



the age of well-being

People who have higher purpose in life have a diminished risk of dying 10 to 15 years later, regardless of chronic health challenges.



Happiness across the lifespan forms a U-shape, with people aged 45 to 55 showing the lowest levels of happiness, but increasing after. Some researchers attribute the trend to wisdom that comes with age.



About 12 % of adults aged 65 or older report that they rarely or never receive the social and emotional support they need.

The aging brain might not create as many new connections as that of a child, but circuits in the brain can still be re-wired and shaped.



Sources: Hill, P. L., & Turiano, N. A. (2014). Purpose in Life as a Predictor of Mortality Across Adulthood; Steptoe, A., Deaton, A., & Stone, A. A. (2015). Subjective well-being, health, and ageing: CDC 2013 Report on Aging; Park and Bischof, The Aging Mind: Neuroplasticity in Response to Cognitive Training

There are no shortcuts. To get to old age, one has to steer through midlife.

Sometimes that path is filled with joys of family, friendships, good health and career success. Other times, there is hardship, illness or loss, and the journey becomes more about how to survive in a complex world and being resilient.

With either path, common themes are emerging as important stepping stones to well-being.

economic inequality, unexpected stresses or the challenges of aging."

Researchers have been following thousands of people for more than 20 years in the study, asking them about the details of their lives, sometimes stirring up tough memories of job or personal loss, episodes of discrimination, battling illness, or struggles with loneliness and spirituality. They were asked what gives their life purpose, if they are satisfied with their lives, and what is worthwhile to them.

telling the tale of midlife in the United States

In fact, it's one of the most important developments in health research in recent years — proof that well-being matters — and it's one of many findings emerging from the federally-funded Midlife Development in the U.S. (MIDUS) study, with the neuroscience portion being led by the Center for Healthy Minds.

While there is a significant body of research that focuses on early childhood and "the twilight years," what was missing prior to the study was an in-depth exploration of what happens to people during midlife, the longest segment of the life course characterized by increased responsibility for family and work.

"What we usually study in health research is illness, disease and disability," says Carol Ryff, Hilldale Professor of Psychology at UW-Madison and lead scientist of the national project. "Those need to be studied. But people have strengths, and psychological and social resources that make them resilient and that keep them healthy despite difficult life situations that often accompany

"We are learning a lot about what makes people vulnerable," Ryff says. "But we are learning about what makes people resilient as well."

When participants come to the Center for Healthy Minds to complete the neuroscience portion of their visit, researchers conduct tests focused on measuring emotional reactivity and recovery, including psychological and biological responses to tasks. They also examine which area of the brain is activated and when, and how the brain changes structurally over time.

The next round of the study will collect a new wave of data in multiple areas and will expand to focus on gene expression linked to both inflammatory markers and psychological and social factors.

While federal funding underpins this work, it doesn't cover all of the costs of conducting research. Support from donors like you continues to fill gaps that enable our rigorous science to advance forward.



linking purpose in life to well-being

Center Scientist Stacey Schaefer, in collaboration with Center for Healthy Minds Founder Richard Davidson, helps manage the neuroscience portion of the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study and shares why purpose in life and people's exposure to adversity have come up as themes in the research.

What do we know so far about the research that links purpose in life to well-being?

Schaefer: One of the things to come out of the study is if you look at all age groups from 20- to 70-year-olds, if you have greater purpose in life, you're less likely to be dead 10 years later. Fascinatingly, it doesn't matter if you're older versus younger, or if you have a chronic condition or disease, having low levels of purpose in life increases your risk of dying. Other researchers studying different populations have also found this effect.

So purpose in life has some sort of protective property... Have we learned how the brain and body play into the equation?

It's very early, and we don't have much brain data on this, but what we have found is an interesting relationship between emotional recovery and purpose in life. To measure emotional recovery, we've used a task that measures eye blink startle, or the magnitude of eye blinks when someone is startled by a loud burst of white noise. This magnitude varies depending on whether someone is viewing (or recently viewed) positive, neutral or negative pictures.

Higher purpose in life was associated with smaller startle responses after negative provocations, suggesting those people who have greater purpose in life were able to get over the negative provocation more quickly.

How can we cultivate more purpose in life?

An Italian group has developed well-being interventions focused on Carol Ryff's theories of well-being, and they are currently testing the interventions' effectiveness. So far, they do appear helpful. Personally, my interpretation is that realizing what gives you meaning and purpose — recognizing it and acknowledging it — is important.

Do what makes you happy or makes you fulfilled and make sure to save time for it. It may help you to start your day thinking about your purpose in life, or thinking about what gives your life meaning when trying to refocus after a stressful or unpleasant experience.



Our New Home

YOUR INVESTMENT in the Center supports groundbreaking science and allows us to grow in ways we couldn't imagine. Thank you! With the continued support of UW-Madison, we successfully moved to our new location at 625 W. Washington Ave. We're settling in, but have plenty of ideas on how to promote well-being in the workplace, whether it's weekly meditation and yoga for employees or bringing in plants to liven up the space.



The Keys to Kindness

YOU ASKED. We answered. And thanks to your donor support, we're offering our mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum, used in one of our scientific studies in preschool children, free of charge. To access the curriculum when it becomes available later this year, visit: go.wisc.edu/KindnessCurriculum

your life, your legacy

"We're inspired that our investment in the Center for Healthy Minds will have an impact and lead to positive change today, and for years to come. It's exciting to see the Center expand its research through the addition of new faculty, each approaching the problems facing humanity through their own lenses, across disciplines, with new insights on how to create a better world for our next generations." – Fran Orrok

A planned gift can be the most significant legacy a donor may leave, honoring a lifetime commitment to creating a kinder, wiser, more compassionate world for all. Longtime Center donors Tim and Fran Orrok have devoted their lives to improving the lives of others. Their transformative gifts to the Center enable us to advance our mission in impactful ways, including significantly expanding well-being research and bringing in new faculty leaders like John Dunne, our first Distinguished Chair in Contemplative Humanities. They also are seeding new research and ensuring the future sustainability and leadership of the Center. The Orroks have a passion for the greater good and want to ensure their philanthropic goals have the greatest impact.



Change Your Mind – Change the World

We are deeply honored that Tim and Fran Orrok chose to leave a bequest to support the work of the Center for Healthy Minds.

Together, we are making a better world.

If you would like more information about leaving a legacy gift to the Center, please contact Lorri Houston, Director of Donor Engagement, at LHouston2@wisc.edu or 608-263-3672.