

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

Six Key Findings: Applied Research Briefs



The Pathways to Encore Purpose (PEP) project is a collaboration between the Stanford Graduate School of Education's Center on Adolescence and Encore.org. The research examined older adults' life goals, prosocial values and behaviors, perspectives on the progression to later life, and prevalence of purpose in their post-midlife, or encore, years.

The Stanford University research team conducted a nationally representative survey of nearly 1,200 adults, ages 50-90, followed by 102 in-depth interviews to determine what role "purpose" plays in their lives. 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.

This series of applied research briefs highlights each of the the six major findings from Stanford's research, with a focus on what they might mean for practitioners. All six findings are listed on the next page. 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. For more information and all six research briefs, visit encore.org/research/purpose.



The Six Findings

BRIEF #1: Help Wanted? Ask Someone 50+

Finding: 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 them.

BRIEF #2: Beyond the Self: 34 Million Older Adults Committed to Common Good

Finding: 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.

BRIEF #3: Purpose is for Everyone

Finding: Purpose is an equal-opportunity pursuit. The prevalence of purposeful living does not vary significantly across 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 common to all.

BRIEF #4: Living with Purpose in the Encore Years: Not a Zero Sum Game

Finding: Purposeful living is not a zero-sum game. Purposeful living does not crowd out other pleasures and personal goals. People who place a high priority on beyond-the-self goals often consider more self-oriented goals – travel, family, friends, learning – equally important in their lives.

BRIEF #5: Positive Outlook

Finding: People who are purposeful have a positive outlook on life. The great majority (94 percent) of those interviewed who were unambiguously 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.

BRIEF #6: Freedom and Flexibility Matter

Finding: 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 interviewees mostly described freedom from burdensome responsibilities like paid work and childrearing. The purposeful ones highlighted the ways they used their freedom for the benefit of all; they loved having the freedom to get more involved beyond the self.