Purpose and Longevity Are Related, But Not in the Way You Might Think

5 MIN READ

JUN. 11, 2025

BY DANN ALBRIGHT, CSCS

The science connecting meaning and mortality is more interesting than the simple version.

When you think of the most important factors in living a long, healthy life, what do you think of? Did you say exercise and nutrition? Stress management? Sleep?

If you said any of those things, you'd be right. They're all important in boosting not just your lifespan, but your healthspan and the fullness of your life, too. Those are the kinds of things we help you with all the time here at Super Age. But every once in a while, a different kind of research catches our eye. This is one of those times.

Let's talk about purpose and how it might help you live a longer, healthier life.

A **2024 peer-reviewed study confirmed** what many of us intuit: purpose in life is a robust predictor of mortality, even more so than life satisfaction. Purpose shows up in our biology.

And it's not just something that people say. Having a strong sense of purpose is linked to:

- **Reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease and mild cognitive impairment**
- **Reduced risk of dementia**
- **Improved memory, executive function, and overall cognition**
- **Improved verbal fluency and episodic memory**
- **Protection against cognitive decline**
- **Better immune and inflammation biomarkers**

With all that evidence, it seems clear that having a strong sense of life purpose can play a huge role in keeping you healthy and strong as you age. However, there might be a problem with that reasoning.

Does A Sense of Life Purpose Help You Live Longer?

A **study published in the *Journal of Public Health*** casts doubt on the seemingly straightforward relationship between purpose and health outcomes. The researchers followed 8,425 adults aged 50 and older from the Health and Retirement Study across three four-year periods, from 2006 to 2018. They used more comprehensive health measures than previous studies and examined what happened to the purpose-mortality link across different time horizons.

Here's what they found: the relationship between purpose and mortality was substantially attenuated, or disappeared entirely, at longer time horizons. Purpose predicted who would die in the next four years, but not who would die in years eight through twelve. That pattern is consistent with reverse causation: declining health reduces your sense of purpose, rather than low purpose causing poor health.

In short, their message is this: a stronger sense of purpose doesn't necessarily lead to better health outcomes. What may really be happening is that poorer health outcomes lead to a drop in purpose. A cancer diagnosis or another significant health decline would make it harder to maintain a sense of purpose, and that declining purpose is what earlier studies were measuring.

This idea certainly makes sense. Maybe people feel strongly about their purpose until a decline in health makes it harder to pursue.

So what does this mean for those of us trying to age boldly and with intention? Where does purpose fit in?

Why This Changes How We Think About Purpose

I can tell you from my own experience that without purpose, a pursuit of health and longevity feels hollow. I've been in this industry a long time, but I've only recently remembered my true calling and come to live in alignment with it. I feel alive again. I act with intention. I live boldly.

Purpose can change your life. The question this research raises is whether it also changes your bloodwork.

The honest answer, based on the current evidence, is that purpose and health reinforce each other, but the arrow may point differently than we assumed. Protecting your health is how you protect your ability to stay connected to what drives you. And staying connected to what drives you is part of what makes the work of health feel worth doing. They're not a one-way street. They're a feedback loop.

In the end, you have a great deal of control over both your sense of purpose *and* your health.

Try This: A 10-Minute Purpose Check-In

Psychologist **Carol Ryff's research** at the University of Wisconsin has spent decades studying purpose as a measurable dimension of psychological well-being, linked to better immune function, lower inflammation, and reduced cognitive decline. You don't need a grand epiphany to benefit. You need a pattern.

Set a timer for 10 minutes this week and sit with three questions:

1. **What makes me lose track of time?** Not what I think I should enjoy, but what actually absorbs me.
2. **What would I do more of if no one were watching?** This strips away performance and obligation.

3. **What feels unfinished?** Not undone tasks, but the deeper sense that something in you hasn't been fully expressed yet.

Write your answers down. Don't edit them. Revisit them in a week and notice what stays consistent. Purpose often shows up as a pattern across answers, not as a single lightning bolt.

For more on the science of purpose, researcher **Kendall Cotton Bronk's work at the Greater Good Science Center** offers additional questions worth exploring.

Keep Looking Forward

Research tells us that life purpose is associated with better health outcomes. Other research indicates that better health might just help us feel more attached to our purpose.

It's complicated.

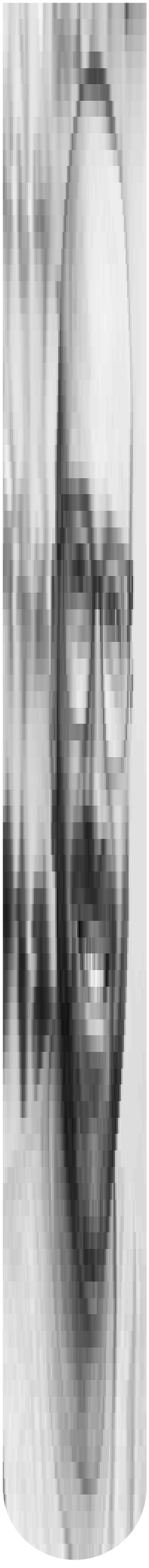
In the end, the best thing we can do is pursue this one extraordinary life with passion, vigor, and direction.

Take steps to discover and reconnect with your purpose. Protect your health and wellness, because they fuel your ability to stay in the game. And keep checking in, because purpose isn't something you find once. It's something you tend to.

Read This Next

*The information provided in this article is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended as health, medical, or financial advice. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat any health condition. Always consult a qualified healthcare provider regarding any questions you may have about a medical condition or health objectives.**Read our disclaimers**.*

WRITTEN BY:



Dann Albright, CSCS