

Psychologist explores how meaningfulness cultivates well-being

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Time and money spent on meaningful choices is often associated with lasting positive consequences, according to a Stanford professor.

Jennifer Aaker, a social psychologist at Stanford Graduate School of Business, recently organized a collection of research papers on meaningfulness for the *Journal of Consumer Research*. In her own research, Aaker, the General Atlantic Professor of Marketing, has explored how happiness is often misunderstood and how happiness and meaningfulness lead to different choices. Stanford News Service recently interviewed her on this topic:

Can you talk about your own research on happiness and meaningfulness?

My research with colleagues Cassie Mogilner and Sep Kamvar suggests that the meaning of happiness shifts in systematic ways over the life course. This finding is important for two reasons. First, it suggests the meaning of happiness is dynamic, perhaps more than people think. Second, guiding people's choices is often the question, "What would make me happy?" Our research shows that the answer to that question changes systematically, and the answer influences the choices people make. When people are making choices guided by the desire to feel happy, the feeling of pleasure that they experience when they make the choice may be fleeting. From a research perspective, we explored what choices are associated with a more lasting sense of well-being. Research suggests that choices guided by meaningfulness – in the area of time and money – are often associated with more lasting positive consequences.

How is meaningfulness distinct from happiness?

One distinction between happiness and meaningfulness is self-vs.-other orientation. In general, people leading happy (but not necessarily meaningful) lives derive joy from receiving benefits from others. In contrast, people leading meaningful (but not necessarily happy) lives experience joy from giving to others. Meaning transcends the self while happiness focuses on giving the self what it wants.

Consider parenting: studies show that parenting is often associated with a high degree of meaningfulness, but it is not always fun or even pleasurable. (Of course this is not the case with me. Or at least don't share this interview with my children).

What do you mean by meaningful choices?

Whereas meaningful choices are often not pleasurable to make, and indeed may come at a cost or involve pain, they are often associated with a larger purpose. The consequences of the choices you make when guided by a desire for meaningfulness (as opposed to happiness) are often longer lasting. What is interesting is the possibility that the choices we make when aiming for happiness might be fundamentally different than the ones we make when aiming for meaningfulness.

For example, you often hear parents say, "I just want my children to be happy," and we are making decisions based on that wish. It is unusual to hear: "I just want my children's lives to be meaningful." Yet that's what most of us seem to want for ourselves. This insight was one reason we started empirically exploring the choices fueled by the pursuit of meaning vs. happiness.

What are the characteristics of meaningful choices?

The characteristics of meaningful choices include (1) looking backwards – for example, choices that protect special memories; (2) looking forward – choices that allow individuals to collect experiences in their life; and (3) looking outward – choices that enhance the well-being of others and the world.

You say that people may make choices that protect special memories. Why?

Research by Gal Zauberman, Rebecca Ratner and B. Kyu Kim shows that people tend to avoid situations when they believe that the situation will threaten a special memory – even if the situation is pleasurable. For example, you might choose to forgo a positive experience if it threatens to "overwrite" a memory that is important to you. Further, when people believe that future events might interfere with their ability to remember earlier special experiences, they acquire memory cues so as to savor the past experience. Thus, the choices made are meaningful in how they protect special memories. Also, meaningful choices often connect you to the future as well. For example, research by Anat Keinan and Ran Kivetz show that people make choices to use time productively and collect new unique experiences – even when those experiences are aversive or painful. Those unique experiences build their "experiential CV."

What types of experiences contribute to a sense of self and well-being as one ages?

In general, experiences can be grouped into one of two categories: the extraordinary, or that which goes beyond the realm of everyday life; or the ordinary, which are those experiences that make up everyday life but are often overlooked when the future seems boundless. Whereas sometimes people are making choices that allow them to acquire a bucket list of "extraordinary" experiences, other times exist where mundane experiences are more meaningful. For example, Amit Bhattacharjee and Cassie Mogilner ran eight studies showing that although extraordinary experiences are valuable at earlier stages of life, mundane ordinary [experiences](#) increasingly contribute to a sense of self and well-being as one ages.

What about helping others and the world?

One of the most important differences between choices made when

people are guided by the desire for meaningfulness vs. happiness is the degree to which the choice might benefit others and the world. For example, Noah Goldstein and his colleagues ran two field studies that show how consumers engage in important, real-world decisions to reduce resource consumption and enable environmental conservation. These choices are meaningful in that they promote pro-social and pro-environmental behaviors.

Finally, the way we think about [happiness](#) and meaningfulness is conceptually and practically important. In other words, how people choose to spend their time and money when motivated by the question, "What would make me happy?" vs. "What would be meaningful?" may differ. Identifying those conditions is worthy of future research, and the work on meaningful choices curated at the *Journal of Consumer Research* is an important step in that direction.

More information: www.ejcr.org/Curations/curations-11.html

Provided by Stanford University

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