Have You Found Meaning in Life? Answer Determines Health and Well-Being

BY MICHELLE BURBAKER

Over the past three decades, meaning in life has emerged as an important question in medical research, especially in the context of an aging population. A recent study by researchers at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine found that the presence of and search for meaning in life are important for health and well-being, though the relationships differ in adults younger and older than age sixty.

“Many think about the meaning and purpose in life from a philosophical perspective, but meaning in life is associated with better health, wellness, and perhaps longevity,” said Dr. Jeste. “As you start to get into your thirties, forties, and fifties, you have more established relationships, maybe you are married and have a family, and you’re settled in a career. The search decreases and the meaning in life increases.”

“After age sixty, things begin to change. People retire from their job and start to lose their identity. They start to develop health issues and some of their friends and family begin to pass away. They start searching for the meaning in life again because the meaning they once had has changed.”

The study, published online in the December 2019, edition of the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, found the presence of meaning in life is associated with better physical and mental well-being, while the search for meaning in life may be associated with worse mental well-being and cognitive functioning. “When you find more meaning in life, you become more contented, whereas if you don’t have a purpose in life and are searching for it unsuccessfully, you will feel much more stressed out,” said Dr. Jeste.

The results also showed that the presence of meaning in life exhibited an inverted U-shaped relationship with age, while the search for meaning in life showed a U-shaped relationship with age. The researchers found that age sixty is when the presence of meaning in life peaks and the search for meaning of life was at its lowest point.

“When you are young, like in your twenties, you are unsure about your career, a life partner, and who you are as a person. You are searching for meaning in life,” said Dr. Jeste. “As you start to get into your thirties, forties, and fifties, you have more established relationships, maybe you are married and have a family, and you’re settled in a career. The search decreases and the meaning in life increases.”

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The three-year, cross-sectional study examined data from 1,042 adults, ages twenty-one to 100 plus, who were part of the Successful Aging Evaluation (SAFE)—a multi-cohort study of senior residents living in San Diego County. The presence and search for meaning in life were assessed with interviews, including a meaning in life questionnaire where participants were asked to rate items, such as...
The lecture is Vaccine, Loneliness: Using Wisdom as Behavioral aging.ucsd.edu

If you missed our special November lecture, presented by Dilip, V. Jeste, MD, senior psychiatrist at the San Diego VA and associate dean for healthy aging and senior care and director of the Center of Healthy Aging at UC San Diego.

As societal stresses have increased, loneliness has become an epidemic, the risk factors, helpful interventions, and how we can harness wisdom for compassion, self-regulation, and more. We can watch this video and our other public lectures at www.ucsd.tv/stein.

MARCH’S LECTURE
With aging, sleep patterns tend to change. However, disturbed sleep, waking up too early, and other symptoms of insomnia are not a part of normal, healthy aging. A good night’s sleep is important to your physical and emotional health at any age. Older adults who don’t sleep well are more likely to suffer from depression and attention and memory problems, and experience more nighttime falls. Learn how to improve the quality of your sleep from Elle Lee, MD, assistant professor of psychiatry at UC San Diego and a staff psychiatrist at the San Diego VA Healthcare System.

Dr. Lee’s research focuses on the inflammatory mediators of sleep disturbances in older adults with serious mental illnesses. Dr. Lee is the principal investigator of a K23 Career Development Award from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), a NARSAD Young Investigator Grant from the Brain and Behavior Research Foundation, as well as several grants from the VISN 22 Mental Illness Research, Education, and Clinical Center, and the UC San Diego Atman Clinical and Translational Research Institute.

**Meet This Month’s Successful Ager: Barbara Peters**

**BARBARA PETERS**

Barbara Peters, now in her eighties, is one of the oldest ballerinas in the world. She recently received the top Grade 8 award from the Royal Academy of Dance, a UK-based examination board specializing in dance education and training.

Peters started dancing when she was a little girl and achieved Grade 5 in the Royal Academy of Dance at twelve. She devoted her career to teaching and only three years ago she decided to return to her ballet lessons to pick up where she left off and complete the three remaining grades. She took the exam on the same day that her eleven-year-old granddaughter, Mia, passed her Grade Two. It was the first time in the institution’s history when a grandmother and granddaughter took the test together.

For the exam, Peters was performing for fifty minutes, which included four solo dances and presenting her skills at the bar.

She received a pass rate of seventy-three percent, with no concession made for her age. The mother of three and grandmother of eight, Peters was considering retirement twenty years ago when her daughter Claire asked her to help her open a preschool dance academy in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where they live. The daughter of a mechanic and domestic servant, Peters has always worked, including as a conductor on the buses to put herself through school, and she was happy to take up a new challenge.

As far as successful aging is concerned, Peters claims that exercising regularly, and a healthy diet is key to good health as we grow older. She practices what she preaches almost every day dancing and teaching in the studio. Many older adults are trying to follow her example during her Silver Swans classes. They claim that it not only helps with their posture and muscles, but is a great memory booster as well.

Resilience is another trait that is important for Peters. When her husband passed away from a brain tumor nine years ago, she was struggling to find meaning in her life again. What helped her rebound after the loss was her passion for dance. “Dancing is my life. I have no plans to hang up my dancing shoes just yet,” said Peters.

**Have You Found Meaning in Life? continued from page 1**

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To answer the question that you are making today … and tomorrow!

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**ASSESSMENT TOOL**

MSQ-20 Online

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**SUCCESSFUL AGERS IN ACTION**

**Tune Into UCSD-TV!**

If you missed our special November lecture, The Modern Epidemic of Loneliness: Using Behavior as Vaccine, a video of it is available online at UCSD-TV: www.ucsd.tv/search-details. Watch this video and our other successful aging’s submissions as we are seeking to discover evidence-based answers to some of life’s most profound questions.

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