Purpose is defined as a strong stable sense of commitment to something that is meaningful to you and makes a difference in the world around you. It is found in all aspects of life and can change over time.

Get to the heart of purpose by asking yourself these questions:

What am I meant to do?
What gives my life meaning?
What do I care about?
What really matters to me?
How can I use my skills to make a difference in the world?

Take time to reflect on those answers, write them down, and allow flexibility in yourself to evolve over time.

Developing a sense of purpose... what does it look like to you?

Purpose increases well being. People with higher levels of purpose tend to be happier and feel more satisfied with their lives. They have stronger identities and higher levels of self-esteem, and feel more hopeful, optimistic, and confident in their abilities. What's more, they are more likely to be engaged in their communities in positive, helpful ways.

Purposeful people are stronger and longer-lived. More purposeful people are more resilient and better able to cope with life's challenges. Purpose has even been related to better physical health and longevity.

Students with a purpose do better at school. Students with purposeful goals find schoolwork more meaningful and tend to have higher academic achievement because they can see how their efforts relate to future aspirations. A feeling of purpose in life even seems to protect students from potentially negative influences in their environments.

Purpose is a journey, not just a destination. Interestingly, for teens and young adults, just the process of searching for purpose - even if they haven't found it yet - is associated with great life satisfaction.

Positive relationships with a caring adult are beneficial. According to research, only 20% of adolescence have a clear sense of purpose, but those who do tend to be better off in many ways. It also shows that the support of teachers, mentors, and other adults outside the family is crucial to young people's development of purpose, particularly in the early stages.
IN THE MOMENT

SENSE OF PURPOSE

To be a teacher. And to be known for inspiring my students to be more than they thought they could be.

- OPRAH WINFREY, Founder of OWN, The Oprah Winfrey Network

In your moment

Shape your core beliefs and values into a short, one- to two-sentence personal mission statement that represents who you are and paints a big picture of how you want to live your life.

See Oprah’s personal mission example on the left and then try writing your own!

Putting it into practice

1. What makes you come alive? Think about things bigger than you that put a “fire in your belly”, things you really care about that you are willing to put yourself into.

2. What are your innate strengths? We all have them! Think about things that naturally come easy to you and write them down.

3. Where do you add value? Your strengths are perfectly-positioned to help solve challenges in your school, workplace, or organization. Focus on opportunities, roles, and career paths where you are most likely to succeed!

4. How will you measure your life? What are your core values and how can you align your actions and behaviors to support them?

For additional SEL resources, visit: go.illinois.edu/InTheMoment

REFERENCES

Greater Good in Education is produced by UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center (GGSC). https://ggie.berkeley.edu/student-well-being/purpose-for-students/


SOURCE

Carissa Davis, 4-H Youth Development Educator, University of Illinois Extension

University of Illinois Extension, College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Information in this publication is for educational purposes only. References to commercial products or trade names do not constitute an endorsement and do not imply discrimination against similar products.

Issued in furtherance of cooperative Extension Service work, Acts of May 8 and June 20, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunity in programs and employment.

Copyright © 2021 by the University of Illinois Board of Trustees.

Authors and publishers have granted permission for copies of this work or parts of this work to be reproduced, provided that (1) copies are distributed at or below the cost of reproduction; (2) the author, the publication, and the University of Illinois College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences and the relevant division within the college are identified; and (3) proper notice of copyright is affixed to each copy.