

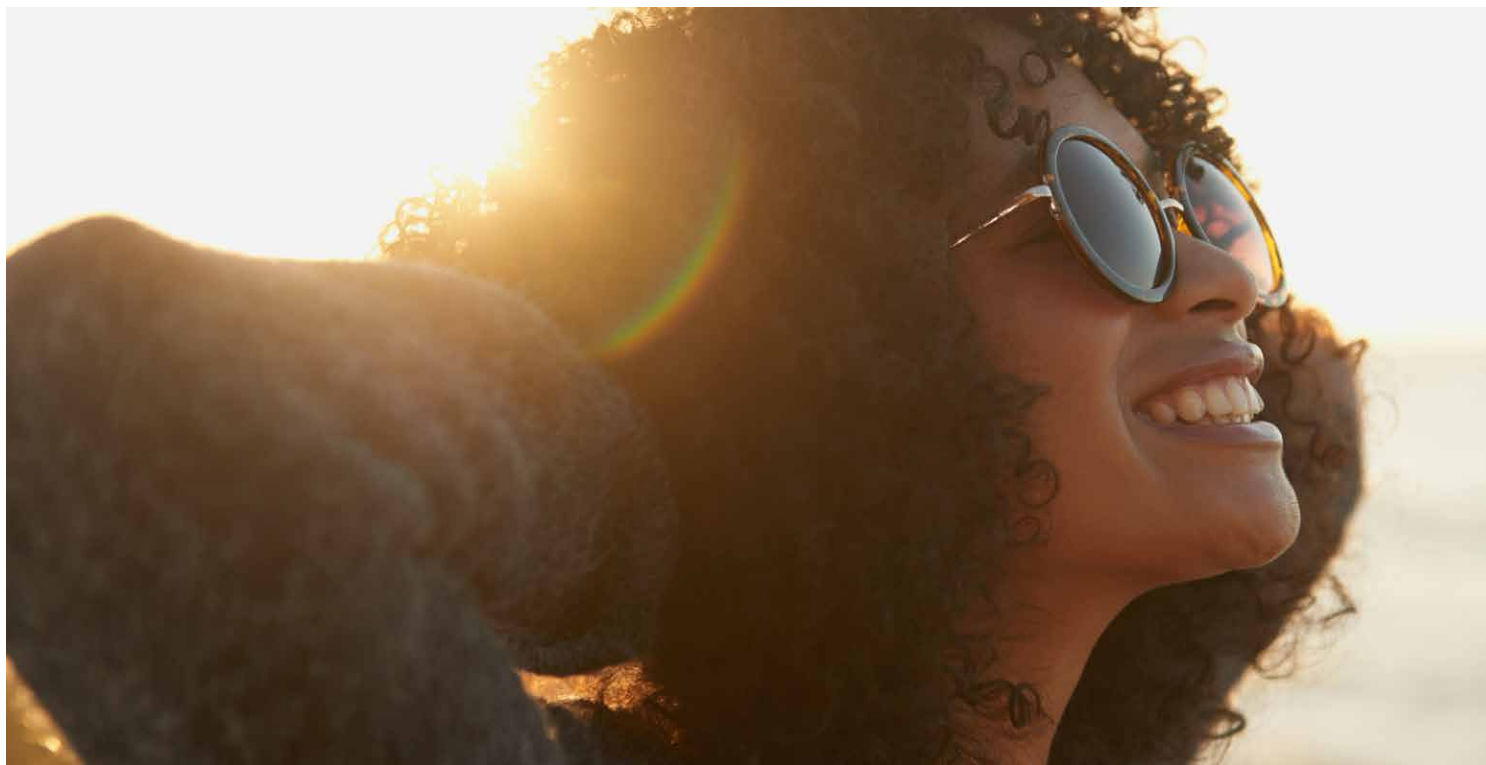


Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #7:

LIVING A FULFILLING LIFE



Many people have encountered times when they feel a bit restless and yearn for adventures and new experiences. Scratching those proverbial itches can help someone feel that their life has purpose, focus, and clarity. Having a sense of purpose and direction can lift our spirits, improve mental well-being and leave you feeling more fulfilled.

Let's be clear: this is not merely about following life lessons or ticking off things on a "bucket list."¹ Fulfillment requires introspection, contemplation, reflection and acceptance as catalysts in the pursuit of happiness. Feeling fulfilled is an important part of living life with intention and purpose. There are many factors we will look at that influence how you define fulfilment. We'll also be sharing suggestions about how you can take control of your life to improve your mental, physical and emotional health and wellness, especially as COVID-19 continues to impact our lives in ways that we never imagined.

What does it mean to be fulfilled?

The specifics of what makes you feel fulfilled will differ from someone else. Fundamentally, these revolve around the same basic set of ideas. Fulfillment is a state of being satisfied with what you've achieved after following your goals, developing abilities and habits, and acting on your intentions. It's living comfortably within your set of values, without regret, while integrating both societal and cultural expectations along the way.

One way to gauge how fulfilled you feel involves looking at different aspects of your life. This kind of reflection can determine what helps you navigate personally, career-wise, and within your relationships.

It's important to consider how societal and cultural influences affect how personally fulfilled you feel and being prepared to step away within legal guidelines freely to discover and embrace your values. For example, society and cultural influences cast judgment about whether someone is single or married; whether they are a parent or not; and even whether they own or rent their home. On the career front, you might reflect on your education, job performance, or financial achievements. However, as you evaluate, you also need to consider that you may be comparing yourself to another person. If so, ask yourself why? Do you feel that you need to compete with others in finding fulfillment? What is it about that other person that you aspire to? While a bit of competition can be motivating, focussing too much on comparisons with someone else's ideals can have the opposite effect. You want to reflect and work towards your own goals and dreams, not arrive at a one-dimensional creation. Given that consideration, you may discover that you are giving less time, energy and focus to the relationships you have with other people in your life. It may be something that you want to change. It's good to look at the complexity and depth within your relationships because "good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."²

The relationships factor

We often neglect our relationships and don't make the necessary investments because we trade them for what we believe to be more critical or urgent. But in actuality, it's the genuine connections we have with others that may have a more significant influence on our sense of fulfillment than we realize. Harvard professors Grant and Clueck conducted a series of studies that initially followed two groups of men to see if they could observe the factors that led people to have happy and healthy lives.³ The researchers tracked 724 participants from "varying walks of life over the course of 75 years." They revealed that "the quality of our life – emotionally, physically, and mentally – is directly proportional to the quality of our relationships."⁴ It's the quality that's key, and the depth of the relationship matters because "just knowing a lot of people isn't enough."⁵

There's a lot of good that happens for our sense of fulfillment when we invest in genuine connections with people through meaningful relationships. We live shared experiences and have interactions that allow us to develop a social skill referred to as "Positive Alacrity," which is defined as "creating intentional micro-experiences that cause an emotional uplifting in others."⁶ In short, it means that the frequency, mode and duration of our interactions can build meaningful, emotional currency within our

relationships because "by uplifting others, we inadvertently uplift ourselves." For example, when we connect with others consistently, using various communication modes that are founded in positive gestures and involve words, visuals and touch, we feel much better about ourselves. We can express our gratitude that they are in our lives. Another set of influential studies backed the power of these positive gestures and their ability to influence people's happiness.⁷ Participants completed tasks such as writing a short handwritten note, taking a minute to thank someone in person, gifting a small token of appreciation, and writing a longer letter, then reading it aloud to the recipient. The results showed that participants reported "increased happiness and decreased depression for a full month after completing the action[s]."

What else can influence your sense of fulfillment?

Experiencing close and supportive relationships helps you increase feelings of happiness and fulfillment. But other influences can affect how easy or difficult it might be to get there. Your family history, different life events you experienced, personal beliefs you developed and personality traits all influence your sense of fulfillment. Social messaging heard over the past few decades has revolved around a belief that people "deserve" to live out their dreams and that reaching your achieving big-ticket goals will also put you on the right track to finding true happiness. However, realistically, many people continue to live very fulfilled yet unextraordinary lives. There is no harm in having a pragmatic sense of purpose. On your quest to achieving fulfillment, you will need to spend time thinking about what motivates you.



Finding motivation

Consider this list as you reflect on your motivations

- ☐ Think about your “why.” It could be someone or something you love to do, but there is a purpose for your actions.
- ☐ Evaluate your life. Look at your family, friends, career, finances, health, relationships and fun; assess them on a scale of 1 (needs improvement) to 10 (totally awesome). Look at your low scores and describe what it would look like as a 10. Contemplating this could help you determine priorities.
- ☐ Be realistic when facing challenges. It is not easy, and not everything will go your way. Learn from mistakes and recognize the contributions they make along the way.
- ☐ Think of who is in your support network – family, friends, doctors, etc. and accept their help to get you back on track.
- ☐ Recognize, track and celebrate your progress, no matter how small. It will give you a record of where you’ve started and how far you’ve gone, showing your movement and growth over time.
- ☐ Keep moving forward. It’s okay to take breaks and engage in reflection to revisit your goals.

Still, goal setting can be a big help

Establishing goals can help you become more successful. It can also give your brain a boost of positive endorphins by helping you recognize and realize your achievements. You shouldn’t feel that you need to set drastic measures to be effective. Setting several smaller, more focused, manageable, reasonable, and achievable goals can be far more beneficial than chasing after lofty, unattainable and broad targets.⁸

There is also a tremendous benefit for using “goals [to] set direction” and “systems [to] build progress.”⁹ For example, take the time to recognize the necessary activities along the way to achieving a goal. You will often have a greater sense of fulfillment and achieve more happiness that builds from that momentum. You might also identify anti-goals or things you don’t want to achieve. This approach allows for a reverse-engineering of your priorities to, in turn, give you more precise focus.

What you want to avoid is a situation where the goals are created without personal reflection and simply for the sake of having some written down. Suppose you don’t do the thinking to ensure they are purposeful. In that case, goals can make you feel worse about a situation because “if a goal is too vague, it’s harder to reach, and you don’t know when or if you’ve gotten there.”¹⁰

Keep an open mind and don’t rush when seeking fulfillment

Ideally, you want to ensure that awareness of your present physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being all factor into the sense of fulfillment you feel. It may be necessary to slow yourself down enough to enjoy life and gain the insight you are seeking.

Here are some tips that might help in your quest.¹¹

- Recognize and release things that are outside of your control. You’ll reduce worry and feel better. Go with your instincts.
- Branch out of familiarity to try new things.
- Live in the present. Being anchored in the past can be counterproductive and keep you from moving forward. Similarly, focusing on the future will only help you miss the beauty of the here and now.
- Be kind and be appreciative. Share love and gratitude. Dr. Daniel Glaser, a prominent neuroscientist, shared this: “It’s amazing what you can achieve if you don’t care who gets the credit.”¹²
- Life is what happens when you don’t pay attention to your surroundings. Remind yourself to experience life first hand, not through the intermediary of a screen.
- When in unfamiliar situations, look for familiar things and form connections to give you a greater sense of security. It’s okay not to have the answer, perhaps you first need to live the question so you’ll experience the answer one day without even noticing.¹³
- Be yourself and live with integrity, even when no-one is looking.
- Choose where you invest your energy. It’s okay to redirect it if it’s draining you.

- The journey to fulfillment isn't global; it's within you. Form a connection with your entire self by practicing exercise, good nutrition, mindfulness, healthy sleep hygiene and becoming attuned to your spirituality.
- Recognize that COVID-19 has likely had a significant effect on your sense of living a fulfilled life. Acknowledge any challenging feelings as a way to help your emotional, physical and mental health. Consider how things will begin to change as vaccinations ramp up and Public Health restrictions ease.

Just remember that introspection, contemplation, reflection and acceptance can help you find fulfillment on your terms.

1. Recognize that your own needs and benefits are important.¹⁴
2. Clarify your values and use them as your personal GPS.¹⁵
3. Have the confidence to define what you really need and want, being honest with yourself.¹⁶

You are in charge of creating your reality and, therefore, your sense of fulfillment in life. Don't be fearful. Move forward at your own pace, but don't get caught up in rushing towards an imaginary finish line, or you may miss seeing all of the wonders along the way. It's an amazing journey, not a race.

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