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How does strong life purpose improve decision-making?

Purpose is a hot scientific topic today in psychology. Benefits of strong purpose include greater resilience, enhanced emotion regulation, and better relationships. But purpose affects more than just psychological well-being. Research shows that having a strong purpose improves physical health and engagement in healthy behaviors.

What's brand new? In this research dose, we review original research exploring how strong purpose improves decision-making, with implications for both health coaching and leadership coaching.

Featured Article

Purpose in Life and Conflict-Related Neural Responses During Health Decision-Making. Kang, Strecher, Kim, Falk. (2019) Health Psychology.

Does a strong life purpose improve physical health?

Having a strong sense of purpose is defined by the authors as “having a set of goals based on one’s core values.” They summarize a large body of research showing that a strong sense of purpose in life is associated with reduced risk of stroke, cardiovascular events, cognitive impairment, and overall mortality risk, while enhancing glucose metabolism and the ability of the body to withstand wear and tear caused by stress (referred to as allostatic load). Research also shows that people with values-based goals and purpose engage more in healthy behaviors, including exercising more and taking their medications as prescribed. Their health matters because it serves their pursuit of valued goals. Importantly, sedentary or overweight people with a stronger sense of purpose are also more receptive to messages describing the health benefits of physical activity.

How does strong purpose make healthy behavior change easier?

Often people who are living an unhealthy lifestyle and at high risk for adverse health events are defensive or resistant to change because they deal with conflicting motivations – the desire for self-improvement and the desire to maintain self-worth by denying the value of the healthy behavior. They may seem indifferent to healthy behavior in order to sustain a positive self-review, hiding their inner conflict. These inner conflicts can arise when people are unclear about their core values and goals, which bring clearer direction to one’s choices, reducing decisional conflict.

The authors hypothesize that people with strong purpose are more open to messages about the benefits of exercise because purpose reduces decisional conflict. To test their hypothesis, the authors use brain imaging to capture reactions to health messages, paying particular attention to the regions of the brain that are active in decisional conflict.

Purpose alters brain activity and reduces decisional conflict

In this study of 220 sedentary and overweight adults, the researchers tested whether those with a stronger life purpose were more likely to endorse positive health messages on physical activity. The participants listened to 30

messages (focused on risks, reasons, and strategies) and rated the degree that they agreed with the messages and were confident that they could do what the message recommended. While participants listened to the messages, the researchers used brain scans of multiple regions involved in neural processing of internal conflicts to learn whether the strong life purpose correlated with a lower level of activity in the brain regions involved in decisional conflict, a better test than self-reports of decisional conflict.

The study revealed that people with greater purpose showed less activity in the brain regions involved in conflict processing during health decision-making, which in turn predicted greater endorsement of self-relevant health advice. The effect of purpose in life was stronger when participants were exposed to “how” messages than “why” messages. The broader “why” provided by life purpose may provide motivation and openness to “how” messages. Greater purpose may reduce internal conflicts or negative self-protective responses to health messages.

What’s in it for coaches?

Coaches are uniquely positioned to apply science-based processes that can help people connect with their values and develop visions and goals that enhance meaning and purpose:

Bridge Physical and Psychological Well-Being: Encouraging clients to articulate their life purpose or larger goals and values can directly impact their well-being, both professional and physical; psychological and physical well-being are connected and synergistic with one another.

Overcome Decisional Conflict with Purpose: Ambivalence and decisional conflict can be a key roadblock to achieving goals, both health and non-health related. Clarifying life purpose has the potential to reduce ambivalence and inertia in the change process.

Strengthen Purpose by Clearly Articulating it: To help clarify and strengthen life purpose and to put more immediate professional and personal goals in perspective, it can be helpful to write out a mission statement that articulates and connects one’s larger goals and values.

To Emphasize Purpose, Use Evidence-Based Approaches: Engage in a number of evidence-based coaching practices to increase a sense of purpose, including motivational interviewing (strengthening motivation), acceptance and commitment coaching (strengthening purpose), or

intentional change theory (developing a positive vision and meaning for change). (Search the [IOC member library](#) for videos and articles on all three processes.)

Takeaway?

The field of neuroscience has delivered an underpinning to Nietzsche's assertion: *"S/he who has a why to live can bear almost any how."*

How cool is that!

The Institute of Coaching
Coach with science in mind
