

This happiness hack can guide you toward a life of purpose - The Washington Post

[Dana Milbank](#)

How can we stay happy in an age gone mad?

It often feels as though all is unstable at the moment. Uncertainty dominates the economy. Our politics and planet are a mess. Scientific experts and government workers have been cast aside. [Many more fear](#) their jobs could be wiped out by artificial intelligence.

Little surprise then that historic levels of Americans report being [depressed](#), [anxious](#) and [lonely](#). Fewer say they are [very satisfied with their lives](#) than at any point since Gallup began asking the question a quarter-century ago.

But there may be a practical way to keep ourselves on a meaningful path — a sort of happiness hack for our chaotic times.

Results from a six-year study out of Cornell add to some already compelling evidence that the most efficient route to

human flourishing may be a lot simpler than we've been making it. While there's no magic solution when it comes to human well-being, the evidence suggests a relatively easy exercise in articulating one's purpose can have outsize mental and even physical health benefits.

Of all the depressed and anxious Americans, nobody is by reputation more depressed and anxious than Gen Z. As portrayed by the likes of popular psychologists [Jonathan Haidt](#) and [Jean Twenge](#), this generation is coddled, narcissistic and addicted to phones. Statistically, those generalizations have some validity. But Cornell psychologist Anthony Burrow, who runs the university's Purpose and Identity Processes Lab, found that with relatively little effort he was able to bring out an entirely different side of Gen Z.

Since 2019, Burrow and his researchers have selected about 1,200 college and high school students to receive \$400 no-strings "[contributions](#)" to use "to pursue what matters most" to them — something that benefits their community, family or even themselves. Before awarding the funds (eligible recipients are selected randomly, not on the merits of their proposals), he tests all applicants based on standard measures of well-being and emotions. Six to eight weeks after awarding the \$400 — the time during which the recipients have to make their contributions — he again tests those who received the funds and those who didn't.

The preliminary results, which Burrow has just begun to present in academic conferences and shared publicly here for the first time, are unambiguous. At the start, both groups typically scored the same on psychological measures. Eight weeks later, those who received the contributions scored significantly higher than the non-recipients on all measures: latent well-being, sense of purpose, sense of belonging, sense of feeling needed and useful, and affective balance (a measure of positive and negative emotions).

Burrow's takeaway: "Invite people to think about a contribution they want to make and help them [to] make that contribution, and that person may walk around with greater purpose than if they hadn't done that."

This is good news for a supposedly lost generation, because it suggests that deep down Gen Zers are as purposeful as members of previous generations and that it doesn't take much to cultivate that innate sense. It's an exercise parents can replicate to cultivate purpose in their own kids (more about that below) and schools could adopt at little cost to cultivate happier and more driven students.

This also could be good news for all of us. We've been seeking happiness from a dizzying array of self-help methods involving mindfulness, self-care, self-compassion, perseverance, grit, resilience, passion, gratitude, joy, flow, personal boundaries, being intentional and more. Twenty-

odd academic centers have sprung up with names such as the Happiness Lab, Human Flourishing Program and Science of Happiness Project.

But maybe we're overthinking it. In these grim times, the most efficient path to living a contented life may be to put ourselves through the same simple exercise of thinking about our purpose and then taking a step — even a modest one — toward fulfilling it. It's not a replacement for other mental health interventions, but the surest path to happiness for many of us could be as simple as this: Stop trying to be happy — and start figuring out how to make other people happy.

Burrow's findings aren't yet peer reviewed and published, and there may be limits to his method. But the results are consistent with a growing body of evidence that focusing on purpose may be the most efficient way to achieve the flourishing we all seek.

"Let's stop confusing humanity to think that it's more difficult than it really is, and give them much clearer guidelines of how to do this," says psychology professor Todd Kashdan, who runs the Well-Being Lab at George Mason University. "Maybe what we need to reduce all the difficulties internally that people have is ... what Anthony's doing, which is basically have people outward-focused on what do you want to do with your limited time today, this week, this month. And

through that, you find yourself not obsessing so much about the chatter that's going on between your ears."

In one study, Kashdan had patients with social anxiety disorder describe what they saw as their purpose in life and then had them monitor their efforts toward this purpose every day. After two weeks, they exhibited higher self-esteem, sense of meaning and positive emotions. Days when they reported significant progress toward life purpose were also days with significant boosts in well-being.

Another study, of Vietnam War veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, produced similar results. The value is in "getting outside of yourself," Kashdan said. "Instead of focusing on the symptoms that are problematic, what if we focused on the effort and progress made toward purposeful pursuits?"

In a sense, social science is confirming what the philosophers knew. Aristotle believed that the good life required living with purpose. Nietzsche wrote that "he who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

The 20th-century psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who believed that his sense of purpose helped him to survive Nazi concentration camps, wrote that happiness "cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a

cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself."

[Research](#) in recent years has found that a greater sense of purpose is associated with reduced inflammation under [stress](#), lower risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke, slower age-related cognitive decline, and greater longevity, as well as improved perseverance, resilience and mood, and the ability to face stressful situations with less negative emotion. Purposeful people aren't necessarily successful, but they are more adaptable during setbacks.

"So much of the pop psychology stuff is 'focus on yourself, focus on your own personal growth, focus on your needs, focus on your self-care, focus on you, you, you,'" says psychologist Kendall Cotton Bronk of Claremont Graduate University. Instead, she argued, "the real path to happiness is focusing on others, on how you can contribute to others and their well-being. ... What we need to be focusing on is contributing in meaningful ways, and often that will lead to the happiness that you're seeking."

I've been thinking a lot about purpose in my own life lately. For years, I had been on the hamster wheel of political journalism. I'd assemble the week's most appalling political developments into columns and then feel the dopamine rush as those columns leaped into the "most read." That's a classic example of extrinsic motivation — much like social

media likes — in which we organize our lives around the approval of others.

For a long time, I felt such journalism was purposeful; I was using my pen to hold the powerful to account. But over time, that sense of purpose ebbed. It seemed there was no longer such a thing as accountability in politics, and it wasn't clear that I was accomplishing much beyond adding to the outrage.

So I'm trying something new, something more purposeful. The transition, I admit, is hard. I'm working longer hours and struggling to [learn new topics](#). The "clicks" — the extrinsic reward — don't come as automatically when you're not weighing in on the debate of the day.

But I'm making a determined effort to focus on meaning. I am trying to use my pen to heal — our [planet](#), our [communities](#), our politics, [ourselves](#). I'm trying to shift from extrinsic validation to intrinsic validation, the belief that I am using my skills for a worthy purpose. Change is stressful, but focusing on purpose tends to reduce the anxiety.

I spoke about my struggles with purpose with psychology professors I interviewed for this column (a savings of hundreds of dollars in therapy bills), and they suggested that we all should do regular purpose check-ins with ourselves.

Kashdan says the best exercise is to ask yourself what “the world is missing” and then how you uniquely “fill that gap a little bit.” The specific purpose doesn’t matter; it’s just a question of “what lights you up.” Then commit to make a specific regular contribution — particularly time — toward that purpose and spend, say, 20 minutes every other day assessing your progress.

Burrow says his research suggests that the contribution we make toward fulfilling our purpose needn’t be “a major life-changing allocation of time or energy” but rather “things we can fit into our everyday routines.”

There’s no right or wrong purpose. It could be related to family or work or anything else that gives you meaning and helps you order your goals. It’s not necessarily altruistic (evil people can have purpose) but often is. Your purpose can change over time. You can have more than one; at various times, I think of my own purpose as caring for my family and friends, making people laugh, restoring the health of my land, and proselytizing for truth and reported journalism.

Young people in particular seem to crave purpose. Polling in recent years shows that [upward](#) of [7 in 10](#) young people put a high priority on finding purpose in their work. (In Burrow’s study, those with the fewest resources reported the biggest psychological boost from making contributions.) “The future of our country depends upon how you develop that,” argued

Brian Collier, whose Gambrell Foundation funds some of Burrow's work.

Various small efforts are aiming to make student [statements of purpose](#) part of school curriculums. Burrow, who launched his Contribution Project at Cornell and through the State University of New York system, is now expanding it nationally, to people ages 14 to 25, through a nonprofit called [Purpose Commons](#). This fall, he's launching a National Youth Purpose survey to draw responses from 2,000 kids.

Parents, too, can use these techniques to develop a sense of purpose in their own kids. Bronk advises parents to reflect on their own purpose in life and share that with their children, and then ask them questions about what they want to accomplish and what they're good at. She offers an [online "purpose tool kit"](#) for adolescents.

Burrow suggests parents ask their kids what contribution they'd most like to make and then talk about how they can get started — with or without a financial assist.

He says his own research contradicts the narcissistic reputation that Gen Z has, because 95 percent made contributions that benefit others. "If they're so self-focused and self-centered and if I say, 'Here, you can think of any contribution you'd like to make,' they should all buy Apple Watches for themselves," Burrow says. "They don't."

His project emphasizes community contributions, so more selfish Gen Zers may not apply. Even so, the contributions that recipients made provide a strong rebuttal to the cynics. One recipient used the contribution to hold a community party at a laundromat and to pay for 270 loads of laundry. One donated books to her former high school. Melanie Marshall used the contribution to plant a persimmon tree in the middle of campus, so that students could pick fruit to eat. The young tree won't fruit for many years, if at all. But the benefit to the donor was immediate. "It made me feel that my ideas mattered," she says.

For an "anxious" and "narcissistic" generation, that's no small thing. "I think a lot of people in my generation are like me," says Eric Kohut, who used his \$400 to start a website providing mental health resources for people in his home state of New Jersey. "Inherently, everyone wants to love and be loved. And I think that that comes out so often."

I feel a lot happier just hearing that.