

Finding Purpose in Life

By Thurmon Thomas, LAMFT

Trick question: What is the first thing you do when you are ready to put together a puzzle? Most say you start by arranging the pieces or putting the corners and edges together. While these seem like the obvious answers, there is actually a very critical step that comes before these. The first step in putting together a puzzle is looking at the picture on the box. Most people don't acknowledge this step because it is so intuitive, but can you imagine how difficult it would be to put a large puzzle together without the picture?

During my clinical work in residential treatment for youth I would use this principle to teach my clients the importance of having a plan, or vision for the future. In a group setting I would split the group in two teams and give each team an identical puzzle. One team would get the lid/picture for reference and the other team would not. I would

then start a timer to see which team could assemble their puzzle the quickest. You can imagine how it played out. The team with the picture would get organized immediately and would then assign roles to the team members. The picture gave them clear direction as to what their task entailed. The team without the lid typically broke into chaos. There was little organization and clear frustration on the faces of the team members. Obviously, the team with the picture always won the contest.

Life is similar to this exercise – without a clear vision or picture of what you want your life to look like it can feel quite chaotic and frustrating. The vision, or picture I am referring to is life purpose. Life purpose is accomplishing the things you value most in life. The trouble is many of us aren't really sure what we value most, at least not in great detail. So often, I hear from my clients that they really don't know what their place in life is – they feel lost and without any clear direction for the future. This is especially true for my adolescent AND empty nester clients. During these stages of life, the picture for the future can be difficult to define. The results of not having a clear life purpose or vision are low motivation, anxiety, and impulsivity.

Many adults struggle with this concept because they are living a life purpose that is controlled or defined by outside influences. It is common for me to hear people say that their children are their life purpose, or their career is their life purpose. The trouble with these



About the Author

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statements is that children grow up and leave, and careers eventually come to an end. Then what? It may be more helpful to change these statements slightly to: being a good parent is my life purpose, or the things I do in my career are my life purpose. Then, regardless of what your children do, or whether or not you are employed, you can still fulfil those purposes. Life purpose should be unique to you as an individual – no outside influence should have control over your personally defined life purpose.

How do I define and live a life of purpose? First, you need to determine what you value most in life. I encourage people to think about how they want to be remembered by others after they are gone. This exercise can help you understand what is truly most important to you. There are other resources such as values worksheets, and personality testing which can also help further define what is most important to you. Second, evaluate the things you are currently doing in life. Do your behaviors line up with your life purpose? Third, set some goals to DO things that will help you accomplish the things you value most in life. For example, if helping others is important to you, then you may consider volunteering for community service. If being creative is important to you then you may consider artwork, music, or starting a new company. If being a good parent is important to you then you may consider skipping that extra work meeting and spending more time with your children.

As you live a life of purpose you will find your motivation and sense of fulfillment increase dramatically. You will be able to lay down at night and feel that you have accomplished what you are on this earth to do. If you need some help defining and living your life purpose, reach out to our office and we can guide you through the process. Greater happiness and fulfillment await!