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ARTICLE

Daily activities and purpose in life

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Abstract: Purpose in life varies within-person day to day. The present research examines how common daily activities are associated with nightly evaluations of purpose in life and the association between dispositional purpose and likelihood of engaging in these activities. Participants from the Couples Healthy Aging Project (N=303; Mage=51.81 [SD=7.32]; 54.5% female) completed nightly assessments of their engagement in activities (e.g., socializing, physical activity, work for pay) that day and their feelings of a purposeful life for eight days. On days when participants socialized in person (b=4.62, SE=.96), took care of children (b=3.33, SE=.89), were physically active (b=2.02, SE=.69), worked on a hobby (b=2.49, SE=.76) or around the house (b=2.00, SE=.68), they felt their life more purposeful. Not engaging in any social activities (b=-5.66, SE=2.21) and feeling bored (b=-9.05, SE=1.15) were associated with less purpose. Other activities (e.g., work, volunteering, meditation/mindfulness/prayer) were unrelated to daily purpose. Dispositional purpose was only associated with greater likelihood of socializing in person (OR=1.57, 95% CI=1.08-2.28) and meditation/mindfulness/prayer (OR=2.23, 95% CI=1.34-3.70) and lower likelihood of boredom (OR=.35, 95% CI=.24-.51). Relatively few daily activities (6/22) were associated with nightly evaluations of purpose, which highlights the complexity and perhaps personal nature of how daily activities contribute to feelings of purpose in life.

Keywords: purpose in life; within-person; ecological momentary assessment; daily purpose; daily activities

1. Introduction

Purpose in life is an aspect of eudaimonic well-being that reflects the feeling that one's life is goal-oriented and has direction (Ryff, 1995). Purpose in life has traditionally been conceptualized as a dispositional factor that captures a relatively stable component of well-being (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Recent theoretical and empirical advancements, however, indicate that purpose in life has a state component that can vary day to day (Hill et al., 2023) and even moment to moment (Sutin et al., 2025). Given these within-person fluctuations, there is interest in identifying factors that contribute to day-to-day feelings of more (or less) purpose.

As a state-like construct, daily purpose better captures variations in how purposeful one feels each day in contrast to trait-like evaluations of dispositional purpose. Information at this more granular level can detect which daily activities promote well-being and which activities may be harmful. Such intensive longitudinal research is critical for theory and intervention development, given that increasing state purpose should theoretically foster longer-term increases in dispositional purpose (Hill et al., 2023). By identifying the specific factors associated with daily increases in purpose among middle-aged adults, we can elucidate the mechanisms that support feelings of purpose as it unfolds in daily life. Ultimately, this information may lead to

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interventions designed to increase and sustain greater dispositional purpose, thereby contributing to better health outcomes (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Previous research on predictors of daily purpose has found consistent evidence for aspects of social connection. On days adolescents felt that they contributed more to their family, for example, they felt that their life had more purpose (Kiang, 2012). Among college students, positive social events were associated with greater daily feelings of purpose, whereas negative social events were associated with less daily purpose (Machell et al., 2015). Among older adults, more positive social interactions during the day were associated with feeling that one's life had more purpose that day (Pfund, Hofer, et al., 2022). These associations are consistent with the literature on between-person associations that find consistently that greater purpose in life is associated with more social integration (Sutin et al., 2022) and that greater social connection is associated with maintaining purpose over time (Weston et al., 2020).

In addition to social activities, some leisure activities have been associated with within-person fluctuations in purpose in life. Among leisure activities, there is the most evidence for physical activity. When measured monthly, for example, engaging in moderately vigorous physical activity was associated with greater monthly feelings of purpose in life (Pfund, DeLongis, et al., 2022). When measured moment-to-moment, greater accelerometer-measured physical activity was associated with feeling more purpose-driven in the subsequent momentary assessment (Kekäläinen et al., 2024). In contrast to physical activity, engaging in pleasurable, leisurely activities has been associated with feeling less daily purpose among adolescents (Kiang, 2012). Although dispositional purpose has been associated with a number of leisure activities, including reading and doing more chores around the house and less television watching (Sutin et al., 2024), whether engaging in these leisure activities (reading, chores, TV) are associated with feeling more (or less) purposeful on a daily basis has yet to be tested.

Finally, purpose in life is associated with other common activities in daily life, including working and volunteering (Sutin et al., 2024). Interestingly, although many people derive purpose from their paid employment (Gander et al., 2021), simply working may not be related to daily feelings of purpose (Pfund, Hofer, et al., 2022) or with maintaining purpose over years (Chen et al 2020). Purpose in life is also associated consistently with volunteering (Kim, Whillans, et al., 2020), and extensive time spent volunteering is associated with maintaining purpose over four years (Kim et al., 2022). As such, volunteering may be more likely to support daily purpose than employment.

The present study used data from an intensive micro-longitudinal study that assessed purpose every evening for eight days. Participants also reported on the activities they engaged in each day in this evening assessment. Given that social connection is associated consistently with purpose in life, including daily purpose, we expect social activities will be associated with greater daily purpose. And, likewise, given the within-person associations previously found for physical activity and purpose in life measured at different time frames (e.g., momentary [Kekäläinen et al., 2024], monthly [Pfund, DeLongis, et al., 2022]), we expect that engaging in physical activity will be associated with more daily purpose. This study expands on previous research by examining a larger range of daily activities, particularly different types of social activities (e.g., socializing in person, socializing through a device, caregiving), to better differentiate which activities are associated with daily variations in purpose. We further examine whether dispositional purpose is associated with engagement in these specific activities across the eight days. Importantly, associations identified with either dispositional or temporal (momentary, daily, or longer intervals) measures may differ, offering insights into the dynamic processes that contribute to daily activities and a sense of purpose. We address these associations in a sample of middle-aged adults because this age is a relatively neglected period of adulthood (Infurna et al., 2020), and because midlife health is associated with later life outcomes (Lafortune et al., 2016). Supporting purpose in life in middle adulthood may improve health and well-being in older adulthood.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and procedure

Participants were from the Couples Healthy Aging Project (CHAP; Kekäläinen et al., 2023; Sutin et al., 2024). To be eligible for the study, participants had to be in a committed relationship for at least one year, live together, be between the ages of 40 and 70, and both members of the couple had to consent to participate. There was no exclusion based on sexual orientation. Participants completed a baseline survey and carried a study provided smartphone to complete assessments at semi-random times throughout the day and one survey at night toward the end of the day. Dispositional purpose was measured in the baseline assessment, and daily purpose in life and daily activities were measured each evening in the nighttime survey. A total of 308 participants (154 couples) were in the study. The sample size for the current analysis is 303; five participants did not have the nightly measures due to technological issues retrieving data from the phones. Participants were, on average, 51.71 years old (SD=7.32), 54.5% female, 24.1% person of color (17.5% Black or African American, 2.6% Asian, 1.9% American Indian or Alaska Native, 3.9% Hispanic or Latino [the percentages add to more than 24.1% because participants could be in more than one racial/ethnic group]), and had a median annual household income between $50,000 and $74,999.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Dispositional purpose

Participants completed the 7-item measure of purpose in life from the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989). Items (e.g., "I have a sense of direction and purpose in my life.") were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), reversed scored where necessary, and the mean taken in the direction of greater purpose in life (alpha=.72).

2.2.2 Nightly purpose

At each nightly assessment, participants rated how much they felt their life had purpose that day ("I felt my life had purpose today.") on a slider that ranged from 0 to 100. This item has been used previously as a measure of daily purpose in life (Pfund, Hofer, et al., 2022; Steger et al., 2008).

2.2.3 Daily activities

At each nightly assessment, participants reported (yes/no) whether they engaged in a number of activities during the day. The activities were grouped and presented to participants in three categories: social activities, leisure activities, and other activities. The items for social activities were socialized with one or more people in person, socialized with one or more people through a device, took care of children, took care of parents or other adult relative, did an activity with a religious group, other social activity, and none of the above. The items for leisure activities were played puzzles or games, watched TV, read, looked at social media, worked on a hobby or project, did meditation, mindfulness, or prayed, exercised or were physically active, went to a sports event, other leisure activity, and none of the above. The items for other activities were worked for pay, volunteered, felt bored, cooked, worked around the house (e.g., cleaning, home maintenance, gardening), walked for 20 minutes or more, other activity, and none of the above. Note that bored was included as an option even though it is not an activity because it is often measured in the context of leisure activities (An et al., 2023). Participants could endorse as many activities as relevant.

2.2.4 Covariates

Sociodemographic covariates were age in years, sex (0=male, 1=female), race (0=white, 1=person of color), and education in years. Day in the study for each nightly assessment (range 1-8 days) and weekday (=1) versus weekend (=0) were also included as covariates.

2.3 Statistical approach

Three-level multilevel models were used to test the association between daily activities and daily purpose in life: Nightly measurements (level 1) were nested within participants (level 2), and participants were nested within couples (level 3). Level 3 was to account for the couple-structure of the sample. A preliminary analysis tested the association between dispositional purpose and daily feelings of purpose in life. The first focal analysis tested the association between each daily activity and end-of-day feelings of purpose in life, controlling for the covariates and dispositional purpose in life. A follow-up analysis further adjusted for the proportion of days the participant engaged in each daily activity to account for the probability of engaging in the behavior. We also tested an interaction between dispositional purpose and each daily activity and between age and each daily activity to evaluate whether the association between the activity and nightly purpose was moderated by dispositional purpose or age, respectively. The second focal analysis used multilevel logistic models to test the association between dispositional purpose and likelihood of engagement in each daily activity, controlling for the covariates. A supplemental analysis tested the associations between previous day activities and purpose and next day purpose and activities, respectively.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics are in Table 1 (below). The ICC for daily purpose was .58, which indicated that 58% of the variance in daily purpose was between person and 42% of the variance was within person. Not surprisingly, dispositional purpose was associated with daily purpose: Participants with higher dispositional purpose in life reported feeling their life was more purposeful each day over the eight days ($b=13.03$, 95% CI=10.46, 15.60, $p<.001$). Aside from age ($b=.26$, 95% CI=.04-.47, $p=.021$), the other covariates (sex, race, education, day in the study, or weekend versus weekday) were unrelated to daily purpose (all *ns*).

Six out of 22 daily activities were associated with daily feelings of purpose in life (Table 2; below). Participants who socialized in person or took care of children felt their life was more purposeful that day; there was a trend for taking care of an adult, although it did not reach significance perhaps because there were relatively few instances of this type of care, particularly relative to taking care of children (n=211 versus n=871). Interestingly, on days participants reported not engaging in any social activities they felt that their life was less purposeful. Among leisure activities, working on a hobby and engaging in physical activity were associated with feeling more purposeful. Finally, participants who did work around their house felt more purposeful, whereas those who felt bored felt less purposeful.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for all study variables*

Variable	Mean (SD) or % (n)	Mean Proportion (SD)[a]
Age (years)	51.71 (7.32)	--
Sex (female)	54.5% (165)	--
Person of color (yes)	24.1% (73)	--
Education (years)	16.59 (3.32)	--
Dispositional purpose	4.21 (.59)	--
Social activities		
Socialized in person	79.0% (1914)	.86 (.23)
Socialized through a device	69.3% (1679)	.75 (.31)
Took care of children	35.9% (871)	.39 (.40)
Took care of an adult	8.7% (211)	.09 (.20)
Activity with a religious group	9.0% (217)	.10 (.18)
Other social activity	41.4% (1003)	.45 (.35)
None of the above	1.9% (46)	.02 (.08)
Leisure activities		
Played puzzles or games	37.9% (919)	.41 (.41)
Watched TV	72.2% (1750)	.78 (.26)
Read	47.3% (1147)	.51 (.37)
Looked at social media	70.3% (1704)	.76 (.32)
Worked on a hobby or project	29.7% (721)	.32 (.33)
Meditation, mindfulness, or prayed	25.5% (619)	.28 (.35)
Exercised or physically active	36.1% (875)	.39 (.32)
Went to a sports event	2.4% (57)	.02 (.10)
Other leisure activity	27.8% (675)	.30 (.30)
None of the above	1.5% (36)	.02 (.06)
Other activities		
Worked for pay	51.8% (1255)	.56 (.29)
Volunteered	5.0% (121)	.05 (.14)
Felt bored	8.4% (204)	.09 (.18)
Cooked	41.5% (1007)	.45 (.32)
Worked around the house	55.0% (1333)	.60 (.31)
Walk for 20 minutes or more	28.4% (688)	.31 (.30)
Other activity	28.8% (697)	.31 (.31)
None of the above	1.8% (44)	.02 (.07)

Note. *N*=303. [a] Mean proportion of days participants engaged in each activity.

Participants who did not engage in any of the other activities also felt less purposeful. Of note, working for pay and volunteering were unrelated to daily purpose. The pattern of associations was the same when further adjusting for the proportion of days participants engaged in each activity (Supplemental Table S1 in the Appendix). The interaction analysis provided little evidence that either dispositional purpose or age moderated the association between daily activities and nightly purpose in life. The negative association between not engaging in any social activity during the day and nightly purpose was stronger among participants with relatively higher dispositional purpose ($b_{interaction}$=-9.65, 95% CI=-17.08, -2.23, p=.011) and among the relatively younger participants in the sample ($b_{interaction}$ =.719, 95% CI=.148, 1.291, p=.014). There was also an association between not engaging in any leisure activities and lower daily purpose among relatively younger but not relatively older participants ($b_{interaction}$ =.80, 95% CI=.17, 1.43, p=.012). In addition, there was a stronger positive association between reading and nightly purpose and other leisure activities and nightly purpose among participants with relatively lower dispositional purpose compared to those with relatively higher dispositional purpose ($b_{interaction}$=-3.06, 95% CI=-5.48, -.63, p=.014 and $b_{interaction}$=-2.68, 95% CI=-5.12, -.25, p=.031, respectively). The other 38 interactions were not significant. As such, these interactions should be interpreted with caution because of the number of statistical tests.

Table 2. *Multilevel models predicting daily purpose from daily activities controlling for covariates and dispositional purpose*

Activity	b	SE	95% CI	p
Social				
In person	4.62	.96	2.74, 6.50	<.001
Device	1.41	.85	-.26, 3.08	.097
Care of child	3.33	.89	1.58, 5.08	<.001
Care of adult	2.13	1.18	-.18, 4.43	.071
Religious group	.97	1.11	-1.20, 3.14	.381
Other	1.04	.72	-.36, 2.45	.146
None	-5.66	2.21	-9.99, -1.32	.011
Leisure				
Games	.40	.87	-1.32, 2.11	.649
Television	-1.30	.82	-2.90, .31	.113
Reading	1.21	.74	-.25, 2.67	.105
Social media	.84	.90	-.93, 2.61	.352
Hobby	2.49	.76	.99, 4.00	.001
Meditation/mindfulness/prayer	1.40	.90	-.36, 3.16	.120
Physical activity	2.02	.69	.66, 3.38	.004
Attend sports events	2.75	2.13	-1.43, 6.92	.197
Other	.72	.75	-.75, 2.19	.339
None	-2.80	2.37	-7.45, 1.86	.239
Other activities				
Work for pay	.93	.84	-.72, 2.57	.269
Volunteer	2.16	1.45	-.69, 5.01	.138
Bored	-9.05	1.15	-11.30, -6.80	<.001
Cooked	-.07	.68	-1.40, 1.25	.912
Worked around the house	2.00	.68	.66, 3.34	.003
Walked 20 minutes	.66	.74	-.78, 2.11	.370
Other	.57	.75	-.90, 2.04	.448
None	-6.64	2.16	-10.87, -2.40	.002

Note. *N*=303. Estimates are from multilevel models controlling for age, sex, race, education, day in the study, weekday versus weekend, and dispositional purpose. Each activity was entered separately.

Dispositional purpose was associated with few of the daily activities (Table 3). Participants with more dispositional purpose were more likely to socialize with others in person and were more likely to meditate, practice mindfulness, or pray. The strongest association was for boredom: Participants with greater dispositional purpose were nearly three times less likely to feel bored each day across the eight days than individuals lower in dispositional purpose. Dispositional purpose was unrelated to working for pay or volunteering (or any of the other activities).

Table 3. *Baseline dispositional purpose predicting likelihood of daily activities*

Activity	OR	95% CI	p
Social			
In person	1.57	1.08, 2.28	.019
Device	1.14	.76, 1.70	.532
Care of child	1.10	.67, 1.81	.709
Care of adult	.96	.62, 1.50	.861
Religious	1.27	.82, 1.96	.281
Other	1.07	.75, 1.52	.724
None	1.05	.73, 1.50	.795
Leisure			
Games	.86	.50, 1.48	.592
Television	1.19	.86, 1.66	.289
Reading	.86	.57, 1.28	.448
Social media	.88	.57, 1.36	.564
Hobby	1.21	.83, 1.78	.322
Meditation/mindfulness	2.23	1.34, 3.70	.002
Physical activity	1.36	.99, 1.88	.061
Attend sports events	1.23	.85, 1.80	.272
Other	1.08	.77, 1.53	.654
None	1.10	.75, 1.60	.633
Other activities			
Work for pay	1.28	.86, 1.91	.229
Volunteer	.89	.55, 1.43	.625
Bored	.35	.24, .51	<.001
Cooked	.95	.70, 1.29	.750
Worked around the house	.90	.66, 1.24	.514
Walked 20 minutes	1.13	.80, 1.58	.481
Other	1.32	.93, 1.90	.118
None	1.08	.74, 1.56	.696

Note. *N*=303. Estimates are from multilevel logistic models controlling for age, sex, race, education, day in the study, weekday versus weekend.

The results of the supplemental analysis on next-day associations were primarily null (Supplemental Tables S2 and S3 in the Appendix). The only evidence for a potential bi-directional association was for religious activities: Although same day religious activities and daily purpose were unrelated in the primary analyses, participating in religious activities was associated with greater purpose the next day, and purpose was associated with greater likelihood of participating in religious activities the next day. In addition, in contrast to the primary analyses, engaging in no social activities was associated with greater purpose the next day, and engaging in physical activity was associated with less purpose the next day. Finally, greater purpose on one day was associated with a slightly greater likelihood of cooking and meditating, practicing mindfulness, or praying the next day.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the association between common activities in daily life and daily feelings that one's life has purpose. As expected, social activities, particularly in-person socializing, or engaging in physical activity were associated with feeling more daily purpose. Working on a hobby or working around the house were likewise associated with greater daily purpose. Notably, lack of engagement in any social activities during the day degraded feelings of purpose that day. Some null associations were also of note – including that working, volunteering, and meditation/mindfulness/prayer were unrelated to daily feelings of purpose. This research provided more nuanced evidence that in days when people engage in social and physical activities, they also feel more purpose in life. Dispositional purpose was related to relatively few daily activities (socializing in person, meditation/mindfulness/prayer, feeling bored) and largely did not moderate the association between daily activities and daily purpose.

There is evidence for a consistent association between social connection and purpose in life. Between person, dispositional purpose in life is associated with less loneliness (Sutin et al., 2022) and more social support and relationship satisfaction (Irving et al., 2017). Over four years, greater social support (Weston et al., 2020) and having more close family and feeling less loneliness (Chen et al., 2020) are associated with maintaining more purpose. Similar associations have been found within-person for daily feelings of purpose: Greater social activity during the day is associated with feeling one had more purpose in life that day among adolescents (Kiang, 2012), college students (Machell et al., 2015), and older adults (Pfund, Hofer, et al., 2022). Social behavior even contributes to momentary feelings of purpose. Previous research using this sample found that the presence of others was associated with feeling more purpose-driven measured at moments throughout the day, as was caregiving (Sutin et al., 2025).

The present research is consistent with this literature and adds that the different ways in which individuals engage in social activities matters for daily purpose. In particular, in-person social interactions had the strongest association with daily feelings of purpose, whereas socializing through a device was unrelated to purpose. This pattern suggests the importance of in-person social interactions for feeling purposeful. In addition, caring for others, particularly children, was associated with greater daily purpose. A similar pattern was apparent for caring for an adult (e.g., a parent) but may have been underpowered to detect a statistically significant association. Socializing with a religious group was unrelated to daily purpose. Perhaps most notably, however, was the effect of not engaging in any social activities: Participants felt a loss of purpose on days when they did not socialize, particularly among participants with higher dispositional purpose. Previous research has measured aspects of social engagement (both positive and negative) but not specifically a lack of socializing. The present research provides empirical evidence for the harms to daily purpose for not engaging in any social activity.

In addition to social connection, there is a robust literature on purpose in life and physical activity. Individuals with more purpose engage in more physical activity, measured either with self-report (Kim, Shiba, et al., 2020) or accelerometry (Sutin et al., 2025). There is likewise evidence for reciprocal associations. Measured over years, for example, purpose in life is associated with increases in physical activity, and physical activity is likewise associated with increases in purpose (Yemiscigil & Vlaev, 2021). Using the current sample, previous research has found a similar pattern for momentary purpose in life and accelerometer-measured physical activity (Kekäläinen et al., 2024). The present analysis adds that being physically active during the day is associated with feeling more daily purpose in life. Again, the present research offered more nuance to this association. Specifically, engaging in physical activity, but not simply walking, was associated with more purpose. This pattern suggests there may be some minimum amount of cardiovascular activity needed to get the boost in purpose associated with being physically active. It was surprising, however, that dispositional purpose was unrelated to physical activity across the eight days.

Besides physical activity, of the other leisure activities measured, only working on a hobby was associated with greater daily purpose. That is, on days when individuals work on one of their hobbies, they feel that their life has more purpose. Hobbies are likely to be meaningful to the individual and something they make time for in their day, which may result in a boost in purpose. Previous research has found that engaging in pleasurable, leisurely activities is related to feeling less daily purpose in life among adolescents (Kiang, 2012). The present study did not replicate this negative association with common leisure activities in middle adulthood and early older adulthood. That is, common activities such as watching television, reading, playing games, or looking at social media were unrelated to daily purpose in life. Working around the house, however, was also associated with greater feelings of daily purpose perhaps because it can be goal-oriented behavior with observable results.

Neither working for pay nor volunteering during the day were associated with daily purpose measured in the evening. Although individuals tend to derive meaning from their employment (Gander et al., 2021), it does not necessarily happen on a daily basis (Pfund, Hofer, et al., 2022). It is possible that the type of work matters for purpose, and not just whether one worked for pay. Thus, the null association between working and daily purpose was not unexpected. More surprising was the null association for volunteering because volunteering has been associated with maintaining purpose in life over years (Kim, Whillans, et al., 2020). This association, however, was only observed at the highest level of volunteering (i.e., the greatest number of hours volunteered). There may be a threshold for time spent volunteering rather than simply any volunteer work. In addition, in the eight days captured in the current study, there were relatively few days that participants volunteered. More extensive data collection may be needed to fully evaluate this association.

It was also somewhat surprising that dispositional purpose was associated with few of the daily activities. As to be expected based on the reviewed literature on purpose and social integration, individuals higher in purpose in life were more likely to socialize in person over the eight days. Dispositional purpose in life, however, was unrelated to any of the other social activities. Among the leisure activities, dispositional purpose was only associated with greater likelihood of engaging in meditation/mindfulness/prayer during the day. Interestingly, this association was not apparent in the other direction; that is, engaging in meditation/mindfulness/prayer was unrelated to daily purpose. Likewise, working around the house was related to greater daily purpose, but dispositional purpose was unrelated to likelihood of engaging in this activity in daily life.

One interesting finding to emerge was the association with boredom. Specifically, participants higher in dispositional purpose were less likely to experience boredom in daily life, and on days participants felt bored, they perceived their lives to be less purposeful. Boredom can be conceptualized in many ways and can include cognitive, affective, and situational components (Vodanovich & Watt, 2016). Boredom often occurs with either lack of engagement in activity or co-occurs with specific activities (Chin et al., 2017), and is usually measured in the context of leisure activities (An et al., 2023). Purpose in life is measured, in part, by feeling that one's daily activities are worthwhile (Scheier et al., 2006), and individuals higher in purpose engage in more meaningful daily activities and such engagement is associated with maintaining purpose over time (Hooker et al., 2019). Such individuals may thus be less likely to experience boredom in daily life. The present research suggests that there may be few specific activities associated with dispositional purpose such that activity engagement may be specific to the individual. But the greater engagement in a range of activities may prevent feelings of boredom. Interestingly, when individuals experience boredom in daily life, it erodes their feelings of purpose on that day. Over time, frequent feelings of boredom may contribute to declines in purpose in life.

Finally, there was little evidence for day-to-day residual or carry-over effects between the activities and purpose across days. Although theoretical models of purpose in life argue that daily activities lead to habits that ultimately contribute to a more dispositional sense of purpose in life (Hill et al., 2023), such associations may not be apparent day to day. For example, engaging in regular social interactions should help to increase dispositional purpose over time, but social interactions on one specific day may or may not carry over to feeling purposeful the next day. As such, these bidirectional associations are unlikely to be observed on consecutive days and are more likely to be detected over longer periods of time as these experiences and their associations with daily purpose accumulate. The only evidence for a bi-directional carry-over effect in the current study was for religious activities. This finding, however, should be interpreted with caution until it is replicated because the same-day association was not significant and the p-values were modest, especially given the number of statistical tests run. Likewise, it was surprising that not engaging in any social activities and engagement in physical activity were associated with higher and lower next day purpose, respectively, which was the opposite direction as the same-day associations. It may be compensation for change the previous day, but, again, for the same reasons, it needs to be replicated before drawing any firm conclusions.

This research had several strengths, including daily measurement of purpose in life, the middle-aged sample, a period of the lifespan neglected in studies of daily life, and the consideration of multiple types of daily activities, including the lack of engagement in specific types of activities (e.g., social activities). This research also had some limitations that can be addressed in future research. Although the age group was a strength of the sample, future research should also include younger and older adults to determine whether the associations found in middle-aged adults extend to these age groups. Likewise, all participants were in the United States; samples from other areas of the world, including samples from lower- and middle-income countries are needed to evaluate generalizability. The present study also included more daily activities than in previous research, but more could be done, including asking about additional daily activities, the duration of each activity, and feelings experienced during the activities. Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to better understanding the types of activities in daily life that contribute to feeling purposeful in daily life.

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No AI was used in the preparation of this article.

Data availability statement

Data are available at https://osf.io/xsb56/overview?view_only=9bd7a0bc9c274e7d8cf51e250965097b

Ethics statement

The protocol was approved by the institutional review board at the Florida State University (#STUDY00000472) and carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed consent before testing.

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Appendix

Supplemental Table S1. *Multilevel models predicting daily purpose from daily activities further controlling for the probability of engaging in the behavior*

Activity	b	SE	95% CI	p
Social				
In person	4.20	1.00	2.24, 6.16	<.001
Device	.76	.91	-1.02, 2.54	.402
Care of child	2.70	.98	.78, 4.63	.006
Care of adult	2.66	1.23	.25, 5.08	.031
Religious group	.28	1.14	-1.97, 2.52	.810
Other	1.32	.76	-.16, 2.80	.081
None	-5.19	2.28	-9.66, -.72	.023
Leisure				
Games	-.04	.98	-1.98, 1.89	.964
Television	-1.45	.85	-3.12, .22	.088
Reading	.75	.80	-.82, 2.31	.348
Social media	.71	.97	-1.18, 2.61	.462
Hobby	2.24	.81	.65, 3.83	.006
Meditation/mindfulness/prayer	.16	.98	-1.76, 2.09	.870
Physical activity	1.93	.72	.51, 3.42	.008
Attend sports events	3.36	2.21	-.97, 7.69	.129
Other	.90	.78	-.64, 2.44	.252
None	-1.30	2.42	-6.05, 3.45	.592
Other activities				
Work for pay	.82	.88	-.90, 2.54	.349
Volunteer	2.26	1.51	-.69, 5.22	.133
Bored	-8.96	1.19	-11.29, -6.63	<.001
Cooked	-.47	.70	-1.85, .91	.506
Worked around the house	1.50	.71	.10, 2.89	.036
Walked 20 minutes	.08	.77	-1.43, 1.59	.917
Other	.85	.78	-.69, 2.39	.279
None	-5.39	2.21	-9.73, -1.05	.015

Note. *N*=303. Estimates are from multilevel models controlling for age, sex, race, education, day in the study, weekday versus weekend, and dispositional purpose. Each activity was entered separately.

Supplemental Table S2. *Associations between daily activities and next-day purpose in life*

Activity	b	SE	95% CI	p
Social				
In person	.11	1.06	-1.97, 2.18	.920
Device	-.81	.92	-2.61, .98	.374
Care of child	1.15	.96	-.73, 3.03	.230
Care of adult	2.42	1.28	-.10, 4.93	.059
Religious group	2.58	1.22	.19, 4.98	.034
Other	-.37	.77	-1.89, 1.14	.631
None	4.91	2.39	.22, 9.60	.040
Leisure				
Games	1.25	.93	-.57, 3.06	.178
Television	1.31	.89	-.43, 3.06	.140
Reading	-.07	.80	-1.65, 1.50	.928
Social media	.52	.98	-1.39, 2.44	.592
Hobby	1.35	.84	-.29, 2.99	.106
Meditation/mindfulness/prayer	.98	.07	-.91, 2.88	.310
Physical activity	-1.48	.75	-2.95, -.004	.049
Attend sports events	1.94	2.38	-2.72, 6.60	.414
Other	-.14	.81	-1.74, 1.46	.863
None	-3.70	2.66	-8.92, 1.52	.164
Other activities				
Work for pay	.25	.90	-1.52, 2.01	.783
Volunteer	-1.75	1.54	-4.78, 1.27	.256
Bored	-1.15	1.28	-3.66, 1.36	.370
Cooked	.25	.73	-1.18, 1.68	.734
Worked around the house	1.19	.75	-.27, 2.66	.111
Walked 20 minutes	-.50	.80	-2.06, 1.06	.528
Other	.99	.82	-.62, 2.60	.227
None	1.28	2.38	-3.38, 5.95	.589

Note. *N*=303. Estimates are from multilevel models controlling for age, sex, race, education, day in the study, weekday versus weekend, and same-day purpose. Each activity was entered separately.

Supplemental Table S3. *Daily purpose predicting the likelihood of next day activities*

Activity	OR	95% CI	p
Social			
In person	1.01	1.00, 1.02	.085
Device	1.01	1.00, 1.02	.078
Care of child	1.00	.99, 1.01	.733
Care of adult	1.00	.99, 1.01	.706
Religious	1.02	1.00, 1.03	.015
Other	1.00	.99, 1.01	.644
None	1.00	.99, 1.01	.862
Leisure			
Games	1.01	1.00, 1.01	.184
Television	1.00	1.00, 1.01	.267
Reading	1.00	.99, 1.01	.912
Social media	1.00	.99, 1.01	.663
Hobby	1.00	.99, 1.01	.709
Meditation/mindfulness	1.01	1.00, 1.02	.012
Physical activity	1.00	.99, 1.01	.684
Attend sports events	1.00	.98, 1.01	.862
Other	1.00	.99, 1.01	.785
None	1.00	.99, 1.01	.700
Other activities			
Work for pay	1.00	1.00, 1.01	.583
Volunteer	1.00	.99, 1.01	.819
Bored	.99	.98, 1.00	.090
Cooked	1.01	1.00, 1.01	.041
Worked around the house	1.00	1.00, 1.01	.550
Walked 20 minutes	1.01	1.00, 1.01	.178
Other	1.00	.99, 1.01	.637
None	1.00	.99, 1.01	.822

Note. *N*=303. Estimates are from multilevel logistic models controlling for age, sex, race, education, day in the study, weekday versus weekend, and same day activity.