

There's More to Life Than Being Happy

Meaning comes from the pursuit of more complex things than happiness



Shutterstock

EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH

JAN 9, 2013 | HEALTH

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

Want to receive exclusive insights from The Atlantic—while supporting a sustainable future for independent journalism? Join our new membership program, [The Masthead](#).

"It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness."

In September 1942, Viktor Frankl, a prominent Jewish psychiatrist and

neurologist in Vienna, was arrested and transported to a Nazi concentration camp with his wife and parents. Three years later, when his camp was liberated, most of his family, including his pregnant wife, had perished -- but he, prisoner number 119104, had lived. In his bestselling 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which he wrote in nine days about his experiences in the camps, Frankl concluded that the difference between those who had lived and those who had died came down to one thing: Meaning, an insight he came to early in life. When he was a [high school student](#), one of his science teachers declared to the class, "Life is nothing more than a combustion process, a process of oxidation." Frankl jumped out of his chair and responded, "Sir, if this is so, then what can be the meaning of life?"

As he saw in the camps, those who found meaning even in the most horrendous circumstances were far more resilient to suffering than those who did not. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing," Frankl wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Frankl worked as a therapist in the camps, and in his book, he gives the example of two suicidal inmates he encountered there. Like many others in the camps, these two men were hopeless and thought that there was nothing more to expect from life, nothing to live for. "In both cases," Frankl writes, "it was a question of getting them to realize that life was still expecting something from them; something in the future was expected of them." For one man, it was his young child, who was then living in a foreign country. For the other, a scientist, it was a series of books that he needed to finish. Frankl writes:

This uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual and gives a meaning to his existence has a bearing on creative work as much as it does on human love. When the impossibility of replacing a

person is realized, it allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude. A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any "how."



Viktor Frankl [Herwig Prammer/Reuters]

In 1991, the Library of Congress and Book-of-the-Month Club listed *Man's Search for Meaning* as [one of the 10 most influential books](#) in the United States. It has sold millions of copies worldwide. Now, over twenty years later, the book's ethos -- its emphasis on meaning, the value of suffering, and responsibility to something greater than the self -- seems to be at odds with our culture, which is more interested in the pursuit of individual happiness than in the search for meaning. "To the European," Frankl wrote, "it is

a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy.' But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to 'be happy.'"

[According to Gallup](#), the happiness levels of Americans are at a four-year high -- as is, it seems, the number of best-selling books with the word "happiness" in their titles. At this writing, [Gallup](#) also reports that nearly 60 percent all Americans today feel happy, without a lot of stress or worry. On the other hand, according to the [Center for Disease Control](#), about 4 out of 10 Americans have not discovered a satisfying life purpose. Forty percent either do not think their lives have a clear sense of purpose or are neutral about whether their lives have purpose. Nearly a quarter of Americans feel neutral or do not have a strong sense of what makes their lives meaningful. Research has shown that having purpose

and meaning in life increases overall well-being and life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, enhances resiliency, enhances self-esteem, and decreases the chances of depression. On top of that, the single-minded pursuit of happiness is ironically leaving people less happy, according to [recent research](#). "It is the very pursuit of happiness," Frankl knew, "that thwarts happiness."

This is why some researchers are cautioning against the pursuit of mere happiness. In a [new study](#), which will be published this year in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, psychological scientists asked nearly 400 Americans aged 18 to 78 whether they thought their lives were meaningful and/or happy. Examining their self-reported attitudes toward meaning, happiness, and many other variables -- like stress levels, spending patterns, and having children -- over a month-long period, the researchers found that a meaningful life and happy life overlap in certain ways, but are ultimately very different. Leading a happy life, the psychologists found, is associated with being a "taker" while leading a meaningful life corresponds with being a "giver."

"Happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desire are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided," the authors write.

How do the happy life and the meaningful life differ? Happiness, they found, is about feeling good. Specifically, the researchers found that people who are happy tend to think that life is easy, they are in good physical health, and they are able to buy the things that they need and want. While not having enough money decreases how happy and meaningful you consider your life to be, it has a much greater impact on happiness. The happy life is also defined by a lack of stress or worry.

Nearly a quarter of Americans do not have a strong sense of what makes their lives meaningful.

Most importantly from a social perspective, the pursuit of happiness is associated with selfish behavior -- being, as mentioned, a "taker" rather than a "giver." The psychologists give an evolutionary explanation for this: happiness is about drive reduction. If you have a need or a desire -- like hunger -- you satisfy it, and that makes you happy. People become happy, in other words, when they get what they want. Humans, then, are not the only ones who can feel happy. Animals have needs and drives, too, and when those drives are satisfied, animals also feel happy, the researchers point out.

"Happy people get a lot of joy from receiving benefits from others while people leading meaningful lives get a lot of joy from giving to others," explained Kathleen Vohs, one of the authors of the study, in a recent presentation at the University of Pennsylvania. In other words, meaning transcends the self while happiness is all about giving the self what it wants. People who have high meaning in their lives are more likely to help others in need. "If anything, pure happiness is linked to not helping others in need," the researchers, which include Stanford University's Jennifer Aaker and Emily Garbinsky, write.

What sets human beings apart from animals is not the pursuit of happiness, which occurs all across the natural world, but the pursuit of meaning, which is unique to humans, according to Roy Baumeister, the lead researcher of the study and author, with John Tierney, of the recent book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*. Baumeister, a social psychologist at Florida State University, was named an ISI highly cited scientific researcher in 2003.

The study participants reported deriving meaning from giving a part of themselves away to others and making a sacrifice on behalf of the overall group.

In the words of Martin E. P. Seligman, one of the leading psychological scientists alive today, in the meaningful life "you use your highest strengths and talents to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self." For instance, having more meaning in one's life was associated with activities like buying presents for others, taking care of kids, and arguing. People whose lives have high levels of meaning often actively seek meaning out even when they know it will come at the expense of happiness. Because they have invested themselves in something bigger than themselves, they also worry more and have higher levels of stress and anxiety in their lives than happy people. Having children, for example, is associated with the meaningful life and requires self-sacrifice, but it has been famously associated with low happiness among parents, including the ones in this study. In fact, according to Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, research shows that [parents are less happy interacting with their children](#) than they are exercising, eating, and watching television.

"Partly what we do as human beings is to take care of others and contribute to others. This makes life meaningful but it does not necessarily make us happy," Baumeister told me in an interview.

Meaning is not only about transcending the self, but also about transcending the present moment -- which is perhaps the most important finding of the study, according to the researchers. While happiness is an emotion felt in the here and now, it ultimately fades away, just as all emotions do; positive affect and feelings of pleasure are fleeting. The amount of time people report feeling good or bad correlates with happiness but not at all with meaning.

Meaning, on the other hand, is enduring. It connects the past to the present to the future. "Thinking beyond the present moment, into the past or future, was a sign of the relatively meaningful but unhappy life," the researchers write.

"Happiness is not generally found in contemplating the past or future." That is, people who thought more about the present were happier, but people who spent

more time thinking about the future or about past struggles and sufferings felt more meaning in their lives, though they were less happy.

Having negative events happen to you, the study found, decreases your happiness but increases the amount of meaning you have in life. Another study from 2011 confirmed this, finding that people who have meaning in their lives, in the form of a clearly defined purpose, rate their satisfaction with life higher even when they were feeling bad than those who did not have a clearly defined purpose. "If there is meaning in life at all," Frankl wrote, "then there must be meaning in suffering."

Which brings us back to Frankl's life and, specifically, a decisive experience he had before he was sent to the concentration camps. It was an incident that emphasizes the difference between the pursuit of meaning and the pursuit of happiness in life.



Peter Andrews/Reuters

In his early adulthood, before he and his family were taken away to the camps, Frankl had established himself as one of the leading psychiatrists in Vienna and the world. As a 16-year-old boy, for example, he struck up a correspondence with Sigmund Freud and one day sent Freud a two-page paper he had written. Freud, impressed by Frankl's talent, sent the paper to the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* for publication. "I hope you don't object," Freud wrote the teenager.

While he was in medical school, Frankl distinguished himself even further. Not only did he [establish suicide-prevention centers for teenagers](#) -- a precursor to

his work in the camps -- but he was also developing his signature contribution to the field of clinical psychology: logotherapy, which is meant to help people overcome depression and achieve well-being by finding their unique meaning in life. By 1941, his theories had received international attention and he was working as the chief of neurology at Vienna's Rothschild Hospital, where he risked his life and career by making false diagnoses of mentally ill patients so that they would not, per Nazi orders, be euthanized.

That was the same year when he had a decision to make, a decision that would change his life. With his career on the rise and the threat of the Nazis looming over him, Frankl had applied for a visa to America, which he was granted in 1941. By then, the Nazis had already started rounding up the Jews and taking them away to concentration camps, focusing on the elderly first. Frankl knew that it would only be time before the Nazis came to take his parents away. He also knew that once they did, he had a responsibility to be there with his parents to help them through the trauma of adjusting to camp life. On the other hand, as a newly married man with his visa in hand, he was tempted to leave for America and flee to safety, where he could distinguish himself even further in his field.

As Anna S. Redsand [recounts](#) in her biography of Frankl, he was at a loss for what to do, so he set out for St. Stephan's Cathedral in Vienna to clear his head.

Listening to the organ music, he repeatedly asked himself, "Should I leave my parents behind?... Should I say goodbye and leave them to their fate?" Where did his responsibility lie? He was looking for a "hint from heaven."

When he returned home, he found it. A piece of marble was lying on the table. His father explained that it was from the rubble of one of the nearby synagogues that the Nazis had destroyed. The marble contained the fragment of one of the Ten Commandments -- the one about honoring your father and your mother. With that, Frankl decided to stay in Vienna and forgo whatever opportunities for safety and career advancement awaited him in the United States. He decided to

put aside his individual pursuits to serve his family and, later, other inmates in the camps.

The wisdom that Frankl derived from his experiences there, in the middle of unimaginable human suffering, is just as relevant now as it was then: "Being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself -- be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself -- by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love -- the more human he is."

RECOMMENDED



[No Flowers On the Psych Ward](#)

Baumeister and his colleagues would agree that the pursuit of meaning is what makes human beings uniquely human. By putting aside our selfish interests to serve someone or something larger than ourselves -- by devoting our lives to "giving" rather than "taking" -- we are not only expressing our fundamental humanity, but are also acknowledging that there is more to the good life than the pursuit of simple happiness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

EMILY ESFAHANI SMITH is the author of [The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters](#). She is a columnist for *The New Criterion* and an editor at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, where she manages the [Ben Franklin Circles Project](#).

Twitter
