

## Invited Commentary

# The Benefits of Purposeful Life Engagement on Later-Life Physical Function

Carol D. Ryff, PhD

**Although psychological disorders**, such as depression and anxiety, have long been studied as factors that contribute to poorer health (broadly defined) over time, it is only in the last few years that psychological strengths have emerged as having possible protective influences on health. One such strength is purpose



Related article [page 1039](#)

in life, which was first formulated from the life experiences of Victor Frankl, who spent 3 years in a Nazi concentration camp.<sup>1</sup> He saw purpose in life as having life-saving features and went on to develop a form of psychotherapy based on it. What does purpose in life mean? It is about reflective activities in which individuals perceive their existence to be meaningful and to include goals for which they live. Sometimes, this takes proactive efforts. In 1989, I developed a structured, self-report scale to measure purpose in life,<sup>2</sup> along with 5 other dimensions of psychological well-being. Since then, more than 500 publications have grown up around this model of well-being. Components of it have been linked to a host of other domains (aging, work and family life, personality, health, and interventions).<sup>3</sup> However, without question, the greatest amount of new science that has taken well-being in the direction of health has involved purpose in life. Frankl, a psychiatrist by training, saw it was essential for sustaining life, particularly under conditions of adversity. A growing body of evidence suggests he was probably right.

As conveyed in this new article,<sup>4</sup> Kim et al has been an important contributor to this emerging literature. His work has shown that higher levels of purpose in life among older adults prospectively predict reduced incidence of stroke, reduced risk of myocardial infarction among those with coronary heart disease, reduced risk of sleep disturbances, and greater use of preventive health care services. Additional studies have shown that purpose in life also prospectively predicts reduced risk of incident Alzheimer disease and mild cognitive impairment, better cognitive functioning, and extended longevity. Mortality findings, now evident in multiple studies, also show that high levels of purpose in life predict longer lives after adjusting for numerous covariates. Other studies have linked purpose in life to biological mechanisms, such as inflammatory markers, neuroendocrine regulation, and allostatic load, as well as to brain structure and function.<sup>5-7</sup>

To this emerging body of science, Kim et al<sup>4</sup> now link purpose in life to a critically important domain of health, namely, the capacity of older adults to remain physically functional as they age. Underscoring the salience of such inquiry, the ar-

ticle opens with the point that 1 in 3 US adults older than 65 years report difficulty walking 3 city blocks. Using a nationally representative sample of US adults that has been followed through time, the authors find that those with adequate (not impaired) levels of physical function at baseline subsequently showed reduced risk of functional decline 4 years later if they had higher purpose in life at baseline. Specifically, after controlling for numerous sociodemographic factors, those with higher purpose in life had a 13% decreased risk of developing weak grip strength and a 14% decreased risk of developing slow walking speed 4 years later. A notable strength of the findings is that functional health was measured objectively, thereby adding to prior findings using self-report to measure decline in physical function. In addition, the authors tested for but found no evidence of reverse causality (ie, that baseline levels of physical function predicted subsequent changes in purpose in life 4 years later).

What is the import of these new findings that link purpose in life to maintenance of good physical function with aging? First, as with any area of novel scientific advancement, it is important that other studies test the replicative consistency of the results. Are they evident in other longitudinal studies of aging that include cross-time assessments of purpose in life as well as objective measures of physical function? Second, the findings call for further science to explicate how a psychological factor, such as purpose in life, could have effects on functional health over time. What are the intervening mechanisms and processes? One possibility is that older adults with higher levels of purposeful engagement are more physically active in their daily lives, ie, they get up and do things every day. Thus, more detailed assessments of daily activities, possibly motivated by goals and objectives that constitute reported life purposes, might illuminate how physical functioning capacities remain vital among some older adults. Third, growing intervention studies<sup>3</sup> show that psychological well-being is modifiable, ie, it is not trait-like but can be enhanced (or diminished) by environmental inputs. This reality points to new possibilities for improving later-life health (broadly defined) by nurturing change in the direction of more purposeful life engagement. These ideas are worth considering. Leading a life of purpose not only feels good and meaningful, existentially speaking, it may also be an area of rich potential in which intervention studies and public health education programs might contribute to improved health of our ever-growing aged population.

**ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**Author Affiliation:** University of Wisconsin, Madison.

**Corresponding Author:** Carol D. Ryff, PhD, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2245 Medical Science Center, Madison, WI 53706 ([cryff@wisc.edu](mailto:cryff@wisc.edu)).

**Published Online:** August 16, 2017.  
doi:[10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2017.2136](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2017.2136)

**Conflict of Interest Disclosures:** None reported.

## REFERENCES

1. Frankl VE. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press; 2006.
2. Ryff CD. Happiness is everything, or is it? explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 1989;57:1069-1081. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069
3. Ryff CD. Psychological well-being revisited: advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia. *Psychother Psychosom*. 2014;83(1):10-28.
4. Kim ES, Kawachi I, Chen Y, Kubzansky LD. Association between purpose in life and objective measures of physical function in older adults [published online August 16, 2017]. *JAMA Psychiatry*. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2017.2145
5. Boyle PA, Buchman AS, Wilson RS, Yu L, Schneider JA, Bennett DA. Effect of purpose in life on the relation between Alzheimer disease pathologic changes on cognitive function in advanced age. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 2012;69(5):499-505.
6. Ryff CD, Heller AS, Schaefer SM, van Reekum C, Davidson RJ. Purposeful engagement, healthy aging, and the brain. *Curr Behav Neurosci Rep*. 2016;3(4):318-327.
7. Zilioli S, Slatcher RB, Ong AD, Gruenewald TL. Purpose in life predicts allostatic load ten years later. *J Psychosom Res*. 2015;79(5):451-457.