

# 'Purpose in life' linked to lower mortality and cardiovascular risk

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People who have a higher sense of purpose in life are at lower risk of death and cardiovascular disease, reports a pooled data analysis in *Psychosomatic Medicine: Journal of Biobehavioral Medicine*, the official journal of the American Psychosomatic Society.

"Possessing a high sense of purpose in life is associated with a reduced risk for mortality and [cardiovascular events](#)," according to the study by Drs. Randy Cohen and Alan Rozanski and colleagues at Mt. Sinai St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital, New York. While the mechanisms behind the association remain unclear, the findings suggest that approaches to strengthening a sense of purpose might lead to improved health outcomes.

## How Does Purpose in Life Affect Health and Mortality Risks?

Using a technique called meta-analysis, the researchers pooled data from previous studies evaluating the relationship between purpose in life and the risk of death or cardiovascular disease. The analysis included data on more than 136,000 participants from ten studies—mainly from the United States or Japan. The US studies evaluated a sense of purpose or meaning in life, or "usefulness to others." The Japanese studies assessed the concept of *ikigai*, translated as "a life worth living."

The study participants, average age 67 years, were followed up for an

average of seven years. During this time, more than 14,500 participants died from any cause while more than 4,000 suffered cardiovascular events (heart attack, stroke, etc).

The analysis showed a lower risk of death for participants with a high sense of purpose in life. After adjusting for other factors, mortality was about one-fifth lower for participants reporting a strong sense of purpose, or ikigai.

A high sense of purpose in life was also related to a lower risk of cardiovascular events. Both associations remained significant on analysis of various subgroups, including country, how purpose in life was measured, and whether the studies included participants with pre-existing [cardiovascular disease](#)..

There is a well-documented link between "negative psychosocial risk factors" and adverse health outcomes, including heart attack, stroke, and overall mortality. "Conversely, more recent study provides evidence that positive psychosocial factors can promote healthy physiological functioning and greater longevity," according to the authors.

The new analysis assembles high-quality data from studies assessing the relationship between purpose life and various measures of health and adverse clinical outcomes. The researchers write, "Together, these findings indicate a robust relationship between purpose in life and mortality and/or adverse cardiovascular outcomes."

While further studies are needed to determine how purpose in life might promote health and deter disease, preliminary data suggest a few basic mechanisms. The association might be explained physiologically, such as by buffering of bodily responses to stress; or behaviorally, such as by a healthier lifestyle.

"Of note, having a strong sense of life purpose has long been postulated to be an important dimension of life, providing people with a sense of vitality motivation and resilience," Dr. Rozanski comments.

"Nevertheless, the medical implications of living with a high or low sense of [life](#) purpose have only recently caught the attention of investigators. The current findings are important because they may open up new potential interventions for helping people to promote their health and sense of well-being."

**More information:** Randy Cohen et al. Purpose in Life and Its Relationship to All-Cause Mortality and Cardiovascular Events, *Psychosomatic Medicine* (2015). [DOI: 10.1097/PSY.0000000000000274](https://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000274)

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