



# Unveiling the Health Benefits of Life Purpose

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Vice President of Research and Academic Excellence, Provost

# Introduction to Life Purpose

A life purpose is a person's central motivating aims or vision for their life.

It's a unique set of goals that can guide a person's life decisions, shape their behavior, and create a sense of meaning.



A top-down photograph showing a large number of hands of various skin tones and ages, all reaching towards the center and overlapping to form a dense circle. The hands are resting on a dark, possibly black, surface. The lighting is even, highlighting the texture of the skin and the variety of hand shapes and sizes. The overall composition is circular and symmetrical, suggesting unity and collective effort.

## Why is life purpose important?

- Life is suffering and malevolence, we are going to be tested that is for sure, life will take you out, make no mistake about it. If a person has a sustaining meaning they have a better chance to overcome the situation and gain personal growth.



Sense of meaning is not a rational phenomenon, it is more like a mystical experience.



Do you have a life purpose?



# Why do people lack purpose?

- Leave a job
  - Military – end of tour
  - Retirement
  - Laid off
- Divorce
- Children leave the home
- Social isolation
- Serious medical diagnosis
- Death of a loved one

# Cross-pathology with purposelessness

- Deficiencies in generating purpose;
- Loss of purpose due to traumatic events such as catastrophic illnesses or bereavements;
- Conflicts due to crossed purposes; and
- Maladaptive purposes, such as life-limiting single-minded goals, dominating others, or exacting revenge



# Habits of people who lack purpose



<https://forwardfrom50.com/habits-of-people-without-purpose/>



They abuse the snooze button.



They wear pajamas all day.



Personal hygiene is not a must. Not taking a shower, brushing teeth and getting dressed are habits of purposeless people.



They go on streaming sprees. Watching television all day, every day is just a way to pass time. It helps nobody and accomplishes nothing.



They don't make it past Chapter 1.



They don't see projects through to completion.



They are constantly adding to the online shopping cart.



They take lots of naps.





# Epidemic of Purposelessness

- Most Americans (57%) say they wonder, “How can I find more meaning and purpose in my life?” at least monthly,
- with more than 1 in 5 saying they consider the question daily (21%) or weekly (21%).
- Few (6%) say they think about it yearly.
- Close to 1 in 4 (23%) say they never wonder about finding more meaning and purpose. Another 15% aren’t sure.

<https://research.lifeway.com/2021/04/06/americans-views-of-lifes-meaning-and-purpose-are-changing/>

2021

# The Biggest Problem for Kids Today Isn't Stress, It's Lack of Purpose

Stanford  
research study

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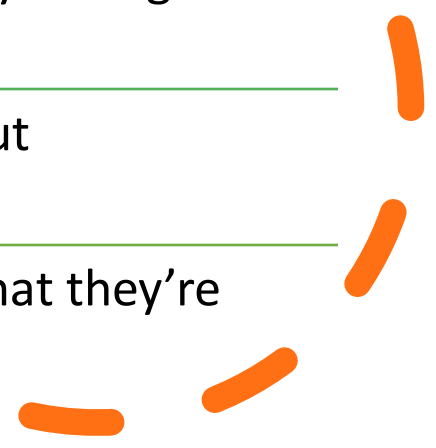
More kids today say they're stressed than 20 years ago.

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High school students are the most stressed out demographic.

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Why? They don't know WHY they're doing what they're doing. It lacks meaning.



# People without life purpose are more likely to:

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- Be less engaged in their life
- Be depressed
- Be lonely

Sutin AR, Luchetti M, Aschwanden D, Lee JH, Sesker AA, Stephan Y, Terracciano A. Sense of purpose in life and concurrent loneliness and risk of incident loneliness: An individual-participant meta-analysis of 135,227 individuals from 36 cohorts. *J Affect Disord.* 2022 Jul 15;309:211-220. doi: 10.1016/j.jad.2022.04.084. Epub 2022 Apr 26. PMID: 35483500; PMCID: PMC9133197.



# Loneliness as a moderator



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Affective Disorders

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jad](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jad)



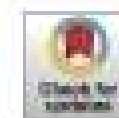
Research paper

**Sense of purpose in life and concurrent loneliness and risk of incident loneliness: An individual-participant meta-analysis of 135,227 individuals from 36 cohorts**

Angelina R. Sutin<sup>a,\*</sup>, Martina Luchetti<sup>a</sup>, Damaris Aschwanden<sup>a</sup>, Ji Hyun Lee<sup>a</sup>,  
Amanda A. Sesker<sup>a</sup>, Yannick Stephan<sup>b</sup>, Antonio Terracciano<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Florida State University College of Medicine, United States

<sup>b</sup> Eurasian, University of Montpellier, France



# About Loneliness

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Loneliness is the subjective experience of the discrepancy between the social connection that one wants and the social connection that one has.

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Often considered as a symptom of depression, loneliness increases risk of depressive symptoms and the development of depression over time.

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Prior to death, loneliness increases risk of chronic disease, including diabetes, hypertension, and Alzheimer's disease and related dementias.

# Loneliness Results

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Higher sense of purpose was associated with lower concurrent loneliness in all samples.

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The association was stronger among participants with severe psychological distress.

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Purpose was associated with lower risk of incident loneliness in longitudinal samples.

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Pattern suggests purpose may have a protective relation against development of loneliness.

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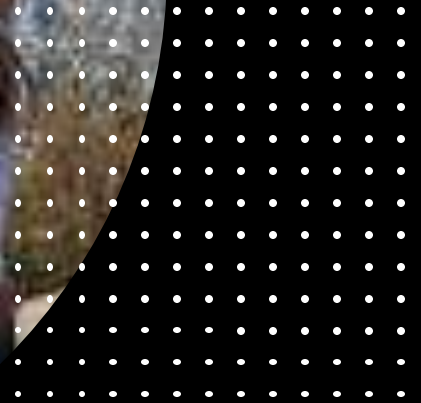
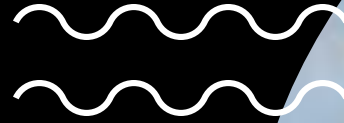
Findings were similar across American samples and samples from other countries.

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Sutin AR, Luchetti M, Aschwanden D, et al. Sense of purpose in life and concurrent loneliness and risk of incident loneliness: An individual-participant meta-analysis of 135,227 individuals from 36 cohorts. *J Affect Disord.* 2022;309:211-220. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2022.04.084

# How do we study life purpose?

Life Engagement Test



# Life Engagement Test

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
There is not enough purpose in my life.					
To me, the things I do are all worthwhile.					
Most of what I do seems trivial and unimportant to me.					
I value my activities a lot.					
I don't care very much about the things I do.					
I have lots of reasons for living.					

Scoring: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree. Reverse code items 1,3, 5 prior to scoring. Sum the six items to get a score.



A photograph of a brick wall at night. A neon sign is mounted on the wall, consisting of white, glowing letters. The sign reads "THIS IS THE SIGN YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR" in four lines. The sign is slightly out of focus, and the background is dark, suggesting an outdoor setting at night.

THIS IS  
THE SIGN  
YOU'VE BEEN  
LOOKING FOR

Does it seem too easy?

# Four Domain Conceptual Model of Life Engagement

Domain	Low	High
Emotional (Affect/Mood)	Negative Affect/Mood, depressed	Positive Affect/Mood, hopeful, happy
Physical (Energy)	Low energy, fatigued, tired	High energy, motivated, productive, energized
Social (Interest)	Low involvement, disengaged, anhedonia, disinterested	Involved, engaged, interested
Cognitive (Alertness/Thinking)	Low arousal, brain fog, slow thinking	High arousal, alert, clarity, attentive, aware

Weiss C, Meehan SR, Brown TM, et al. Effects of adjunctive brexpiprazole on calmness and life engagement in major depressive disorder: post hoc analysis of patient-reported outcomes from clinical trial exit interviews. *J Patient Rep Outcomes*. 2021;5(1):128



Mind-Body-Spirit



# The Connection Between Psychological Well-Being and Physical Health

## Psychological Well-being is:

- A person's mental health and overall functioning
- Characterized by feeling good and functioning effectively

## Is Not:

- The absence of ill-being,
- Normal to experience painful emotions like disappointment, failure, and grief

# Key Links Between Psychological Well-Being and Physical Health

## Mental health problems can lead to physical health conditions

- People with mental health problems are more likely to have preventable physical health conditions, such as heart disease. This can be due to a number of reasons, including genetics, low motivation, and difficulty concentrating.

## Poor mental health can lead to harmful behaviors

- Poor mental health can lead to harmful behaviors that can negatively impact physical health.

## Emotional well-being can improve recovery from physical illness

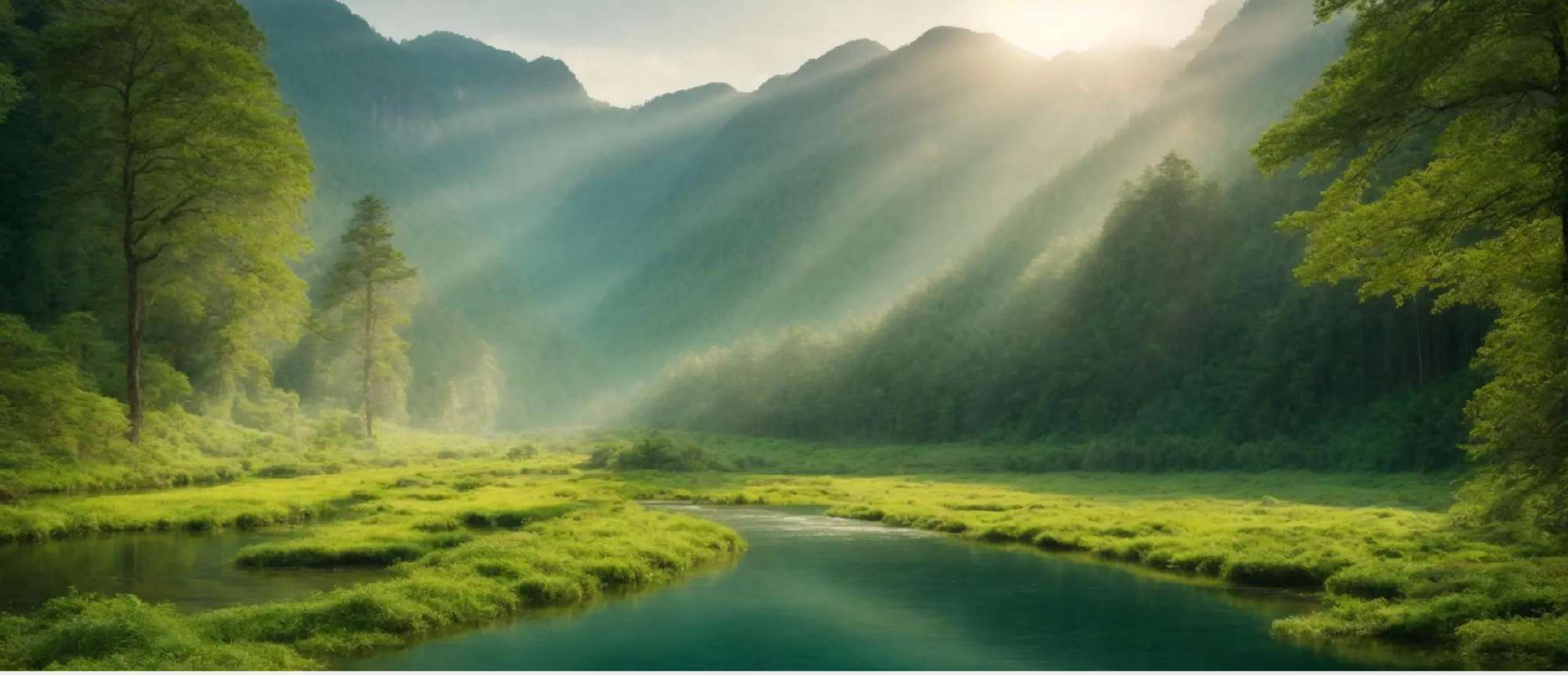
- Higher levels of emotional well-being can improve the prognosis for physical illness.

## Psychological issues can exacerbate existing physical diseases

- Psychological issues like anger, anxiety, and depression can cause or worsen existing physical diseases, such as hypertension and asthma.

## A well-nourished body can support mental well-being

- A body that is fit, free from disease, and well-nourished can provide a solid foundation for mental well-being.



## Why Life Purpose Matters in Health





## HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

*J Appl Gerontol.* Author manuscript; available in PMC 2022 February 01.

Published in final edited form as:

*J Appl Gerontol.* 2022 February ; 41(2): 560–570. doi:10.1177/07334648211027691.

### **Multimorbidity and social participation is moderated by purpose in life and life satisfaction**

Jamie E. Luster, MPH<sup>a</sup>, David Ratz, MS<sup>b</sup>, Melissa Y. Wei, MD, MPH, MS<sup>a,c,d</sup>

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<sup>b</sup>Center for Clinical Management Research, VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

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<sup>d</sup>Division of General Medicine and Health Services Research, University of California, Los Angeles, 1100 Glendon, Suite 900, Los Angeles, CA 90024, USA

# Purpose inversely correlated with morbidity

- Among participants with above average purpose in life (>4.6), social participation score does not decrease with increased MWI.

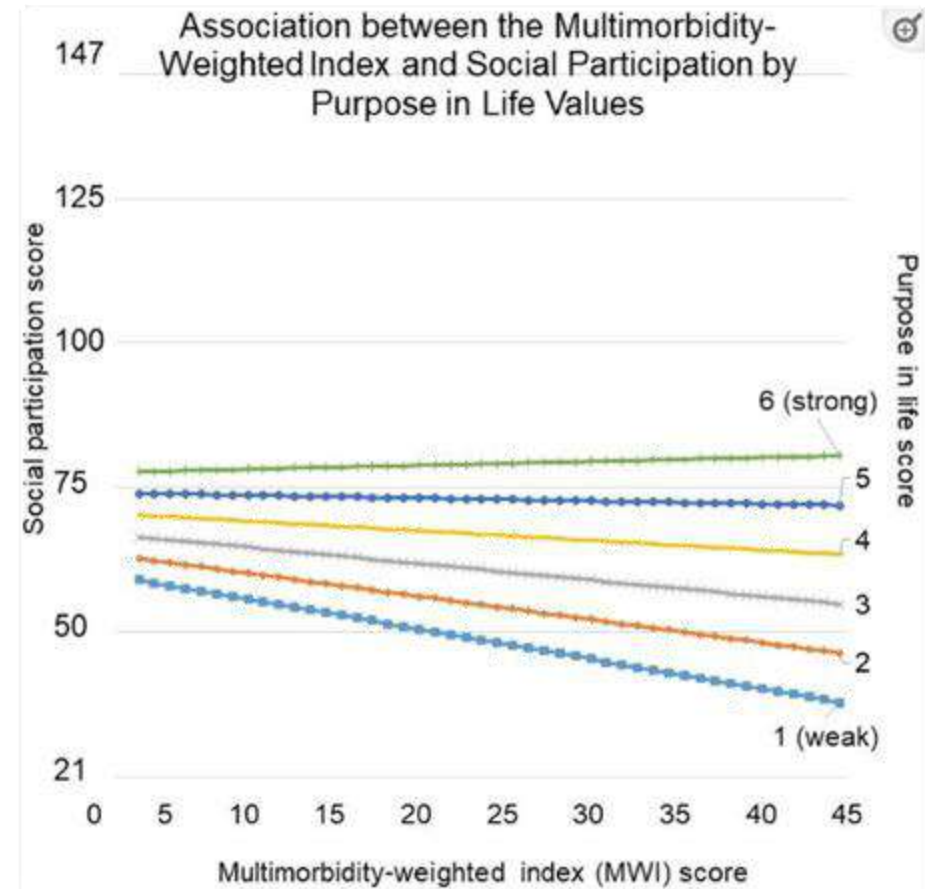


Figure 3

Association between the Multimorbidity-Weighted Index and Social Participation by Purpose in Life Values in the Health and Retirement Study, 2010–2014 and 2012–2016

\*Among participants with above average purpose in life (>4.6), social participation score does not decrease with increased MWI. Among participants with average or below average purpose in life (<=4.6), social participation score is decreased with increased MWI.





# Health Benefits of Life Purpose



# Stress Reduction Through Life Purpose

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Sense of purpose is associated with lower levels of perceived stress, decreased reactivity and secretion of cortisol.



The greatest benefit of having meaning and purpose in life is reflected in shaping the perception of stress.



“Stress is not what  
happens to you,  
but how you react to it.”

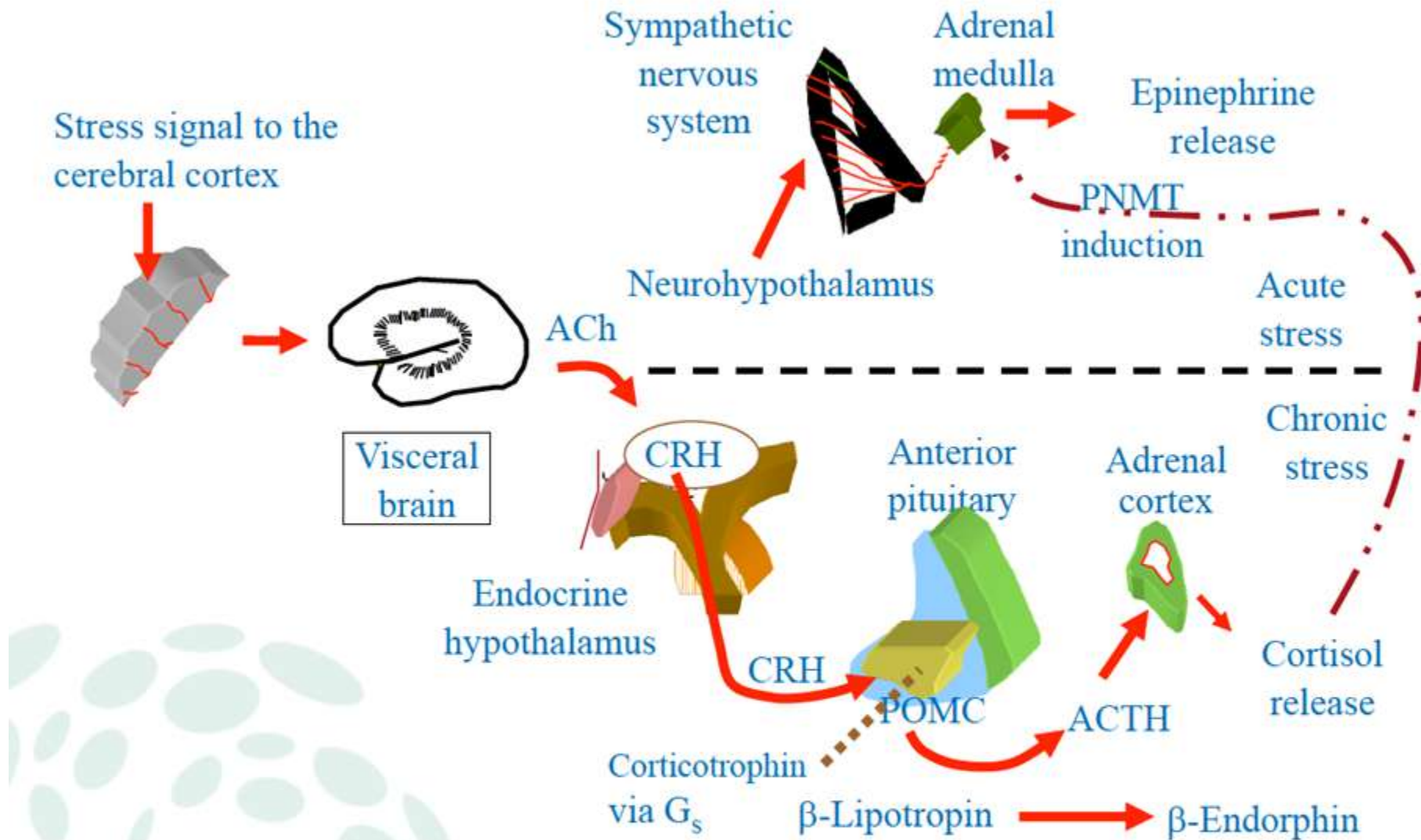
—*Hans Seyle*

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Individuals with a purpose in life have the perception that they can find more solutions to life's problems and obstacles

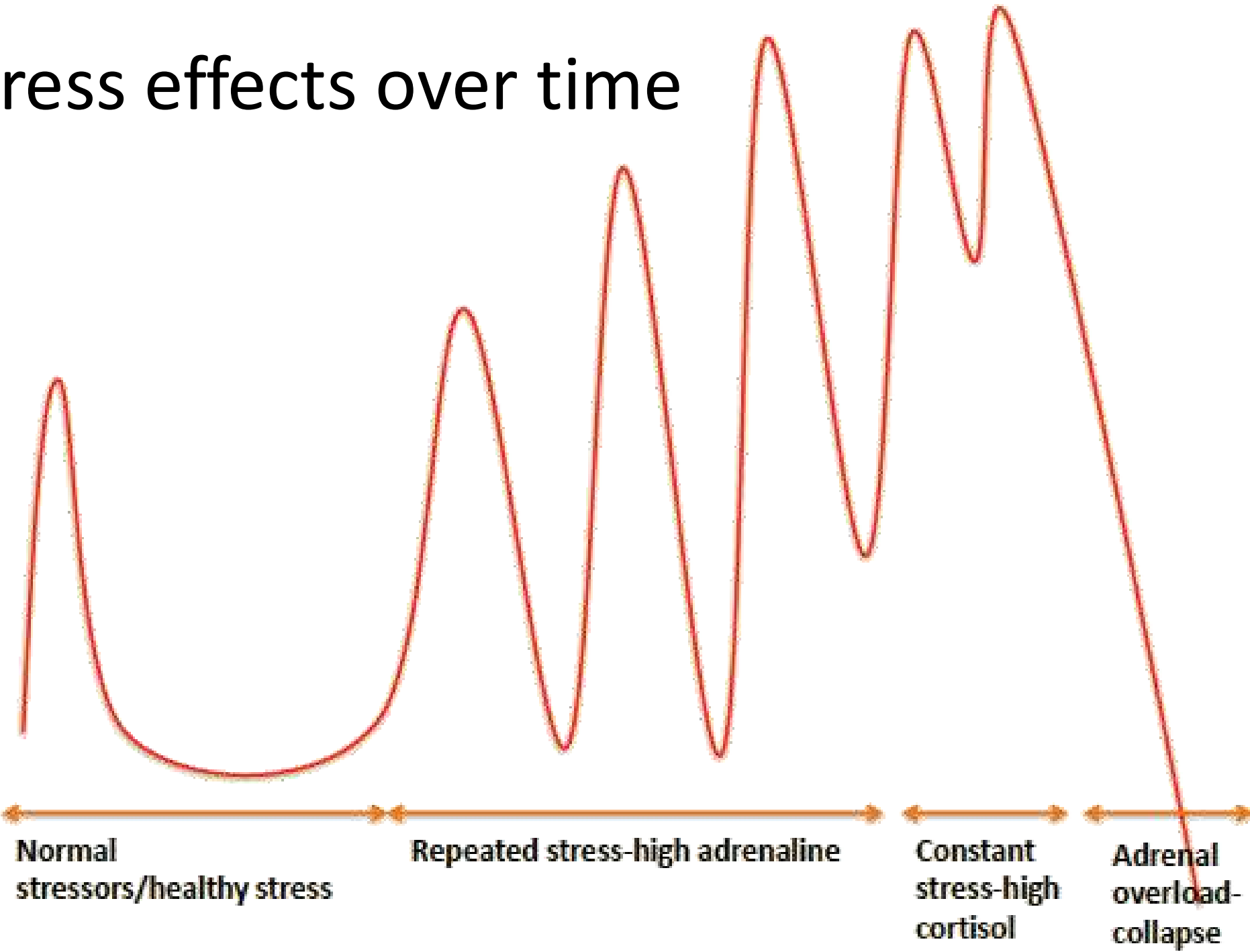


Mulahalilović A, Hasanović M, Pajević I, Jakovljević M. Meaning and the Sense of Meaning in Life from a Health Perspective. *Psychiatr Danub*. 2021;33(Suppl 4):1025-1031.

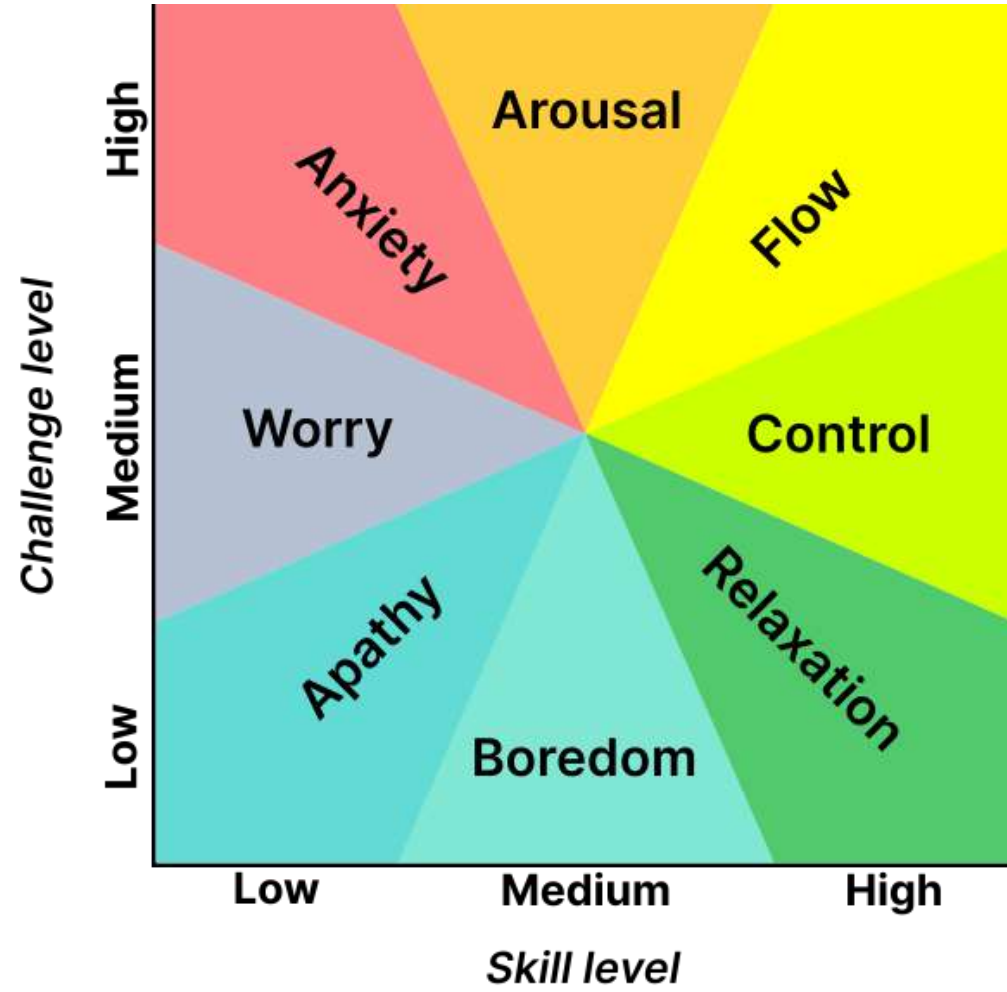


Neuroendocrine Pathways Associated with the Stress Response

# Stress effects over time



Good  
Aspects of  
Stress



# Strength of Stressor Matters

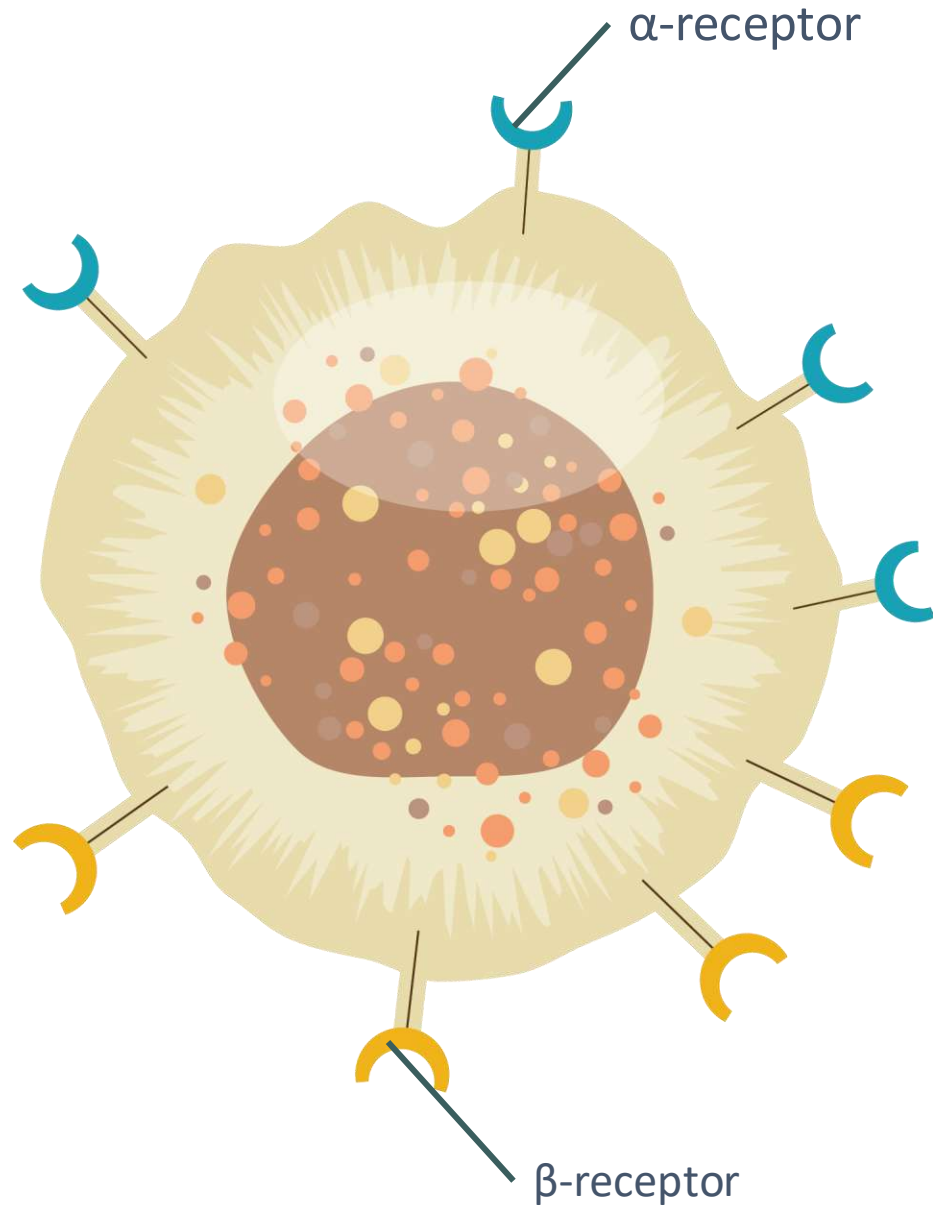
## High stress

- High concentration of stress hormones
- Binds low-affinity receptors

## Moderate low stress

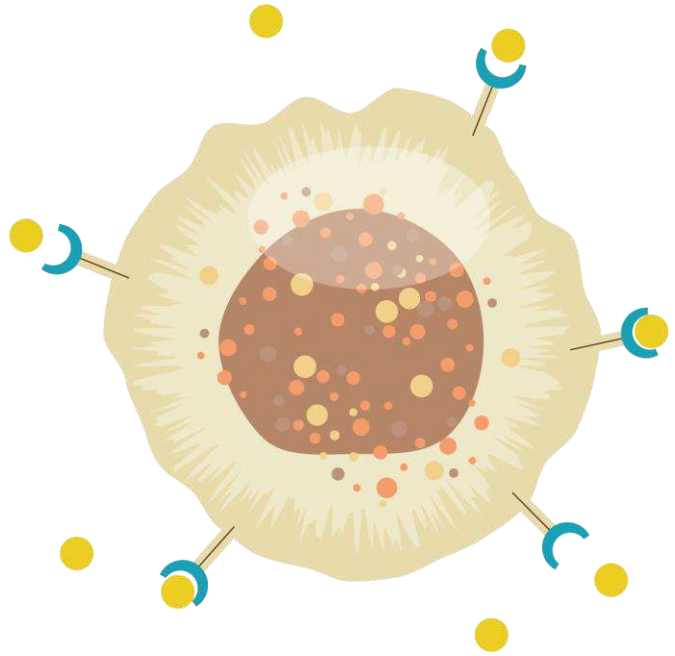
- Lower concentration of stress hormones
- Bind high-affinity receptors





Macrophages  
express both  
 $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  adrenergic  
receptors

Both bind to epinephrine—  
but with different affinity



$\alpha$  receptors are

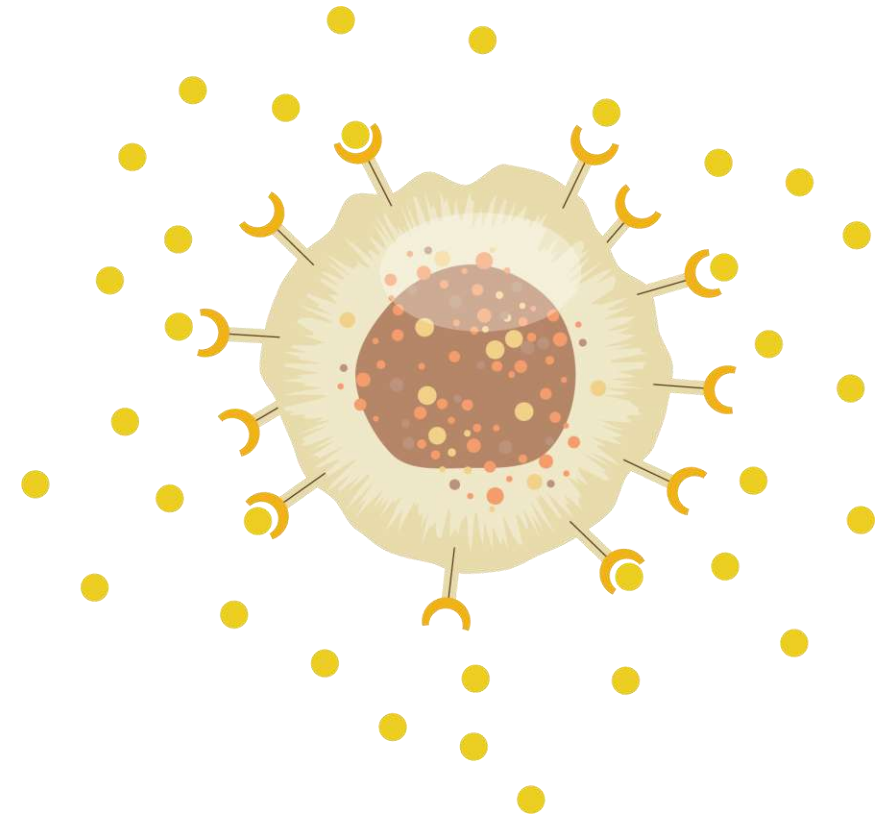
- high affinity

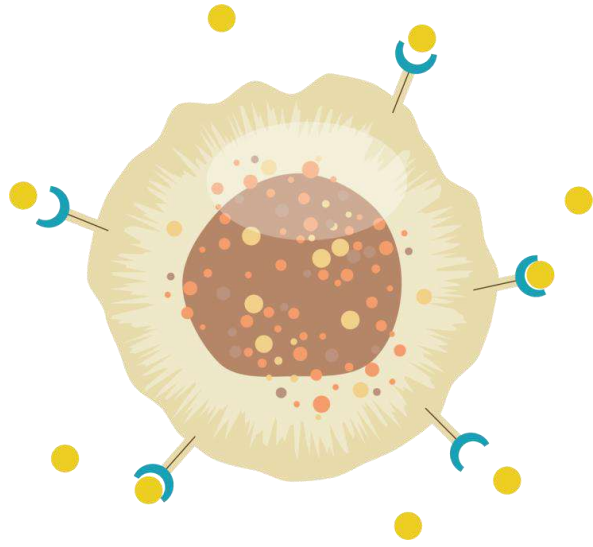
Bind low concentrations of epi

$\beta$  receptors are

low affinity

Bind high concentrations of epi





$\alpha$  receptors are  
high affinity

Bind low concentrations of epi

Low stress—bind  $\alpha$ -receptor

Results upon infection:

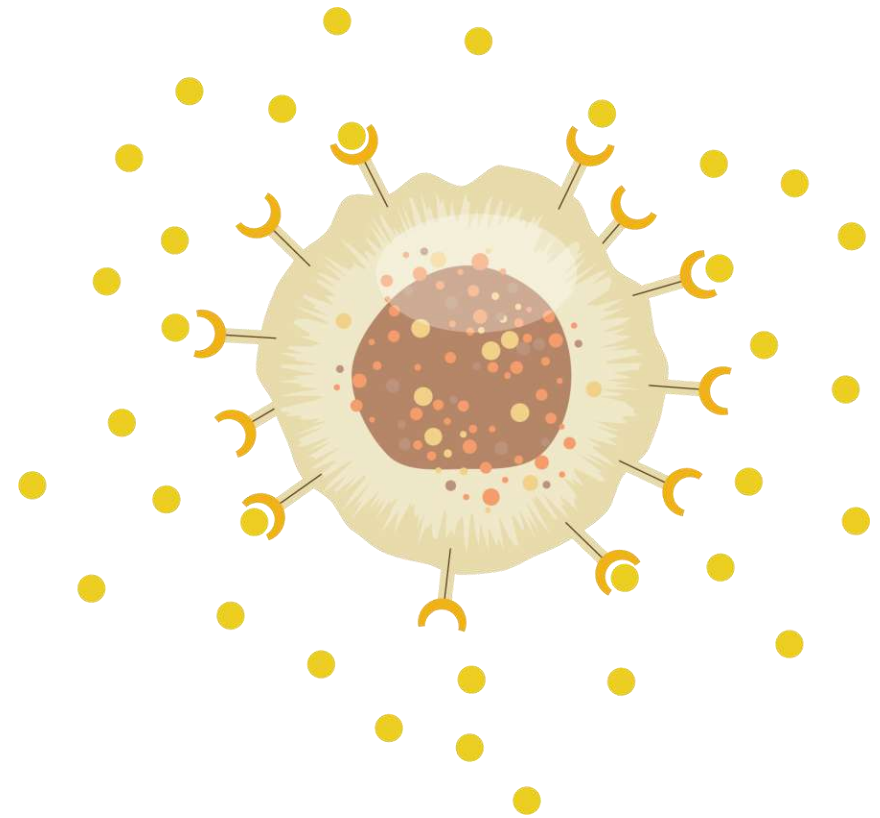
- Increases phagocytosis
- Increases TNFa
- Increases IL-6

# High Stress—Bind $\beta$ -Receptor

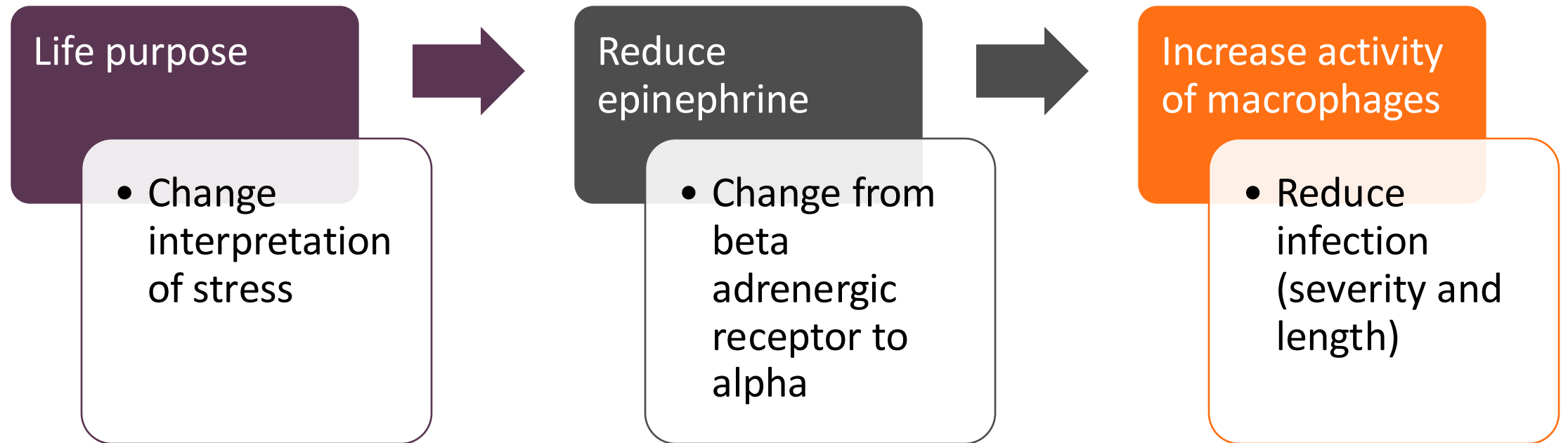
Results upon infection:

- Decreases phagocytosis
- Decreases antigen processing and presentation
- Decreases production of IL-12

$\beta$  receptors are  
low affinity  
Bind high concentrations of epi



# Why Mind-Body Therapies work



# Meaning Making

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We tell ourselves stories to explain where we are, why we are, who we are.

We do this globally (Crystal Parks) or for individual events.



These stories can be good or bad. When what is happening in the world conflicts with our values, it causes stress.



Change in perspective or aligning meaning with our sense of purpose can alleviate the stress.

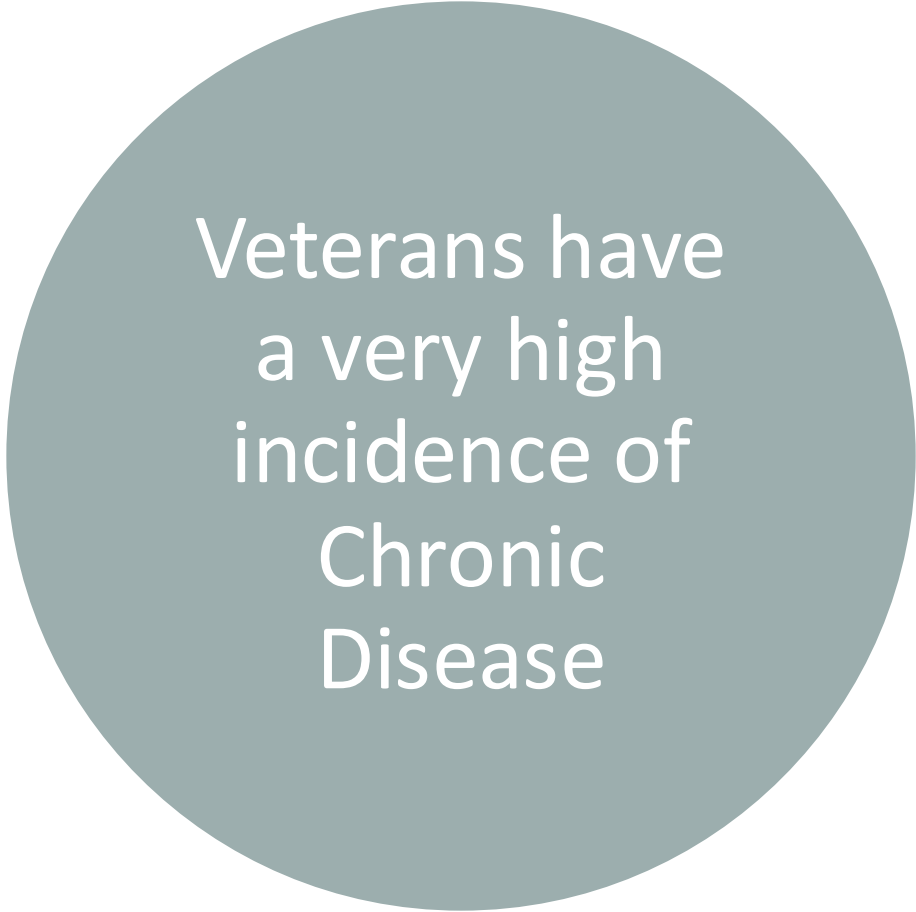
# Healthier Lifestyle Choices

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A Strong Sense of Purpose Influences Healthy Behaviors

Research Findings: People with a strong life purpose are more likely to watch their diet, exercise, and avoid risky behaviors

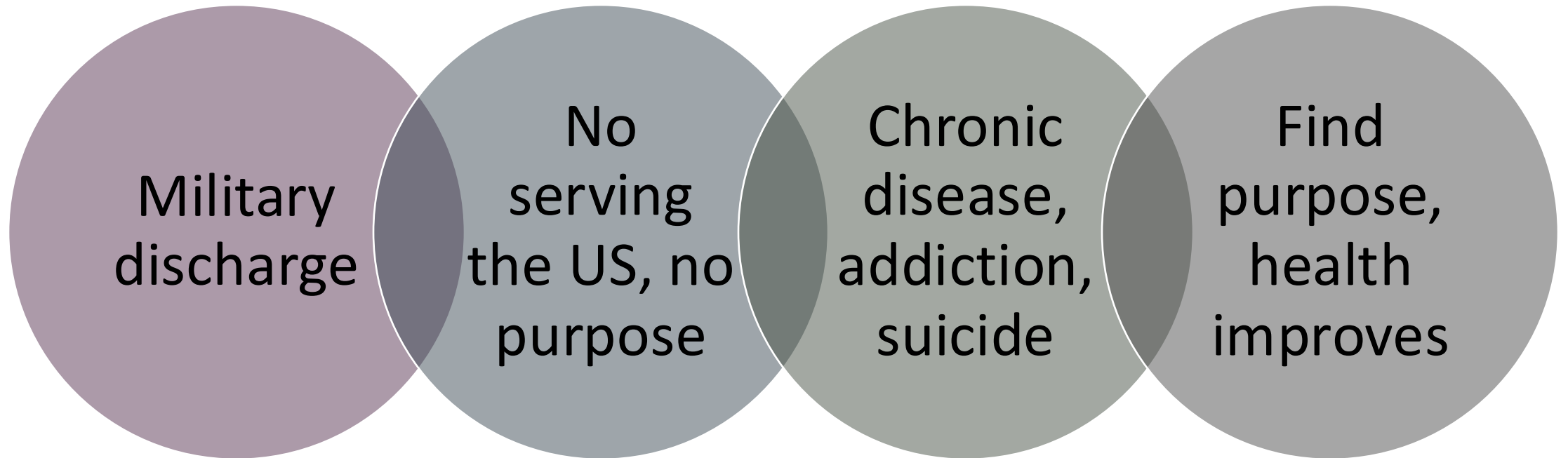
# Example: Veterans



Veterans have  
a very high  
incidence of  
Chronic  
Disease



# Tracy Gaudet's research with veterans



# Tracy Gaudet's Discovery with Veterans

“We are starting from the wrong place. To change the outcomes of the system, we need to change the conversation. We need to start with discovering what gives each of us a sense of meaning and purpose. What matters most deeply in our lives?”

# How do people find purpose?

Volunteering  
(Service)

Family

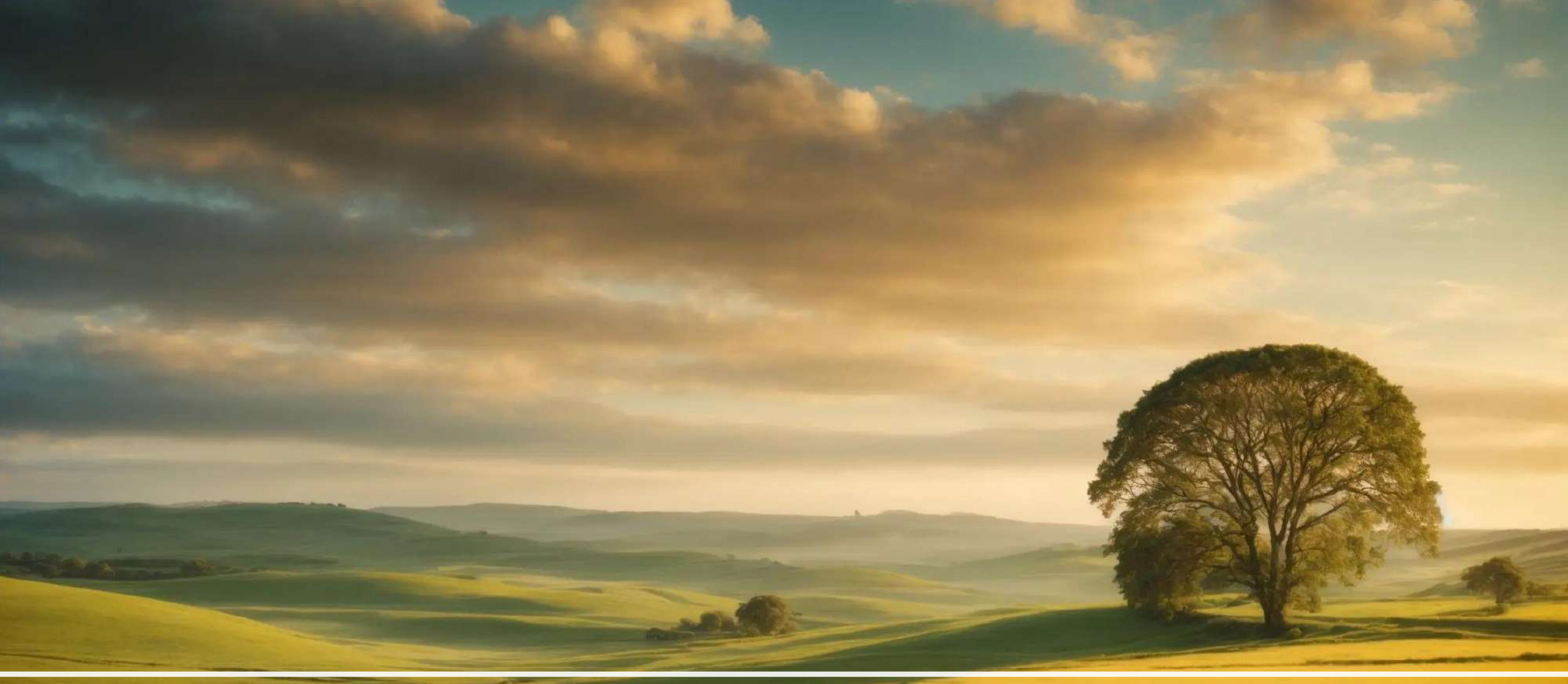
Purposeful  
work

Spirituality

Love and be  
loved

# Love & Be Loved = Enhanced Social Support

- Sustainable social ties are a common means of deriving a sense of purpose among older adults.
  - Bakhshandeh Bavarsad M, Stephens C. Social network type contributes to purpose in life among older people, mediated by social support. *Eur J Ageing*. 2024 Jan 17;21(1):5. doi: 10.1007/s10433-024-00799-w. PMID: 38231456; PMCID: PMC10794679.
- Social support from friends, family, partner leads to resilience and sustained life purpose in those undergoing cancer treatment.
  - Sihvola S, Kuosmanen L, Kvist T. Resilience and related factors in colorectal cancer patients: A systematic review. *Eur J Oncol Nurs*. 2022;56:102079. doi:10.1016/j.ejon.2021.102079
- With youth, sociocultural factors (e.g., social position, adaptive culture), an emphasis on intragroup variability, and discussion of potentially promoting and inhibiting aspects of marginalization can improve life purpose.
  - Sumner, R., Burrow, A. L., & Hill, P. L. (2018). The development of purpose in life among adolescents who experience marginalization: Potential opportunities and obstacles. *American Psychologist*, 73(6), 740–752.



## Mechanisms and Pathways



# Biological Pathways: Brain



Question: Why do people who have a stronger sense of self purpose have better health outcomes?

1. Brain: People with greater (vs. lower) purpose showed less activity in a set of brain regions including dACC, AI, DLPFC, and VLPFC, chosen for their role in conflict processing during health decision-making, which in turn predicted greater endorsement of self-relevant health advice.



# Biological Pathways: Immune

Question: Why do people who have a stronger sense of self purpose have better health outcomes?

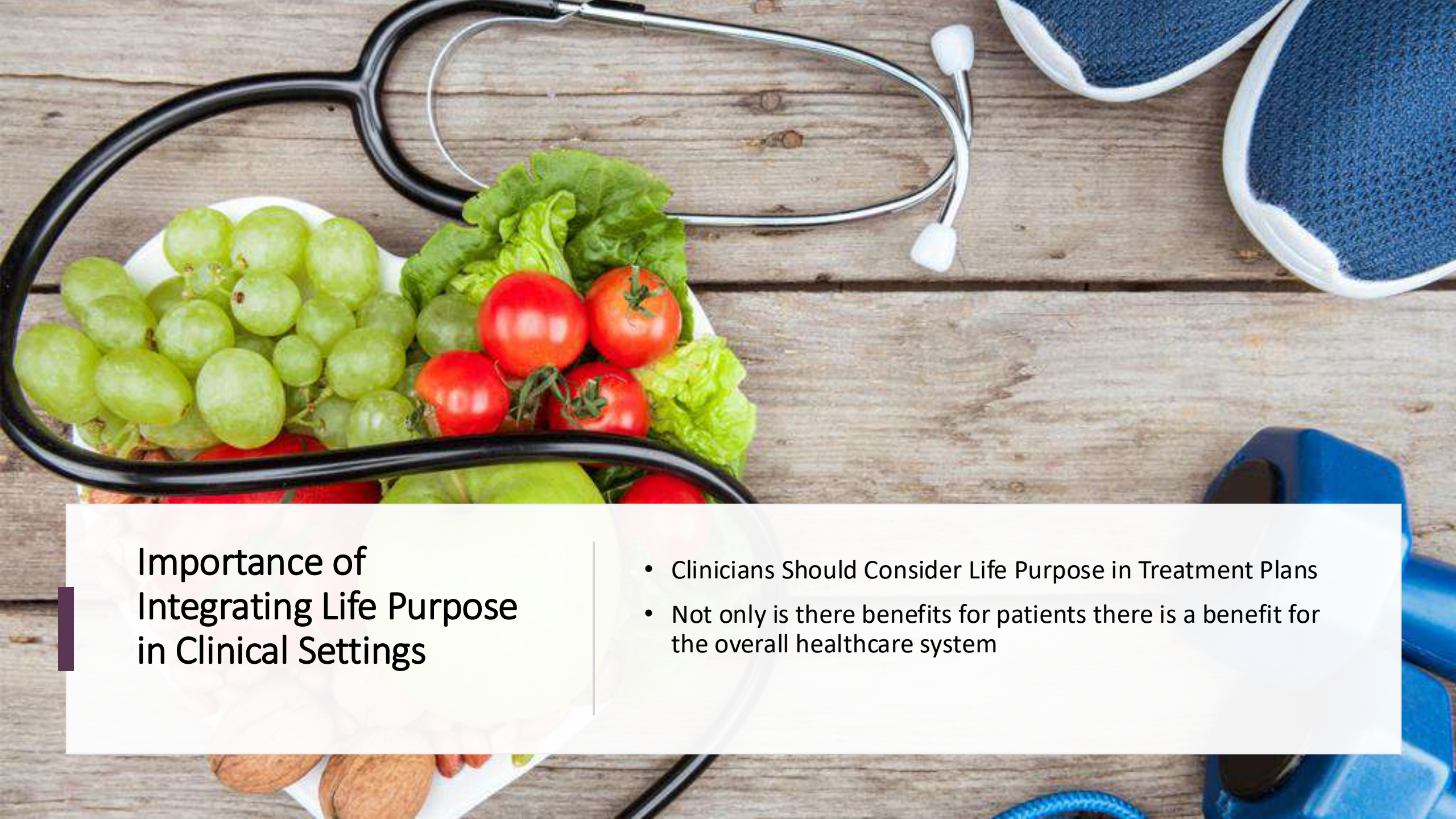
2. Immune: Psychoneuroimmunology. With more life purpose, there are less depression and anxiety, and therefore less pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-1, IL-6 & TNF). Thus all diseases of inflammation (including CVD, diabetes, dementia), decrease.

Kaplin A, Anzaldi L. New Movement in Neuroscience: A Purpose-Driven Life. *Cerebrum*. 2015 Jun 1;2015:7. PMID: 26380036; PMCID: PMC4564234.



# Interventions in Clinical Practice





## Importance of Integrating Life Purpose in Clinical Settings

- Clinicians Should Consider Life Purpose in Treatment Plans
- Not only is there benefits for patients there is a benefit for the overall healthcare system

# Interventions to Enhance Life Purpose

## Overview

- Life Crafting
- Creative Psychopharmacotherapy
- Counseling and Therapy
- Community and Group Programs
- Mindfulness and Meditation
- Educational Programs
- Workplace Interventions

# Life Crafting

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Prior research has shown that personal goal setting and goal attainment plans help people gain a direction or a sense of purpose in life.



No time for this? Consider partnering with a life coach.

# Life Crafting

Discovering	Discovering values and passion,
Reflecting	Reflecting on current and desired competencies and habits,
Reflecting	Reflecting on present and future social life,
Reflecting	Reflecting on a possible future career,
Writing	Writing about the ideal future,
Writing	Writing down specific goal attainment and “if-then” plans, and
Making	Making public commitments to the goals set.



# Atomic Habits by James Clear

Don't just set a goal. Become the person  
who lives the goal.

## Creative Psychopharmacotherapy

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The use of psychedelics, combinations of herbs, or medications to shift perspective and get people “unstuck.”



# Creative Psychopharmacotherapy

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Reset self-identity, self-esteem, self-boundaries, hedonistic capacities, and mental agility;

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To modify risk traits of temperament and character,

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To modify stress responses and strengthen resilience;

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To normalize physiological functions (sleep, appetite and food intake, sexual functions);

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To improve the control of impulses and behavior;

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Modifies lifestyle;

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Enhance the functions of a healthy self;

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Can provide connection to spirit/God/higher power

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# Counseling and Therapy

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A counselor works with a patient to:

- Identify values
- Understand identity
- Explore needs and desires
- Accept what can't be changed





A group of diverse dogs, including a golden retriever, a brown dog, a white dog, a black dog, and a grey dog, are sitting together on a paved surface. They are looking in various directions, some towards the camera and others away. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a path.

# Community and Group Programs

- Writing a love list
- Crafting a personal vision statement
- Mapping heartbreak
- Writing down purpose
- Identifying things that are cared about
- Reflecting on what matters most
- Recognizing strengths and talents
- Volunteering
- Imagining the best possible self
- Cultivating positive emotions like gratitude and awe

# Mindfulness and Meditation

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- Mindfulness and meditation reduce inflammatory cytokines, reducing depression and anxiety.
- Mindfulness can help people find their life purpose by increasing self-awareness and clarity, and by helping people gain insight into their thoughts, values, and desires.



# Educational Programs

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- Helping students/children develop meaningful goals
- Implementation in Schools and Community Centers
- Project Wayfinder at Stanford





# Why “Wayfinder”?

- Wayfinding refers to the practices of people throughout history who have “read” the natural world to travel across immense areas of water and land. Knowledge of cloud formations, subtle changes of weather, the color of the sky or sea, absence or presence of flora and fauna, and the starry night sky, could reveal significant signs and patterns to help them find their way.

# Project Wayfinder at Stanford

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Asks kids:

- What do I value?
- What holds me back from new paths?
- How do I fit into the world?
- They develop a purpose compass
  - The purpose compass enables students to distill their values, strengths and concerns into a discernible orientation in life.
- Takes 2 weeks!



# Workplace Interventions

In the past 30 years, we've moved from employers looking for the right employee to employees having to sell themselves to companies.

- This requires knowing what you want and why.
- Older people don't change jobs because they don't know what they want or they fear the social change.
- Younger people are now changing jobs every 1.5 years.

According Forbes, 29% of employees do not feel they have purpose at work.

- Involve people in planning, decision-making. Ask them their goals.

Benefits for Employee Health and Productivity



Future Directions: Changing the landscape - Rewilding



# Are we asking the right questions?

## Small changes

- Another drug study
- Another yoga study
- Another nutrition study

## Disruptive change

- Building a new model – a model that incentivizes health



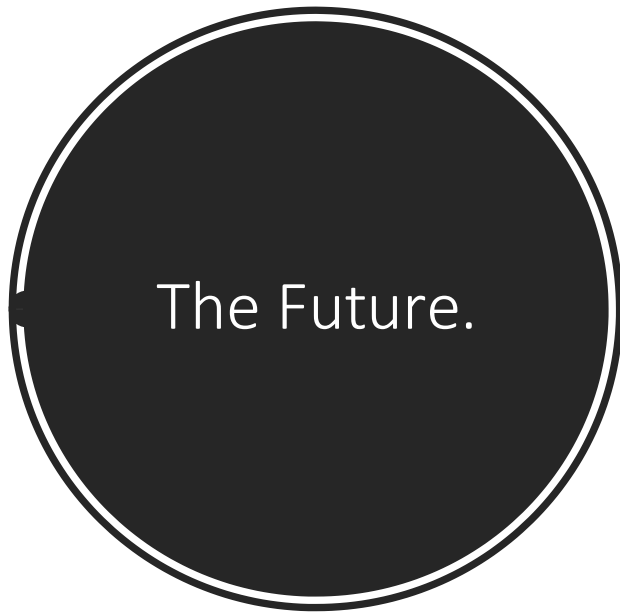
# More from Tracy Gaudet

To sustain behavior change, which is very clearly difficult, one must be intrinsically motivated.

And how does one become intrinsically motivated? Through their personal experience.

This is true for positive and negative behavior change.

Experiencing a change in something that really matters to them is often the catalyst.



<b>AS IS</b>	<b>WILL BE</b>
Focused on disease	Focused on the person and their purpose
Problem based	Aspiration based
Physician-directed	Partnership with team
Disease management	Health optimization
Find it, fix it	Identify risk, minimize it
Reaction	Proactive
Sporadic	Lifelong planning
Biomedical interventions	Whole person approaches
Individual left to enact	Skill building and support in the workplace and the community


# How will we know?

When we succeed, we will see...

- Increase in people's sense of meaning and purpose, connectivity, and compassion
- Increase in physical and mental well-being (decrease in pain, obesity, depression, and chronic conditions)
- Increase in self-care
- Decrease in clinical and pharmaceutical needs and decreased healthcare costs
- Increase in employee engagement and business productivity
- A transformation in social consciousness and a quantum leap in health, well-being, and collective humanity



Conclusion



**Ralph Waldo  
Emerson**

*The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.*

# Summary of Key Points

Life purpose plays a critical role in health.

Clinicians should start addressing life purpose in clinical practice.

- It starts with helping someone identify their values.
- Do this with groups of patients – the social support is beneficial!
- If you don't have time or desire to do this, refer to a counselor or life coach.

Most vulnerable populations to purposelessness are:

- Veterans,
- Elderly,
- Kids,
- Life-threatening diagnosis

A photograph of a forest path with sunlight filtering through the trees. The path is made of dirt and is surrounded by tall, thin trees with green foliage. Sunlight rays are visible, creating a bright and airy atmosphere. The path leads into the distance, disappearing into the trees.

# Gratitude

Thank you to NHAND for the invitation!

Thank you to attendees for listening.

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