

AgingCare

Having a Purpose in Life Protects Your Brain

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Human beings need to feel as though their lives have meaning; that their existence on earth will have a lasting impact.

Feeling like you have a purpose in life can increase your optimism, reduce your risk of depression and enhance your ability to bounce back after a tragedy. But the benefits of this mindset go far beyond the psychological.

As you age, adhering to the belief that your life has greater meaning can help stave off frailty, physical decline, cognitive impairment, disease, and according to a new study, could reduce your risk of having a dangerous stroke known as a cerebral artery stroke by 25 percent.

"Mental health, in particular positive psychological factors such as having a purpose in life, are emerging as very important predictors of health outcomes," says Patricia Boyle, PhD, associate professor of behavioral sciences at the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center. [press release \(https://www.rush.edu/news/press-releases/purpose-life-may-help-aging-brain\)](https://www.rush.edu/news/press-releases/purpose-life-may-help-aging-brain).

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The study

Boyle and a team of Rush University researchers gathered data on more than 450 men and women with an average age of 75. They used psychological examinations to determine whether the adults felt their lives had meaning, then examined for signs of stroke. After ruling out other potential contributing factors (blood pressure, diabetes, etc.), the scientists found that those with a robust sense of purpose were far less likely to experience certain types of stroke.

The study authors offer two possible explanations for why having a purpose in life helps keep the brain healthy.

For starters, people who live purposefully are also more likely to adopt healthy lifestyle habits such as a regular exercise routine, eating a balanced diet and engaging in effective stress management techniques. This also helps clarify why people who live with a purpose-linked life purpose with better heart health.

Another potential reason for the connection between life purpose and stroke risk is that people who believe they have a higher calling also tend to have higher levels of psychological well-being and thus secrete lower levels of cortisol, epinephrine, and norepinephrine—hormones that in large quantities can contribute to inflammation, heart palpitations, anxiety, and hypertension.

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Helping a loved one find a higher calling

While it's nice to know that there are significant physical and psychological benefits of having a life purpose, it can be difficult for caregivers and their aging loved ones to believe in their own higher calling when they are faced with the daily realities of aging.

Helping a loved one tap into their life's purpose as the effects of aging begin to take a toll is no simple task. As [AgingCare.com Caregiver Support Forum \(/Caregiver-Forum\)](#) says: "Yesterday my friend in assisted living said, 'I'm just waiting for something good to happen in my life. I have no purpose in life anymore.' How do I help her?"

Here are some suggestions from other caregivers:

- "I would first try telling her that she give you a place to come and visit—and a good friend to see. That you are always welcome here. You might remind her of all the good things that she has accomplished and end the conversation with a compliment."
- "When I hear that I try to make a joke out of it. In my context I hear it as 'I'm useless.' So I say something like 'You know that's not true. You have at least three useable parts. You're not ready for recycling yet!' It never fails."
- "First, agree with her that it is sad and difficult to figure out one's purpose when one's resources and even abilities have changed. And also tell her that she has been resourceful before, and that as time goes on, you are sure she will find that is helping others, and learn to share it more."
- "My father went through this phase, and what I discovered that helped was to sit and talk with him about his life: how important he was as a father and what he 'gave' to my brother and I. Then I just took it forward to my kids, and how he went and helped the homeschooled with their math. (He was an electrical engineer, computer scientist, and mathematician so his brain was very important to him. He dealt with knowing he had dementia for 8 years, which was bad.) I just pointed out that when you get to 90, and you've left a legacy of helping to shape all these young people, they will never forget you—then it's OK to not remember some things, and to lose strength and to not be able to do some things."
- "If you can, try to find a way to keep your friend busy and to help her feel like she has goals. The elderly just want to feel like they are still doing something anymore."
- "Visits from dogs or cats that come in with their trained assistant might be a day brightener. Animals don't forget you, and you love yourself hundreds of times. They just love you."
- "You can also talk to the activities director at the facility and tell her/him how your friend is feeling, see if she/he can assign someone special for your friend."
- "Can she help putting together baskets for abused women/children, knit blankets for babies in the hospital, make stuffed animals, or stuff bears that a church group nearby her facility makes—cuddly toys for sick children. There are church groups that would love to include your friend."

- "You can assure her that she has made her impact upon society, and that this is the time to be content with and loving."
- "Ask her to tell you about when her life did have purpose. What was that like? What was her purpose then? What was her purpose to be now? Then listen. Listening to a person helps them feel valued and valuable, which is wonderful."
- "Another way to get your friend involved in activities is to join her in the activities. Once she sees she can help, she may do it on her own."

Re-connect with your life purpose

As a caregiver, it's just as important for you to be able to acknowledge and maximize your own life's purpose.

Need some inspiration to get you started? Check out these [6 Tips for Finding Your Life's Purpose While Caring](/articles/choosing-your-life-purpose-while-caring-151267.htm) (</articles/choosing-your-life-purpose-while-caring-151267.htm>).

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