many benefits, Professor Robert Vallerand (2003) also suggests that when it comes to finding meaning and purpose in our work, we can have too much of a good thing.

His studies have found that:

- **Harmonious passion** occurs when we engage in our work because it brings us intrinsic joy, we feel we have a sense of control, and our work is in harmony with other activities in life. We also know when to disengage and are able to turn off the work switch when engagement becomes too risky or we wish to enjoy other activities in our life. As a result, harmonious passion is associated with higher levels of physical health, psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, positive emotions, creativity, concentration, and work satisfaction.
- **Obsessive passion** occurs when we also perceive our work as important and highly valued, but we have an uncontrollable urge to engage in it and feel compelled to undertake it. We find it hard to stop thinking about our work, get frustrated when prevented from working, and persist even when it's risky to do so because our sense of identity and self-worth is heavily tied to our work. As a result we feel conflicted between our passion and other areas of our life, leading to higher levels of negative affect over time and a risk of burning out.

If you think your level of obsessive passion might be too high, Scott Kauffman of the Imagination Institute suggests (2011) you might try:

### Scheduling real breaks

Force yourself to get out by scheduling other activities during the course of the day (like lunch with a friend, or a break to hit the gym) and time after work or on weekends for family, friends, and activities you enjoy.

### Not bringing work home

If you can afford to, make it completely impossible to access your work once you leave work. Don't bring home your laptop. Leave those files on your desk. Keep separate email accounts for home and work, and don't check your work email when you're at home (put up an out-of-office message if you have to).

### Changing your thought patterns when you work

Fake the mindset of the harmoniously passionate person until you make it. For instance, convert thoughts of 'must' and 'need' to 'want' and 'desire'. At first, this may feel awkward, but eventually the obsessively passionate mindset will dissipate, and so will the behaviors associated with it.

### Committing to a new hobby

Often, investing too much self in one project is an indication of a negative core self. The more additional things outside of work contribute to a positive sense of self, the less space your work performance will take up in your ego, and the smaller your chances of burnout.

# Foster Meaning

## Investing In Belonging

### Give at Work

Join your workplace giving program or create opportunities to volunteer.

### Find Your Tribe

Reach out to others to find like-minded people you enjoy spending time with.

### See Others

Look people in the eye, smile, and genuinely say hello when you walk past them.

### Create Coffee Dates

Each week invite one person you don't know well for a coffee and catch up.

## Creating Purpose

### For the Sake of What?

What are you willing to get out of your comfort-zone for? Take one step towards this.

### Re-Frame the Mundane

Write down a task you dread. What's its purpose? Who does it serve?

### Outsource Inspiration

Connect to the people impacted by the work you do. What difference do you make?

### Adopt a Service Mindset

What's one thing you could do today to make a positive difference for others?

## Practicing Story-Telling

### Uncover Your Story

Each day take five minutes to journal about what's happened and why it matters to you.

### Be a Journalist

Look at events as though you are a journalist. What's the turning point in this story?

### Release Your Lost Self

If life had unfolded as you wished, what would have been? Own what you've lost.

## Invest In Job Crafting

### Optimize Your Job

Look for ways to spend more time in the tasks you find meaningful at work.

### Queue It Up

Reorder tasks and interactions so you can start your day with meaningful tasks.

## Making Passion Harmonious

### Restore Balance

A short sprint of obsessive passion is ok, but when will you restore balance?

### Alternative Passions

What would you like to pursue purely for the joy of the activity? Make this happen.

### Set Boundaries

We all need time to rest and recover. Set boundaries to look after your wellbeing.

*With heartfelt thanks*



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