

Social interactions tied to sense of purpose for older adults

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Having positive social interactions is associated with older adults' sense of purposefulness, which can fluctuate from day to day, according to research from the Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis.

And although these findings, published in the July 2022 issue of the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, apply to both working and

retired adults, the research found that for better and for worse these interactions are more strongly correlated to purposefulness in people who are retired.

"Specifically for our retired [older adults](#), this is a construct we should really care about," said Gabrielle Pfund, who led the study as a Ph.D. student in the lab of Patrick Hill, associate professor of psychological and [brain sciences](#). Pfund graduated in June and is now at Northwestern University.

The research team worked with a group of some 100 adults with an average age of about 71. For 15 days, participants were asked three times daily about the quality of the social interactions they'd had that day. Every evening they were asked to use a scale of one to five to answer the question: How much do you think your life had a purpose today?

After analyzing the responses, they found—relative to each person's own baseline—the more positive interactions a person had during the day, the more purposeful they reported feeling in the evening. Other measures, including employment and relationship status, did not predict a person's sense of purpose.

Of note, Pfund said, the study also showed how dynamic a person's own sense of purpose could be.

"Most research on sense of purpose is focused on big-picture orientation of someone being purposeful versus someone being not purposeful," she said. But it turns out, purposefulness may be more dynamic.

Although some people do tend to be generally more or less purposeful overall, Pfund said, "We found purpose can change from day to day. Everyone was experiencing fluctuations relative to their own averages."

The association was much stronger in retired people, the data showed: more positive social interactions showed a stronger association with a higher sense of purpose while more negative interactions were more strongly tied to a lower sense of purpose.

"For everyone, but specifically for our retired older adults, the people in their lives really matter," Pfund said.

The research has its limitations, two among them being that the sample was taken from data collected in Zurich, Switzerland, and the respondents were typically in [good health](#). These findings may look different in other countries or amongst older adults with poorer health.

Having a sense of purpose is about more than feeling good. Prior research has shown that adults with a higher sense of purpose lead longer, healthier and happier lives. They have lower rates of Alzheimer's disease and heart and other cardiovascular problems.

"The people in your life are going to have a very, very big impact on that," she said. "If you find yourself surrounded by people who bring you down ... that's going to have an impact."

"On the flipside, if you're surrounded by people who lift you up and who infuse your life with positivity, that's going to have an impact, too."

And that, she said, was good news.

"If you're feeling like your life has no purpose, that's not how it's always going to be. That's not your life. That can change."

More information: Gabrielle N. Pfund et al, Being Social May Be Purposeful in Older Adulthood: A Measurement Burst Design, *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI:](#)

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