

Fighting loneliness by finding purpose

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A new study published in *Psychology and Aging* co-authored by Patrick Hill, associate professor of psychological and brain sciences, offers an important message for our times: A sense of purpose in life—whether it's a high-minded quest to make a difference or a simple hobby with personal meaning—can offer potent protection against loneliness.

"Loneliness is known to be one of the biggest psychological predictors for [health problems](#), [cognitive decline](#), and early mortality," Hill said.

"Studies show that it can be as harmful for health as smoking or having a poor diet."

The new study, based on surveys of more than 2,300 adults in Switzerland, found that feelings of loneliness were less common in people who reported a purposeful life, regardless of their age. It was co-authored by Mathias Allemand of the University of Zurich in Switzerland and Gabriel Orlu of Tilburg University in the Netherlands.

Respondents were asked to score their feelings on a lack of companionship, isolation from other people, and a sense of being "left out or passed over" during a four-week period. Participants also filled out the six-item [Life Engagement Test](#), which asked them to rate statements such as "there is not enough purpose in my life" and "I value my activities a lot."

"A sense of purpose is this general perception that you have something leading and directing you from one day to the next," Hill said. "It can be something like gardening, supporting your family, or achieving success at work."

Many of the activities that can provide a sense of purpose—joining a club, volunteering at a school, playing in a sports league—involve interaction with others, which is one reason why a purpose-filled life tends to be less lonely. In the study, people who said they received or provided [social support](#) were especially likely to report feelings of purpose.

But Hill noted that there's more to fighting loneliness than simply being around others. "We've all had time in our lives when we've felt lonely even though we weren't actually alone." There's something about having

a sense of purpose that seems to fight loneliness regardless of how many other people are involved, he said.

The study found a slight uptick in reports of [loneliness](#) for people in their 70s and beyond, an age when a sense of purpose can be especially important. "We're trying to dispel the myth from previous generations that this is simply a time for retiring and resting," Hill said. "There are no downsides to finding something meaningful later in life."

Still, it's important to keep in mind that a quest for purpose can be somewhat self-defeating if taken too seriously. "Feeling like you need to save the world can lead to existential dread and distress," Hill said. When it comes to purpose and meaning, even small things can matter. "It's OK if someone else thinks that your purpose is trivial, as long as it's meaningful to you."

More information: Patrick L. Hill et al, Do associations between sense of purpose, social support, and loneliness differ across the adult lifespan?, *Psychology and Aging* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/pag0000733](https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000733)

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