Finding Reasons to Live Longer

“My goal is to die young as late in life as possible.” That was the credo of the late anthropologist Ashley Montagu, who passed away at the ripe age of 94. One exercise that kept him going so long: he and his wife danced nightly.

Your list of ways to up your odds of staying healthy—or as we like to say, dying young as late in life as possible—no doubt includes eating well, working out, and not smoking. Now you can add to these having a sense of purpose.

The evidence for the life-preserving power of purpose has been mounting for years. In a review of decades of findings, Carol Ryff, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin and a leading researcher on the topic, rounded up the evidence for purpose as a path to good health.

Ryff specializes in the emotional ingredients of well-being, which include positive relationships, self-acceptance, and the like. But of all these psychological dispositions, the research shows, the strongest predictor of good health and longevity turns out to be having a sense of purpose in your life.

In studies using the medical methodologies deployed by epidemiologists, for example, purpose turns out to be a surprisingly strong inoculation against risks to brain and body in later life. Purpose offers protection against neurological diseases like Alzheimer’s as well as the delay of normal cognitive impairments in attention and memory that even healthy people experience as they advance through the decades. Purpose seems to protect against heart disease and even stroke. And perhaps most unexpectedly, a sense of purpose in life minimizes the chances of someone developing osteoporosis.

It’s no surprise then that having a sense of purpose predicts a longer life. And not just longer, but richer: scientists invoke the Japanese concept of ikigai, which translates as “what makes life worth living.” The longevity benefit has been found true around the world.

The biological advantages from purpose go beyond better habits like eating well and exercise. In fact, some studies have found a sense of purpose has stronger health benefits than these two much-vaunted salutary habits.

The biological mechanisms at play here are mysteries at present. But the medical studies have turned up some clues. For instance, people with a strong sense of purpose secrete fewer stress hormones than do others under extreme pressure; and they are more stress-resilient, recovering more quickly from upsets. Their genes for chronic inflammation—a causal factor in a host of diseases, from asthma to arthritis and cancer—are less active. Their metabolism better regulates glucose, lessening the risk they will develop diabetes. Their levels of cardiovascular risk factors, like triglycerides and “bad” cholesterol, are lower than expected.

All these biological assets may be a side effect of what Ryff, borrowing from the ancient Greeks, calls eudaimonia, or flourishing. It just may be that having a strong sense of purpose signifies a life that flowers. Studies of folks who flourish reveal payoffs in how their brain operates. Such people, the data shows, have stronger and longer activity in the brain’s reward circuitry in response to whatever makes them happy. That brain pattern, other studies show, predicts a person will generate less of the stress hormone cortisol while they sleep—which suggests they will be more “cooled out” during their day.

But amid all this data suggesting that a sense of purpose may be life-extending, there seems to be a paradox: if extending our lives is our main purpose, that may not cut it. A worthwhile purpose focuses us beyond ourselves on a greater good. The health impacts are side effects of this wider lens, not the main point.

So reaching for the best within us and making that a central focus for our lives may be, by the way, life-extending. Salud! ☕️