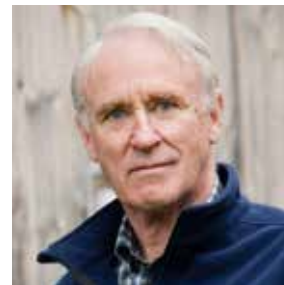


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose in the Encore Years: Shaping Lives of Meaning and Contribution



Research Team

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About the Pathways to Encore Purpose Project

The Stanford University-led study described in this report is part of a collaboration between researchers at the Stanford Center on Adolescence at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education and Encore.org. The project has two interconnected aims: to better understand the nature and determinants of purposeful living in the “encore” (post-midlife) years and to use those insights to enable organizations to improve the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of programs that support purposeful aging in widely diverse segments of the population.

The project begins from the assumption that during the productive, active years beyond midlife — the encore years — individuals have the potential to adapt, renew or create lives in which their well-being is grounded in pursuits that are highly meaningful to them while also contributing to the well-being of others, their communities and the wider world.

This study, Purpose in the Encore Years, aims to better understand the nature and implications of purpose for those in their encore years. With a more complete picture of the diversity of encore-stage adults, the authors hope that professionals and organizations will be better able to serve and engage this population.

About the Stanford Center on Adolescence, Stanford University Graduate School of Education

The Stanford Center on Adolescence (COA) is a scholarly research center that aims to promote the well-being of young people growing up in today's world and to illuminate the lifespan development of qualities, such as purpose, that emerge early in life and continue to evolve throughout adulthood. The COA pursues its mission through scholarly research that can provide information and guidance for parenting, educational practice, and vocational training. A primary focus for the COA is the development of purpose during adolescence and beyond.

About Encore.org

Encore.org is an innovation hub that taps the talent of the 50+ population as a force for good.

Acknowledgements

The members of the research team are grateful for the time given to this project by our participants, without whom we could never have done the research. We would like to especially thank those participants who took part in the interviews and opened up their worlds to us.

Our deepest appreciation goes to the John Templeton Foundation for providing grant support to Stanford University for the Pathways to Encore Purpose project.

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FOREWORD

By Marc Freedman

John Gardner became a professor in public service at Stanford in 1989, after a long and distinguished career that included winning the Presidential Medal of Freedom, serving as President of the Carnegie Corporation, founding Common Cause, and leading the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare during the heart of the Great Society years.

While at Stanford, John — whom I was lucky enough to call my mentor — helped me create Encore.org and co-found Experience Corps, a program to mobilize the time, talent and experience of older Americans to revitalize their communities, provide purpose in their later years, and help young people succeed.

In John's later years, as age and illness began to weigh heavily on him, he took a piece of construction paper, neatly folded it into a square, then inscribed a single word on it — *purpose* — before taping it to the wall above his desk. The touchstone helped him get through his last year of life, his grandson told me. It helped him stay focused on what mattered most.

John would be thrilled to know that Stanford and Encore.org have collaborated on this study of purpose in the encore years.

As researchers, innovators and organizers, we set out to learn more about what purpose looks like for people over 50 today. We found that purpose shapes people's lives — without regard for age, income, health status or geography — in powerful ways, fostering optimism and well-being, and supporting robust engagement with a full array of life goals.

“True happiness involves the full use of one's power and talents.” — John Gardner

What we learned affirms our belief in the power of the years beyond midlife, deepens our commitment to channeling this windfall of human talent to improve communities, and strengthens our resolve to ensure that older generations leave a better world for younger ones.

We learned, too, that we must keep asking questions if we are to succeed in building a movement to tap the talent of the 50+ population as a force for good. How can we reach all who want and need to make a difference? How can we encourage those who may not be strongly motivated by purpose beyond the self to give it a try? What changes and innovations might increase the movement's size, breadth and impact? Insights and answers can be found in the ensuing pages.

In our complex world, it's a simple truth that those beyond midlife have a great deal to contribute to society. Our challenge — as John would have surely agreed — is to make it easier for them to follow the purposeful path. So much — in our own lives and the lives of future generations — depends on it.

*Marc Freedman is the president and CEO of Encore.org and the author, most recently, of *The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife*.*

What role does purpose play in the lives of people 50+? And what might the answer mean for people interested in how the United States is aging?

“Pathways to Encore Purpose,” a national study of purpose beyond the self among a representative sample of adults age 50-92, examined life goals, prosocial values and behaviors, perspectives on the progression to later life, and prevalence of purpose in the post-midlife or encore years. The study was conducted by a research team at Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education in collaboration with a team at Encore.org. The teams worked together to make the study’s results accessible and useful to the general public and to organizations and individual practitioners that serve older populations.

Defining Purpose

The study’s authors define purpose as a **sustained commitment to goals that are meaningful to the self** and that also **contribute in some way to the common good**, to something larger than or beyond the self. Throughout this report, “purposeful” refers to people who meet this specific definition of purpose beyond the self; “non-purposeful” refers to people who do not meet this definition.

A growing body of evidence indicates that purpose is associated with academic achievement, vocational success, energy, resilience, and psychological and physical health throughout the lifespan. Purpose can be found in family, work, faith, and other important life missions.

Findings

Based on nearly 1,200 survey responses and 102 one-hour interviews, this mixed-methods¹ study found that:

1. **The majority of older adults exhibit high levels of prosocial values and behaviors**, such as helping and caring for others, caring for nature and the environment, endorsing equal treatment for all, and seeking to understand people who are different from themselves.
2. **Nearly a third of older adults in the United States (31 percent) exhibit purpose beyond the self** – that is, they identify, prioritize, adopt and actively pursue goals that are both personally meaningful and contribute to the greater good. These commitments are central to these older adults’ identity and sense of meaning in life. Extrapolating to the population as a whole, that’s more than **34 million people** dedicating themselves to making their corner of the world a better place.
3. **Purpose is an equal-opportunity pursuit.** The prevalence of purposeful living does not vary significantly across age, income, health status or geography. The one meaningful difference is that the prevalence of purpose was higher among people of color than among whites. Overall, however, what stands out is that purpose is available to all.

¹ **Mixed methods** research involves collecting, analyzing and integrating quantitative and qualitative data on the same respondents. In this case, information was collected through a survey and a semi-structured interview.

4. **Purposeful living is not a zero-sum game.** Purposeful living does not crowd out other pleasures and personal goals. Contrary to expectations, people who place a high priority on beyond-the-self goals simultaneously endorse views of later life that embrace self-oriented activities such as continued learning, leisure and the like — even more so than people who aren't engaged with purposeful goals.
5. **People who are purposeful have a positive outlook on life.** The great majority (94 percent) of those interviewed who were purposeful share a trait we call “positivity,” which refers to joy, hopefulness, optimism and other related emotions. Though many people in this group were dealing with serious life problems — such as poverty, poor health, family difficulties and bereavement — they emphasized the joy and satisfaction they experience in their lives, especially in their beyond-the-self engagements.
6. **Freedom is important to purposeful and non-purposeful people in different ways.** In the interview analyses comparing purposeful and non-purposeful adults, half of each group said that a significant source of their well-being was their appreciation of the freedom they were experiencing at this time in their lives. The non-purposeful mostly meant freedom from burdensome responsibilities like paid work and childrearing. The purposeful highlighted the ways they used their freedom for the benefit of all; they loved having the freedom to get more involved beyond the self.

The first four findings are supported by the nationally representative survey data. The last two are based primarily on the interviews. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data give us a first-ever picture of how purpose beyond the self looks and functions among older adults.

The Value of Purpose

Historically, researchers and practitioners have used the term “purpose” to convey a sense of meaning or direction. In this study, we use the term to refer specifically to a multidimensional construct of “purpose beyond the self,” defined as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self.”¹

Purposeful individuals are among the world's most valuable assets in addressing social issues and making the world a better place.

This study's criteria for purpose set a high bar. Those who are purposeful place at the top of their priorities goals that are both meaningful to them and that are intended to contribute to something larger. They are actively engaged in pursuing those goals and plan to keep doing so. These commitments are central to their lives and their sense of who they are.

This means that purposeful individuals are among the world's most valuable assets in addressing social issues and making the world a better place. They often take leadership, they show persistence, love what they do, and are motivated by more than self-interest. Due in part to their purpose in life, they not only contribute, they also find life especially satisfying.

Conclusion

This study is good news for older adults as well as for the organizations that might recruit them into paid and unpaid roles. Growing evidence shows that purpose, generativity (the desire to nurture younger generations), and practices like volunteering have robust positive effects for older adults, including positive outcomes on mental and physical health. Further, goals related to positive human relationships, social contribution and spirituality are more closely associated with positive well-being than goals like achievement, power and material success.

To increase community service opportunities for people who have beyond-the-self goals but may not be fully engaged in pursuing them, the authors suggest paying attention to transition points in the lives of people 50+, to their specific interests, and to potential barriers to engagement — for example, the cost of transportation, or juggling multiple work and caregiving roles.

Our research demonstrates the power of purpose in the lives of older adults and underscores the desire of this growing population to contribute to the well-being of others in their community and the wider world.