

New packaging for old idea: Can a sense of purpose improve cardiac health?

Do you believe that your life is deeply meaningful, that you have a strong sense of purpose? On some level, do you think that you're alive for a specific reason?

Typically, these ideas are associated with organized religion—or with that frequently used, more politically correct term, spirituality. But not always. Secular people also can have a strong sense of purpose distinct from religious faith. But this hasn't stopped those with strong religious beliefs from making claims that their faith or what is often referred to as a sense of purpose, is critical to their lives—and may also keep them healthier.

One organization, called [Faithnet](#), makes no attempt to secularize its claim that religious faith makes people healthier (despite the fact that there's no evidence for this), and there are many such organizations. And the claims are often very specific. As one clearly religiously motivated [writer](#) puts it:

Religion, not merely spirituality, is a profound predictor of health. Spiritual practices can reduce blood pressure, strengthen the immune system, and help stave off some effects of mental illness about as well as many drugs on the market. In fact, the lack of religiosity is about as unhealthy as 40 years of smoking a pack of cigarettes per day.

Wow, not being religious equals 40 pack-years. That's some claim. The only problem is that there's not a shred of evidence to support it. Looking through the article, you'll find that the rationale is based on factors that can affect health to some extent and are linked only secondarily to religion. For instance, religious people are usually members of religious communities, and being part of a community gives people support. Community can be a stress reducing oasis.

Or not. It can also force conformity, which can generate stress, and make people believe they have lost a sense of purpose. The loose connections that show up in some studies certainly do not persuasively let alone conclusively support the very specific claim that being a non believer is akin to chain smoking. Take a group of churchgoers with smoking in their history and outsized numbers will die of smoking-related illnesses, but an atheist who never smoked is much more likely to live a long life.

The supposed link between spirituality, a sense of purpose and health is also the topic of some [best selling books](#), all filled with different takes on the idea that belief relaxes the mind and therefore reduces faith, citations of studies showing that prayer and meditation reduces blood pressure (only during the time of the prayer or meditation, and hyperboles along the lines of “faith is a potent pharmaceutical”. One of the biggest promoters of the ‘religion is healthy claim’ is the notorious Dr. Oz, who often implies that religious leaders who tell their followers to eat right and exercise regularly lends credence to claims that there is something inherently healthy about religion.

New packaging for the same old theme

The latest promotion of the idea that having a spiritual-like purpose is good for our health comes from

researchers at Mount Sinai St. Luke's and Mount Sinai Roosevelt who presented [results of a study](#) in early March at an American Heart Association conference. They compared various heart disease measures against what they call a "sense of purpose". It sounds very secular, but saying that they have a "purpose" people could mean that they're here by intention; somebody (other than their parents) brought them to life for a specific reason.

Specifically, the new study was a meta-analysis; it analyzed data from several earlier studies in which people had been questioned about their beliefs and health. The new analysis defined purpose in life as a sense of meaning and direction, and a feeling that life is worth living. Previous research has linked purpose to psychological health and well-being, but the new Mount Sinai analysis found that a high sense of purpose is associated with a 23 percent reduction in death from all causes and a 19 percent reduced risk of heart attack, stroke, or the need for coronary artery bypass surgery or a cardiac stenting procedure.

"Developing and refining your sense of purpose could protect your heart health and potentially save your life," said lead study author Randy Cohen, a preventive cardiologist at Mount Sinai St. Luke's and Mount Sinai.

"Our study shows there is a strong relationship between having a sense of purpose in life and protection from dying or having a cardiovascular event. As part of our overall health, each of us needs to ask ourselves the critical question of 'do I have a sense of purpose in my life?' If not, you need to work toward the important goal of obtaining one for your overall well-being."

The results suggested that having some kind of purpose reduces the risk of cardiac-related death and that the risk of experiencing cardiovascular events increases in people with a low sense of purpose. Kind of common sense, yes? The key, they say, is that the relation between sense of purpose and the cardiac issues works through a variety of psychological mechanisms highlighted in the different studies that were meta-analyzed.

Getting to the heart of the matter

When we really examine the connections between "sense of purpose" and what are known as "health endpoints", in this case cardiac events, the new study merely confirms the idea that being happy and motivated is better for your heart than not being motivated toward a goal. Lack of motivation is associated with depression, which for a while has been known to be associated with poor health issues, including in heart health. And when we look at it that way, it becomes clear that the study reveals essentially nothing new at all.

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