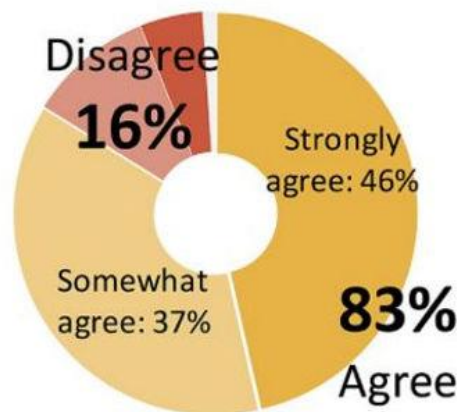


How to Find a Meaningful Purpose

Why do you wake up in the morning? Do you have a strong sense of purpose that gets you up? Or are you going through life without a clear purpose? If you already have a strong sense of purpose, that's fantastic! If not, you're not alone.

The [Cato 2019 Welfare, Work, and Wealth National Survey](#) asked Americans if they believe their life has meaning and purpose, and it found that 46% strongly agreed, 37% somewhat agreed, and 16% disagreed. That means around half the population could use some help with having a more meaningful purpose in life!

Agree/disagree: I feel like I have purpose in my life; my life has meaning



CATO INSTITUTE 2019 WELFARE, WORK, & WEALTH NATIONAL SURVEY
Note: Don't know/refused 1%

[Image Source](#)

Having a strong purpose isn't just a nice-to-have thing. It's extremely important for our mental AND physical health. In his book, [The Stress Solution](#), Dr. Rangan Chaterjee explains how lacking a meaningful purpose is inherently stressful, while people with a meaningful purpose have much better health, including lower chances of heart disease, strokes, and depression.

In the five [Blue Zones](#) (areas of the world where there's the most number of healthy centenarians), people all have a strong purpose that they can articulate clearly. That means having a strong purpose and being clear on it helps us live longer, healthier lives. [The Journal of Research in Personality](#) even found that a strong purpose is linked to greater economic success.



Photo by Jamie Street on Unsplash

Now that we recognize the importance of purpose, the big question is, *How do we get a strong, meaningful purpose?* This article will go over four steps:

1. [Know the difference between a meaningful and non-meaningful purpose.](#)
2. [Self-reflect to learn more about yourself.](#)
3. [Experiment with purposes to confirm if they resonate with you.](#)
4. [Find meaning in whatever you are doing now.](#)

Step 1: Know the difference between a meaningful and non-meaningful purpose.

1.1 A Meaningful Purpose

A meaningful purpose is *something that the world around you needs, which you also enjoy providing*. Notice there are two key parts:

1. Other people benefit from it
2. You enjoy it.

In his book, [Principles](#), Ray Dalio explains how both neuroscientists and spiritual leaders agree that the human brain is evolutionarily programmed to try to help the group and build meaningful relationships. That's why helping others is key to a meaningful purpose.

Notice that whether or not you are good at something does not make it meaningful. There are many people in the world who do things they are talented at but don't feel fulfilled from

it. But if you discover a purpose that is meaningful to you, then even if you are not good at it, you will have the drive and perseverance to get good at it.

Also, just because you enjoy something does not mean it will be meaningful and fulfilling. If you really enjoy something such that you could do it all day without getting bored, we call that a **passion**. Being able to spend time on your passion is already a great blessing that not everyone gets. But even higher than passion is a meaningful purpose.

A **meaningful purpose** has to be something that you enjoy which also makes a positive difference in the lives of others. As Gandhi once said,

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

The Stoic Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, explained that a meaningful purpose has three parts: being a good person, improving my moral character, and helping the greater good.

A Powerful Purpose



Being a Good Person



Improving My Character



Serving The Greater Good



"Fight to remain the person that philosophy wished to make you...Life is short—the fruit of this life is a good character and acts for the common good." —Marcus Aurelius, Stoic Emperor

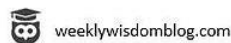


Image Sources: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)

These three things all benefit others and bring ourselves long lasting joy. Moreover, we can fulfill these three goals no matter what role we have, whether it is as a child, parent, friend, spouse. We can also do these three goals no matter what career we choose.

1.2 The Four Levels of Motivation

In his book, [Think Like a Monk](#), Jay Shetty explains how to live with peace and purpose every day. One of the key ideas in the book is the four levels of motivation:

1. **Fear** — being driven by negative things like sickness, poverty, and death

2. **Desire** — being driven by personal gratification through wealth, success, and pleasure
3. **Duty** — being motivated by gratitude, responsibility, and doing the right thing
4. **Love** — being motivated by helping and caring for others

The Motivation Ladder



Being motivated by fear is obviously not a happy place to be. Many people are motivated by desire, but the problem with desire is that there's always more to want, and the selfish nature of desire makes it non-meaningful. The great stoic philosopher Seneca said, *"It is inevitable that life will be not just very short but very miserable for those who acquire by great toil what they must keep by greater toil."*

When we have a strong desire for something, we either end up stressed or end up stressed. That's not a typo. If you don't get what you desire, then you're stressed. If you do get what you desire, you get a temporary sense of relief, but then you're afraid losing it or stressed about the next bigger desire.

Being motivated by duty and love is a strong purpose, and it will lead to much more happiness and fulfillment than being motivated by fear or desire. For example, Lewis Howes is former pro-athlete and the host of *The School of Greatness*. In his [conversation](#) with Jay Shetty about the four motivations, he said, *"Most of my life, one of my main motivation was desire: seeking personal gratification through success, wealth, and pleasure...In the last seven years, it's been more duty and love...And there's an amount of happiness I've never felt before until I reached practicing duty and love. I remember I was never able to fall asleep at night until about 7 or 8 years ago without an hour or hour and half of just anxious anxiety, stress, concern, worry. And when I*

shifted from seeking personal gratifications to being motivated by a mission and love and gratitude, I started to fall asleep within minutes."

We mentioned early that a powerful purpose includes being a good person, improving our moral character, and serving the greater good. Why? Because it is our duty. We received a lot of gratitude and kindness from our parents, teachers, ancestors, nation, and the world, so the least we could do is be a good person and help them back.

A Powerful Purpose Stems from Gratitude



Repaying Parents'
Nurture



Repaying Teachers'
Teachings



Repaying Ancestors'
Virtues



Repaying The
Nation's Support



Repaying All
Citizens' Services



Image Sources: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)

Our parents and teachers all hope for us to be a useful member of society, to give more than we take. Our ancestors have advanced the world for us, so we should leave the world better than when we arrived. The nation and all citizens support our daily lives, so we should contribute something back. When we think about all the gratitude we received, we will naturally feel motivation to improve ourselves and serve the greater good.

Now that you know the difference between a meaningful and non-meaningful purpose, the next step is to figure out how you can implement a meaningful purpose.

Step 2: Self-reflect to learn more about yourself.

2.1 Ask yourself some deep questions

Recall that a meaningful purpose is something that benefits others and that you enjoy providing. In other words, it is the combination of service (helping others) and passion (what you enjoy).

Here are some questions to reflect on regarding passion:

- If I had all the money and time in the world, what would I do (after I've travelled and bought all the stuff I want)?
- What excites me? What am I happily willing to do even when I am exhausted?
- What could I talk about for hours without getting bored?

Here are some questions to reflect on regarding service:

- What problems do I like to help people with?
- What am I most grateful for? How can I provide that to others or repay that gratitude?
- What is my biggest pain? How can I help prevent that pain for others?

To help yourself get clear on your purpose, journal down your answers to these questions and talk to people who know you well about your answers.



Image by lilartsy on Unsplash

Example:

To use myself as an example, I was a white-collar office worker after I graduated from business school. Soon after I started working, I realized that even though I was good at my job, I didn't find it fulfilling or meaningful. I just felt like I was helping big businesses make money.

When I reflected on my passion, I realized that I really enjoy sharing useful knowledge about improving our lives. If I didn't have to care about money and time, I would spend all my time sharing useful knowledge with others. Despite long work days, I would use my evenings and weekends writing blog articles instead of seeking entertainment or relaxation. I could talk about self-improvement for hours without getting bored.

When I reflected on service, I realized I often try to help others solve their life problems, whether it be relationships, career, or health. Aside from my parents, I'm most grateful for all the authors I found on the internet. It's through their books, podcasts, and articles that I learned most of what I know for little to no cost. My biggest pain is not knowing these useful knowledge earlier.

From this reflection, I've made my purpose to be sharing useful knowledge that I've benefited from and that I wish I had learned earlier. I'm doing this out of duty and love to help others improve their life and avoid the suffering that I went through. That's why I spend my free time writing articles, and I even switched my career from a corporate business job to a high school teacher, which has improved my sense of happiness and fulfillment in life greatly.

Common Purposes

Although my purpose is to help others through sharing useful knowledge, that purpose may not resonate with you. Here are some other common purposes that people find meaningful:

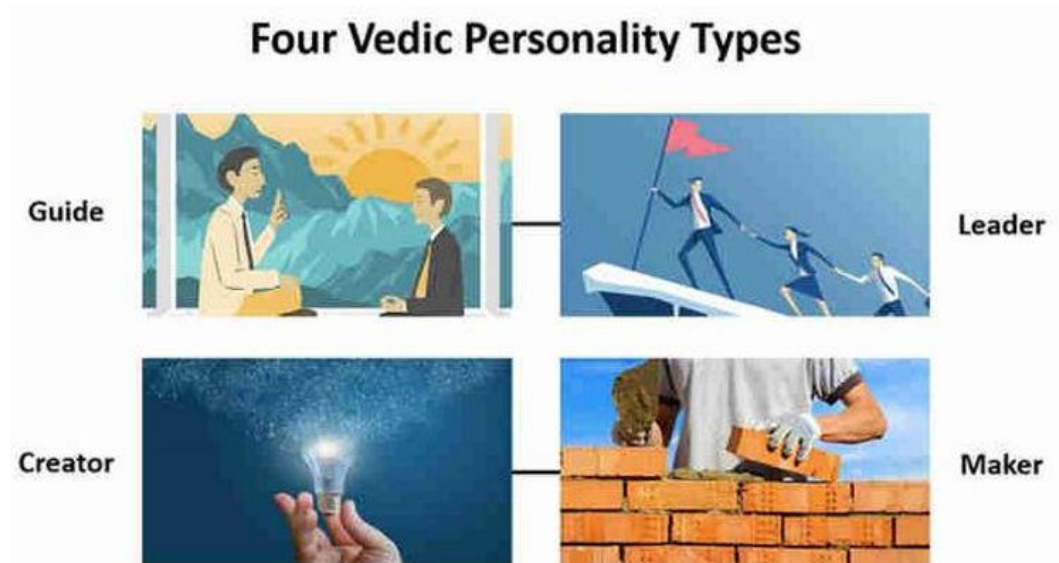
- To advocate for a cause
- To nurture and care for others
- To make useful things
- To create new useful things
- To create art and beauty
- To entertain others
- To maintain order and stability
- To help those in bad circumstances

Perhaps one of those purposes jump out at you. If not, consider using personality tests to learn more about yourself.

2.2 Vedic Personalities

A useful tool to help with self-awareness is personality tests. When it comes to helping you find your purpose, Jay Shetty uses the Four Vedic Personalities:

- **Guides** are compelled to learn and share knowledge. They value wisdom more than fame or money. Their purpose can be to share useful knowledge or to use knowledge to help people.
- **Leaders** like to influence and provide. They are led by morals and seek to inspire cooperation and support society long-term. Their purpose can be to maintain order and stability or to help those in bad circumstances.
- **Creators** like to make things happen, and they are good at innovating and networking. Their purpose can be to create new and useful things for society.
- **Makers** like to see things tangibly being built. They are good at inventing, supporting, and implementing. They are motivated by stability and security, as well as supporting those in need. Their purpose can be to make useful things or art and beauty.



To find out which Vedic personality type is your primary one, you can take this online survey: <https://s.surveyanyplace.com/dharmatype>

2.3 16 Personalities Test

Another useful personality test is the 16 Personality Tests. You can read a detailed explanation of the 16 Personalities [here](#), but for this article, we'll just look at the four categories of personalities:

- **Analysts** are driven by logic and ideas, so their purpose can be to solve big problems for society and innovate new ideas.
- **Diplomats** are driven by compassion and ideals, so their purpose can be to advocate for an important cause and to help those in bad circumstances
- **Sentinels** are driven by duty and morals, so their purpose can be to maintain order and stability in the world.

- **Adventurers** are driven by novelty and fun, so their purpose can be to entertain others, whether that be through films, music, art, or sports.



To find out which one you are, you can take this survey:
<https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test>

The 16 Personalities website provides many famous examples of people from each category. We can see that Analysts include famous logical thinker and innovators like Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, and Elon Musk. Diplomats include famous social advocates and compassion people such as Oprah Winfrey, Martin Luther King Junior, and Mother Teresa. Sentinels have less famous people because they tend to support others from the background rather than being in the center of attention, but some well-known ones include Captain America, Hermione Granger, and George Washington. Explorers include famous actors, singers, and athletes such as Tom Cruise, Adele, and Michael Jordan.

An important note to make here is that personality does not define your best career choice, but rather your purpose for choosing that career. For example, a Diplomat could choose to work in the technology industry for the purpose of using technology for social good. A Sentinel could choose to work in the entertainment industry for the purpose of using media to bring more stability in society.

Hopefully, you've identified a potential purpose for yourself now. If so, the next step is to confirm if that purpose resonates with you.

Step 3: Experiment with purposes to confirm if they resonate with you.

Once you've learned more about yourself and have an idea of your passion and how you want to serve others, look for opportunities to try out that purpose. Use your free time, such as your evenings and weekends, to experiment with your purpose.

A [2017 Statistica survey](#) showed that the average person worldwide spends 134 minutes a day using online entertainment. That's over 2 hours a day, 15.6 hours a week! We may use online entertainment to destress, but it's just temporary pleasure. Online entertainment doesn't provide us with long-lasting happiness and peace, whereas working on your purpose does. For most of us, we could probably replace some entertainment time with time spent experimenting with purpose. Once we've confirmed our purpose, we would naturally want to work on that more and spend less time on entertainment.

For example, if you think taking care of others might be meaningful to you, try volunteering at a food shelter or senior home. If you think entertaining others might be meaningful to you, try joining a comedy club or making online videos. If you think advocating might be meaningful to you, try joining a local government organization or attending community events. If you think creating new things is meaningful to you, try making stuff in your free time.

Personally, when I started working my corporate job, I decided to try writing a blog to share useful information with others. After I wrote articles, I would share them with my friends and colleagues. Not only did I enjoy researching and writing these articles greatly, but I also got great feedback from people who read them. I also tried volunteering at a senior's home. It was okay, but it didn't resonate with me as much as sharing useful knowledge. I remember in high school, I tried entertaining others during a talent show, and it was not my thing. I also remember visiting the robotics club where they were making cool robots, but I just wasn't that interested. From trying all these different things, I could then confirm that, indeed, sharing useful knowledge resonates most strongly with me. Nowadays, I spend almost all my free time on my purpose, and it's much more gratifying than any entertainment could be.

Step 4: Find meaning in whatever you are doing now.

"You can't find positivity in everything, but you can find meaning in everything."

—Jay Shetty



May all your detours and difficulties
become a rainbow trail that lights the
way for other travelers.

While you are experimenting with your purpose, you can also find meaning in whatever you are doing now. When you can link what you are doing to your purpose, you will naturally feel more satisfaction and fulfillment in life.

Example 1: Building a Wall versus Building a Cathedral

Below is a relevant story from the book [*Start with Why*](#) by Simon Sinek:

"Consider the story of two stonemasons. You walk up to the first stonemason and ask, "Do you like your job?" He looks up at you and replies, "I've been building this wall for as long as I can remember. The work is monotonous. I work in the scorching hot sun all day. The stones are heavy and lifting them day after day can be backbreaking. I'm not even sure if this project will be completed in my lifetime. But it's a job. It pays the bills." You thank him for his time and walk on.

About thirty feet away you walk up to a second stonemason. You ask him the same question, "Do you like your job?" He looks up and replies, "I love my job. I'm building a cathedral. Sure, I've been working on this wall for as long as I can remember and yes, the work is sometimes monotonous. I work in the scorching hot sun all day. The stones are heavy and lifting them day after day can be backbreaking. I'm not even sure if this project will be completed in my lifetime. But I'm building a cathedral."



[Image Source](#)

The first stonemason didn't have a strong purpose because he's only thinking about himself and paying his bills. The second stonemason has a strong purpose because he's thinking about all the people that the cathedral will serve.

Example 2: Student in School

Let's say you are a student in school, and you feel school is so burdensome and tiring. You especially find math class boring, but you have to pass math class to go to university. You can reflect on the questions in Step 2, such as *"What am I most grateful for? How can I repay that gratitude?"* and *"What could I talk about for hours without getting bored?"*

You reflect that you are very grateful to your parents and teachers because without them, you'd be nothing. You also reflect that you love art and design, and maybe you want to be an architect. Now, you can find meaning in your math class. Firstly, your parents and teachers hope you will do well in school, so doing your best in the class is repaying their gratitude. Secondly, math is needed for you to study architecture in university, so even if it's boring right now, it is needed for your future goals.

When you can keep these two things in mind, you will naturally feel more motivation. And of course, don't forget to use some of your free time to use art and design to help others!

Example 3: Typical Office Worker

Let's say you're a typical office worker. You just do your job to earn a pay cheque to pay your bills. You don't feel a strong purpose at work. You reflect that two of your biggest pains growing up was not having financial stability and family time. You could see your job as contributing to the success of the company, which provides a stable pay cheque for hundreds of employees. You could also use your lunch hours to chat with colleagues, encourage them to prioritize family, and give them recommendations for family activities. Doing these two things would give you new meaning to your current job.

Example 4: Going Through Hardship

I can use myself as an example for this one. I had a year of health hardship where I had a really bad skin condition. The steroid creams I got from doctors only suppressed the symptoms, but the symptoms came back worse as soon as I stopped using the creams. It was one of the most painful times of my life.

Since my purpose is to share useful knowledge to others, I viewed my illness as a catalyst for me to learn more about health. I learnt that in modern urban societies, chronic illnesses have becoming alarmingly common. Since we basically have nothing without our health, I started using all my free time to learn about health, whether that was reading books or listening to podcasts or watching YouTube videos. I used my body to experiment with all the things I was learning so that I could later share my experiences to help others. So despite the physical pain I was going through, I also felt a sense of purpose that pushed me to study health and persevere through the pain. Later, I ended up helping my mother with a lot of her health problems, and I even ended up teaching a course of healthcare!

Conclusion

Having a strong, meaningful purpose in life is all about doing something you enjoy that also helps others. If you only focus on your own enjoyment without helping others, then you're living for personal pleasure. Personal pleasure is short-lived, whereas a meaningful purpose provides [long-lasting happiness](#). Aside from benefiting our mental health, having a fulfilling purpose also improves our physical health and economic success.



Photo by Fuu J on Unplash

To find a meaningful purpose, reflect on what you love doing and how you can use it to help others. We should also use duty and love as our motivation for doing things rather than fear or desire. Some common purposes are

- To advocate for a cause
- To nurture and care for others
- To make useful things
- To create new useful things
- To create art and beauty
- To entertain others
- To maintain order and stability
- To help those in bad circumstances

If you're not sure which one resonates with you, you can do personality tests such as Vedic Personalities and 16 Personalities. After you have an idea of what your purpose might be, use your evenings and weekends to try it out. Only by trying it out can you confirm that it feels meaningful and fulfilling to you. Lastly, regardless of what you are doing right now, you can find more meaning in it by linking it to your purpose.