

# How to make your life feel more meaningful

Existential psychology offers specific ways to find meaning, giving you a buffer against despair in these anxious times

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## What to do

### Give yourself a meaning-in-life audit

Since meaningful lives are built upon a foundation of connections, it's time to reflect: how well connected is your own life? I encourage you to conduct a brief audit, assessing how you're doing in the domains of close relationships, community, work and spirituality. Are your connections in these areas providing a reliable source of meaning in your life? After considering your own experience with each domain below,

assign a score for the domain on this scale: 1 – not very well connected, 2 – fairly well connected; 3 – richly connected.

*Close relationships.* We tend to feel that our lives are most meaningful when we're spending time with the people we love, such as our closest friends. In particular, relationships with family are especially important for many of us, as they provide a sense of identity; they may extend across many decades or even a lifetime; and families tend to share many traditions, values and religious beliefs. Additionally, when someone takes on a caretaker role, such as by looking after children, the elderly or pets, they often feel a stronger sense of meaning. Take a minute to list your most important relationships and think about how connected you feel with these people. It's not so much about the sheer number of close relationships that you have, but your feelings of connection in this domain overall.

*Community.* Being part of a community can give you a sense of collective identity that connects your individual self

with something much larger. Do you feel that you belong to any communities? These could be based on social and recreational goals, such as a musical group or a sports team, or they might be directed towards an important value that you share with others, such as a group that's focused on protecting the environment. Jot down any communities that you feel connected with, whether these are formal ones (such as an organisation you belong to), or more informal ones (such as an ethnic community, or a group of friends that meets regularly), and rate how strongly connected you feel to your community or communities, on the whole.

*Work.* People's jobs play an underappreciated role in the foundation of a meaningful life as they often supply feelings of belonging and contribute to a sense of identity, purpose, mastery and self-worth. Research finds that some kinds of work are especially conducive to providing a sense of meaning, including jobs that offer some kind of service towards others – such as clergy, teachers and healthcare practitioners. Think about any aspects of your own work that give

you a sense of purpose, self-worth or a feeling that you make a difference, and write down what those are. These can include aspects of a formal job that you hold, or aspects of any work that you do outside of that job (such as regular creative work or volunteer work that enlists your skills and effort). Then rate how strongly connected you feel to meaningful work, overall.

*Spirituality.* When people believe that there are forces that transcend their everyday physical reality, they often sense that they are part of something far more extensive than their own lives, and this can help them feel that their lives matter in the grand scheme of things. Our own [research](#) finds that these existential benefits are not exclusive to those who belong to a formal religion, but also emerge for those who view themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’. Nonreligious people might feel this sense of spiritual connection when, for example, they are out in nature or meditating. So, with all this in mind, ask yourself: how strongly do you feel that you are connected with something transcendent?

## Use the audit to refocus on your connections

Consider what your existential audit reveals. Most likely, you have learned that in at least some of these domains you scored a 1, and have much room for improvement – few people would feel richly connected in *all* of these domains.

Encouragingly, though, one key insight from my [research](#) on meaning maintenance is that, like money, meaning is fungible. You can gain a greater sense of meaning by drawing on the connections from different domains of life. The meaning that you derive from one domain of connections, say, your family relationships, can help to make up for a shortfall of meaning in another domain, such as an uninspiring career. What matters is that your life is richly connected, not whether your life is well connected in all of the individual domains. That said, it is easier to build more meaning in life through a domain where one has opportunity for improvement.

So, having completed your audit, consider how you might shore up your

foundation of meaning by working in the domains where you have room for growth. For instance:

- If your sense of connection in your close relationships is flagging, your efforts might include reflecting on which close friends or family members you have not been seeing much lately, and making concrete plans to spend more time with them.
- If your sense of connection to a community is low, you might consider trying to join a new community that aligns with your values. Again, this can include a variety of possible groups: anything from a recreational pickleball league to a hiking group. If your key personal values include compassion or justice for other people, you should know that volunteering for a cause that one believes in, or engaging in activities that help others – both of which can be part of participating in a community – are especially likely to provide a sense of meaning.
- If you feel you lack a connection to your work, you might find that taking up some other purpose-driven activities in your free time – such as volunteering, or joining some other kind of organisation where you put your abilities to use – will bring some of the existential rewards that are lacking in your job. Or perhaps there are some additional tasks you could take on at your workplace that seem like they could give you greater feelings of purpose or mastery.

- Finally, if your sense of spiritual connectedness is low, I would suggest exploring – or revisiting – any [spiritual practices](#) or traditions that largely fit with your way of viewing the world. I'll have more to say about this below, but some relatively easy ways to boost this form of connection (and others) might be to join a friend in a spiritual practice that they find meaningful, or to attend a gathering of spiritual seekers if their quest resonates with you.

## **Try existential exercises when you need a boost**

Feelings of meaning in life aren't a constant – they ebb and flow. Some days you might feel rather alienated or disconnected from your usual sources of meaning. On such days it could help to augment your sense of meaning, and I'll describe some examples of what I call 'existential exercises' that you can consider. I think of these as the existential equivalent to a shot of espresso: they can provide a much-needed boost to meaning during those times when you're feeling a lack of it in your life.

### *Self-grounding*

This simple exercise is built on the notion that people have greater wherewithal to confront the challenges of their lives when they're feeling more existentially grounded. That is, when they feel that they have a clear understanding of who they are and what they stand for. Much research has found that people feel more grounded, and that their lives are more meaningful, after they have reflected upon their most important values. Dozens of psychology experiments in the tradition of self-affirmation theory have [found](#) that when people write a brief paragraph about their important values, they are then in a better position to respond with resilience to whatever challenges they face.

You might also benefit from writing about your values. Think about a value that is especially important to you – such as your loyalty to family or friends, your honesty, your creativity, your commitment to the environment, or whatever comes to mind for you. Then write a few sentences about *why* this value is important to you. Also describe some personal experience(s) you've had that demonstrate how this value is significant



to you. You'll likely feel more grounded and motivated, and these feelings could persist for some time.

### *Nostalgic reflections*

Research [points](#) to another easy way to give yourself a boost in meaning, which is to engage in nostalgic reflections. Reflecting on past memories can help existentially ground you by giving you a greater sense of continuity across your life. It can remind you of the events and relationships that have made you who you are.

Not all memories are equally helpful for increasing a sense of meaning, however. Try to recall social events from your past – such as when you used to hang out with your best friends on the weekend when you were younger – since relationships are so important for feelings of meaning. Also think about some of your more significant life events, especially ones that revolve around cultural rituals (such as a graduation) or family traditions (such as a big holiday dinner). And try to remember times when you overcame some difficulty, as these memories highlight how you have the

resilience to withstand challenges and can be especially meaningful.

You might make these memories more accessible to you by reaching out to someone who shared the experience with you; looking through a collection of photos or videos from your past; playing some music you associate with a previous part of your life; or visiting a neighbourhood where you used to live. You will be reminded of how your past experiences have shaped who you are now, and this should provide you with a boost to your sense of meaning.

### **Pursue self-transcendent experiences**

Writing in *The New Yorker* in 2015, the author Ceridwen Dovey called a transcendent experience ‘that elusive state in which the distance between the self and the universe shrinks.’ When someone has a self-transcendent experience, they feel that they are connected to something much larger than themselves. In these states, people typically become less self-centred, and many of their concerns are temporarily diminished. These experiences commonly lead people to feel a sense of

awe. Time seems to slow down and their attention becomes focused on the present. Self-transcendent experiences can provide powerful boosts to your sense of meaning and, although the experiences may be relatively brief, they can be highly memorable.

Some common gateways to self-transcendent experiences include:

- *Religious and spiritual rituals*, which frequently combine symbolism with emotionally evocative music, chanting and communal participation to elicit a sense of sacredness and connection. You might step up your participation in any such rituals that have already been a part of your own religious or spiritual life, or seek out new opportunities to participate in such rituals.
- *Mindfulness meditation*, in which you develop the ability to observe your thoughts and feelings as temporary experiences. Practising meditation enhances your awareness of the present moment, which distances you from events that are causing anxiety and stress, and helps you to achieve a state of self-transcendence. (See the Links & Books section below for some tools to help you get started.)
- *Psychedelic drugs*, such as psilocybin, LSD, MDMA or ayahuasca; there has been a sharp growth in interest in using these as a means to deliver

transcendent experiences. While these drugs are illegal in most countries, and there is risk in using them without appropriate supervision, researchers are exploring the potential benefits of these substances, particularly for therapeutic purposes. Studies have also [found](#) that people who ingest these substances often report feeling greater authenticity, self-insight, connection to others, and meaning in life. Researchers strongly recommend that anyone who is using these substances do so under the watchful guidance of a well-qualified therapist or guide, to increase the likelihood that they will have a beneficial and [safe experience](#).

- *Contact with nature* often elicits feelings of awe, which can make your life feel more meaningful. You might find transcendent experiences in beholding a dramatic sunset, a vast mountain range or the crash of ocean waves. In an expansive natural environment, you are likely to have the sense that you are connected to something much larger than yourself. Even a short [nature walk](#) can increase wellbeing, especially if you pause to really appreciate the vastness of the world around you. But you can increase the chances of having an [awe-inspiring experience](#) if you visit a dramatic landscape of the sort that you rarely get to see.

Combine your pursuit of self-transcendent experiences and use of existential exercises with your efforts to shore up your foundation of meaning, working to deepen the connections in those domains where you feel you're lacking. Together, these strategies can help you build a life that is richer in meaning than it was before – one that feels more purposeful, makes more sense, and provides the feeling that what you are doing really matters. With such an outlook, you'll be better prepared to confront the trying times that so many of us are living through.