

A sense of purpose may have significant impact on teens' emotional well-being

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Educational psychology professor Kaylin Ratner found in a study of more than 200 adolescents that feeling a sense of purpose had a significant impact on their emotional well-being. Those who scored high on purposefulness were more satisfied with their lives and experienced more positive emotions in general.

Credit: Fred Zwicky

Adolescents who feel a greater sense of purpose may be happier and more satisfied with life than peers who feel less purposeful, suggests a recent study of more than 200 teens.

Studies with adults have suggested that a sense of purpose in life is an integral component of well-being that fuels hope and optimism and has a variety of positive effects on individuals' physical and mental health.

However, less is known about the effects of purposefulness in adolescents, who, while characteristically hopeful, are in the throes of developing their identities, making choices that reflect who they are and aspire to be, according to the study.

Educational psychology professor Kaylin Ratner of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign led the current study, which examined how youths' feelings of purposefulness related to their daily levels of life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

"Teens who scored high on purpose were more satisfied with their lives and experienced more positive emotions and fewer [negative emotions](#)," said Ratner, who collected the data while working as a postdoctoral associate at Cornell University. "Importantly, we found that on the days when these adolescents felt more purposeful than usual, they also tended to experience greater well-being."

Her co-authors included Anthony L. Burrow, the Ferris Family Professor of Life Course Studies and the director of the Bonfenbrenner Center for Translational Research; and Qingyi Li and Gaoxia Zhu, both then-postdoctoral research associates, all of Cornell University.

Published in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, the project also examined how subclinical autistic traits that fell below the diagnostic threshold for autism—behavioral and cognitive patterns such as poor social skills and

difficulty shifting one's attention—related to these teens' sense of purpose in life and their overall happiness.

Each day for 70 days, the participants—teens ages 14-19—were asked to rate how purposeful they felt, how satisfied they were with their life and the levels of positive and negative emotions they were feeling.

All of those in the study were participants in GripTape, a nationwide nonprofit in the U.S. that strives to instill a sense of agency in youths by providing them with the resources to pursue a 10-week Learning Challenge project of their choosing.

Applicants whose Learning Challenge proposals are accepted receive up to a \$500 grant and an adult mentor who supports them in pursuing a project they are passionate about, such as starting a [small business](#) or researching higher education resources for undocumented teens, according to the study.

Melody Estevez, the research manager at GripTape, also was a co-author of the study.

At the beginning of the Learning Challenge, the study participants completed a 28-item survey that assessed their levels of subclinical autistic traits. A higher aggregate score suggested the teen had greater numbers of these traits, Ratner said.

Each day, the participants completed assessments, rating on a five-point scale how purposeful they currently felt. Ratner's team calculated the average of these daily purpose scores to determine each person's dispositional sense of purpose—their characteristic level of this trait—across the 70 days studied.

The researchers also tracked day-to-day variations in purposefulness by

subtracting the teens' daily purpose score from their dispositional level of purpose.

On the daily assessments, those in the study rated how much they were feeling four [positive emotions](#)—content, relaxed, enthusiastic or joyful—and four negative emotions—angry, anxious, sluggish or sad.

Participants' composite positive and negative emotional affect scores, along with their life satisfaction scores, were used to assess their psychological well-being.

Feeling more purposeful than usual on any single day was a unique predictor of participants' emotional well-being on those days, regardless of their dispositional level of purposefulness, the team found.

"Our findings show that no matter where you are in comparison with your peers, when you feel more purposeful than usual, you have better outcomes," Ratner said. "Purpose is accessible to everyone. What we need to do is help individuals feel more purposeful from day to day."

Ratner and her team found that the participants with greater levels of subclinical autistic traits tended to report higher levels of negative feelings, and lower levels of life satisfaction and positive feelings from day to day. However, the strength of the association between well-being and daily purpose was not moderated by these traits.

In other words, those who had more of these traits seemed to be able to reap well-being benefits at levels equal to their peers who had fewer of these traits, Ratner said. She cautioned, however, that the findings could differ for youths with known clinical diagnoses of autism.

"Our 70-day study is one of the most consistent examinations of youths' purposefulness to date and helps cement the beneficial influence it has

on their well-being," Ratner said. "With the groundwork laid by this study, interventions that promote purposefulness may be viable routes to enhancing the well-being of many young people, including neurodiverse youths."

The population in the study was 70% female. Nearly 31% were Asian, 22% were African American or Black, 18% were white and 14% were Hispanic. The researchers said because the sample was not representative of the gender and racial and [ethnic diversity](#) among teens in the general U.S. population, the findings may not be generalizable.

More information: Kaylin Ratner et al, Daily Adolescent Purposefulness, Daily Subjective Well-Being, and Individual Differences in Autistic Traits, *Journal of Happiness Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10902-023-00625-7](#)

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