

Having a strong life purpose eases loneliness of COVID-19 isolation, researchers say

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Why can some people weather the stress of social isolation better than others, and what implications does this have for their health? New research from the Communication Neuroscience Lab at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania found that people who felt a strong sense of purpose in life were less lonely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Did they achieve less loneliness by flouting public health guidance? No. Although lonelier people were less likely to want to follow public health guidance, people with a stronger sense of purpose also expressed more willingness to engage in social distancing, hand washing, and other COVID-19 protective behaviors.

Purpose in life, or a sense that your life is guided by personally meaningful values and goals—which could involve family ties, religion, activism, parenthood, career or artistic ambitions, or many other things—has been associated in prior research with a wide range of positive health outcomes, both physical and psychological.

"In the face of adversity, people with a stronger sense of purpose in life tend to be more resilient because they have a clear sense of goals that motivate actions that are aligned with [personal values](#)," says Yoona Kang, Ph.D., lead author and a Research Director of the Communication Neuroscience Lab. "People with strong purpose may also experience less conflict when making health decisions. We felt that the COVID-19 pandemic was an important context to test whether purpose in life relates to individuals' willingness to engage in behaviors to protect themselves and others."

Based on their prior research, Kang and her collaborators expected that people with higher sense of purpose would be more likely to engage in COVID-19 prevention behaviors than individuals with a lower sense of purpose. In order to test their theory, the researchers surveyed more than 500 adult participants to capture their levels of purpose in life, their current and pre-pandemic levels of loneliness, and the degrees to which they intended to engage in behaviors known to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

They found that higher levels of loneliness made people be less focused on protecting themselves from COVID-19, and more skeptical that behaviors to prevent COVID-19 would be effective. However, having a stronger sense of purpose was associated with lower levels of loneliness and a greater desire to take action to protect themselves from COVID-19. Those with a higher sense of purpose also expressed a stronger belief that COVID-19 prevention behaviors would work. Even when people who had a strong sense of purpose did report being lonely,

they still felt strongly about taking precautions to prevent COVID-19.

"When faced with extreme loneliness and social isolation, like during the COVID-19 pandemic, wanting to connect with other people, despite the health risks, is a natural response," Kang says. "And yet, amidst this drastic shift in social life, we found that people with a higher sense of purpose were more likely to engage in prevention behaviors. This is striking because it shows that purpose in life can empower people to make life-saving health decisions that protect their own [health](#) and those around them."

Additionally, the researchers found that older people expressed less loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic than younger people. Kang sees this as a sign of the resilience of older adults, and she hopes to further study how to enhance purpose in life and resilience in aging populations.

"Having a stronger sense of purpose was associated with really important, positive outcomes across the lifespan," says Emily Falk, senior author, Director of the Communication Neuroscience Lab, and Professor of Communication, Psychology, and Marketing. "Our upcoming work will test interventions to increase their [sense](#) of purpose, in hopes of bringing these benefits to more people."

More information: Yoona Kang et al, Purpose in life, loneliness, and protective health behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Gerontologist* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnab081](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnab081)

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