How does purpose in life differ from happiness? A comparison using survey, laboratory, day reconstruction, and interview methods

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Abstract

While strongly related, purpose in life and happiness are distinct constructs with important differences. Using surveys, laboratory experiments, a day reconstruction method, idiographic strivings, and semi-structured interviews, we explored differences between purpose and happiness. First, both purpose in life (one measure) and happiness (two measures) showed high stability across 6-month and 2-year intervals. Second, purpose (controlling for happiness) and happiness (controlling for purpose) had links to healthy personality traits and well-being dimensions (such as satisfaction of one’s needs). People with a strong purpose devoted significant effort and made progress toward meaningful goals, which were relatively irrelevant to happiness. Happier people felt less stressed, more in control, and managed negative life events effectively over time, whereas effects were weaker for people with a strong purpose. People with a strong purpose showed greater growth in the aftermath of negative life events, which was largely irrelevant to happiness. This duality between purpose and happiness raises questions about how a happy life might be better in the short-term whereas a purposeful life involves sacrifices and difficulties - that can translate into significant personal growth. We provide profiles of what it means to experience high levels on only one of these two constructs.

*Keywords*: purpose in life, happiness, life satisfaction, well-being, emotion regulation, goal pursuit

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“*Mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become... What man actually needs is not a tensionless state, but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task*.” (Frankl, 1959, p.166)

As a survivor of the holocaust, Viktor Frankl experienced more pain than most of us can imagine. Yet, he recognized that the absence of adversity did not make life worth living. For Frankl, a person must possess agency to pursue what matters most - irrespective of present thoughts and feelings. But, aside from handling adversity, what benefits does a person reap from committing effort and making progress towards a purpose? To better understand the potential benefits of purpose, there is value in contrasting it with the more widely studied experience of happiness.

There are multiple paths to a worthwhile existence. One entails hedonics, where positive emotional states are more common than negative emotional states. Another involves purpose, where life decisions and goals are centrally influenced by one’s ultimate concerns (not the mere attainment of pleasure and avoidance of suffering; Bronk, 2014; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Accumulating evidence supports how both purpose and happiness promote positive mental health (e.g., Reker et al.,1987; Schaefer et al., 2013). While the same can be said for many positively valenced constructs such as optimism (Peterson, 2000), kindness (Hui, Ng, Berzaghi, Cunningham-Amos, & Kogan, 2020), and mindfulness (Brown, Ryan & Creswell, 2007), purpose and happiness are grander than desirable personality traits. Purpose organizes the expenditure of finite resources such as time, energy, and money around a person’s important pursuits. Happiness reflects global evaluations that life is emotionally and mentally satisfying.

What the study of both purpose and happiness requires is a far more precise examination of the exact elements or dimensions of well-being that are relevant (e.g., Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). The present study uses a theoretically informed measure of purpose (Hill, Edmonds, Peterson, Luyckx, & Andrews, 2016) and two measures of happiness (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) to examine how these two ways of living differ in terms of correlates and consequences.

## Defining Purpose in Life

Since Viktor Frankl referred to purpose as a psychological construct in 1959, several definitions have emerged, of which four are frequently cited. First, Ryff (1989) stated that a person with a sense of purpose “has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living” (p. 45). Second, Damon et al. (2003) described purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). Third, Kosine and colleagues (2008) defined purpose as “identification of highly valued, overarching goals, the attainment of which is anticipated to move people closer to achieving their true potential and bring them deep fulfillment’ (p. 133). Fourth, McKnight and Kashdan (2009) considered purpose to be a “central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning” (p. 242).

Efforts to synthesize definitions identify three overlapping elements: centrality, goal-directedness, and commitment. Centrality refers to how purpose related values, beliefs, and behaviors define a person’s sense of self and who they are becoming. Goal-directedness refers to actions aimed at future desired outcomes. Commitment entails the regular expenditure of resources (time, energy, finances, social capital) and decision-making with reference to these desired outcomes. Prosocial intentions are another element that is often viewed as core to purpose (e.g., Damon et al., 2003; Moran, 2009); however, it remains unclear if they are a necessary feature or a common descriptor of some people’s particular purposes (e.g., Hill, Burrow, O’Dell, & Thornton, 2010). A person possesses a strong purpose when they hold a worldview and dedicate behaviors towards ends that matter greatly, which may or may not include helping other people.

## Purpose and Well-Being

When considering whether and how purpose confers benefits, there is value in exploring the outputs. The big outputs include physical health, social relationships, and quality of life. A large body of work points to how a greater sense of purpose is linked to physical health in terms of fewer strokes, cardiovascular problems, illnesses, and longer life longevity (e.g., Cohen, Bavishi, & Rozanski, 2016; Kim, Chen, Nakamura, Ryff, & VanderWeele, 2022). Another body of work links a greater sense of purpose to a better social life, from a more accepting attitude toward racially diverse individuals to higher quality friendships (e.g., Burrow, Stanley, Sumner, & Hill, 2014; Lund et al., 2022). In this research program, we explore the link to quality of life. At the broadest level, well-being can be described as “perceived enjoyment and fulfillment with one’s life as a whole” (Disabato et al., 2020). There is no simple approach to capture well-being. A point emphasized by a comprehensive literature review that identified 155 measures of positive mental health reflecting 410 dimensions (Iasiello et al., 2024).

Although the pursuit of purpose does not hinge on feeling happy or satisfied, constructs such as subjective happiness and life satisfaction often result from the joy of having a mission worthy of being alive and healthy. At a single time point, purpose explains anywhere from 12-46% and 11-44% of variance in feeling happy (Robak & Griffin, 2000; Aghababaei & Błachnio, 2014; Crego et al., 2021) and satisfied with life (Bronk et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2017), respectively. Similarly, possessing a strong sense of purpose predicts greater life satisfaction over an 18-month span (Chen & Cheng, 2020).

Our goal is to help researchers gain a handle on the precise relationship between purpose and various well-being dimensions. To do so, we assessed purpose and happiness and then compared the nature and strength of relationships with well-being. These well-being dimensions are briefly detailed.

**Psychological Need Satisfaction.** Self-determination theory (SDT) describes the fulfillment of three basic needs as critical to living well: autonomy, competence, and belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy is the extent that a person believes they are in control over their own actions. Competence reflects a sense of efficacy when interacting with the world, including the development of strengths, skills, and competencies to do so. Belonging is how much a person feels a sense of connection to people in their social environment, and maintain satisfying relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2001, 2002). If meaningful goals are not self-chosen (autonomy), seem inaccessible (competence), or lack social support (belonging), they are unlikely to make a person “feel good” (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Cross-sectional studies find that purpose explains 7% of the variance in satisfying needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging (Ferrand et al., 2014).

**Hope.** A person has hope when they believe goals are achievable - recognizing *pathways* to making progress and *agency* to use those pathways (Snyder et al., 2005). Purpose and hope are expected to have a bidirectional relationship, where purpose stimulates the identification of goals, which is likely informed and enhanced by hope for achieving them. Findings support a bidirectional relationship with purpose explaining 4-18% variance in pathways towards goals and 19-45% variance in agency towards goals among adolescent, emerging, and middle adult cohorts (Bronk et al., 2009). Purpose predicts increases in hope and hope predicts increases in purpose among older adults over a 4-year span (Long et al., 2020).

**Curiosity.** Curiosity is the motivation to seek out new information and experiences, which often leads to exploratory behavior and learning (Kashdan et al., 2009). Curiosity is often a precursor to uncovering what is interesting, valuable, and in some cases, a mission in life through trial-and-error explorations (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). If present, a person’s purpose can redirect curiosity and exploration toward relevant information streams and experiences – that promote purpose pursuit. Findings support the bidirectional relationship between curiosity and purpose. Concurrently, purpose explains 14% of the variance in curiosity (Kashdan et al., 2009; Gallagher & Lopez, 2007), and adolescents higher in trait curiosity report greater purpose (Jovanovic & Brdaric, 2012).

**Reactivity to Pain and Stressful Events**. A sense of purpose in life is expected to inversely correlate with indicators of psychological pain and reduced reactivity to stressful life events due to its role in adaptive emotion regulation. Individuals with a clear purpose allocate resources more efficiently, enabling them to view stressful events as more of a challenge and less of a threat, consequently lessening emotional strain (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Empirical evidence supports this hypothesis, demonstrating that those with a stronger sense of purpose show attenuated negative emotions and physical health problems in response to daily stressors (Hill, Sin, Turiano, Burrow, & Almeida, 2018) and exhibit lower cortisol levels during stressful social interactions (Fogelman & Canli, 2015). People with a stronger purpose display diminished eyeblink responses to negative stimuli, indicating lower physiological reactivity (Schaefer et al., 2013).

Prior findings suggest that the mechanisms underlying the relationship between purpose and stress reactivity include not only resource allocation but also the adoption of adaptive emotion regulation strategies (Kashdan et al., 2024; Pfund et al., 2023). To understand how purpose helps people self-regulate consider the concept of recentering, where individuals shift attention from stressors to overarching life goals – replenishing energy supplies for more desirable pursuits (Burrow, Hill, Stanley, & Sumner, 2024). Upon recentering, it is expected that people with a strong purpose can discover more about themselves, other people, and the world when confronting adversity – otherwise known as stress-related growth. This will be one of the first studies to comprehensively examine how purpose relates to the presence of stressful events, coping strategies relied upon, and potential opportunities for personal growth (e.g., improved relationships, perceiving new life paths, discovering strengths, spiritual maturation, and gratitude) (e.g., Park, 2010).

## The Present Research

Building on prior work comparing meaning and happiness (Baumeister et al., 2013), we conducted a multi-method examination of whether the correlates and consequences of purpose and happiness differ. Besides exploring differences on desirable trait-like variables (e.g., hope, curiosity, distress tolerance), we included idiographic measures of stressful life events (Needles & Abramson, 1990; Alloy & Clements, 1992), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), and experience-sampling in daily life (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). These methods allowed for a fine-grained analysis of what people with strong purpose and/or happiness feel, think, and do on a specific day when confronted with negative and positive life events throughout the day. On a slightly longer time scale, we explored what they strive for and how much effort, progress, and psychological benefits arise from these pursuits (such as joy and meaning). With the inclusion of 6-month and 1-year follow-up surveys, our work allowed for exploratory tests of the shorter and longer-term patterns uniquely linked to purposeful and happy living.

Kaufman creative achievement scale

Laboratory measure of emotional intelligence – MSCEIT 2.0

# Method

## Participants and Procedure

Community adults were recruited from the DC/Maryland/Virginia region through local advertisements. The baseline sample (Time one; T1 *n* = 303) completed trait measures and ideographic assessments in the laboratory and subsequently completed follow-up measures six months (Time two; T2 *n* = 205) and two years later (Time three; T3 *n* = 167) through an online survey platform. Demographics of samples at each time point are available in Table 1.

## Measures

### Purpose

**Brief Measure of Purpose in Life (BPIL; Hill, Edmonds, Peterson, Luyckx, & Andrews, 2016).** The 4-item BPIL measures the degree to which one has a clear direction in life that is aligned with their values (e.g., *“My plans for the future match with my true interests and values''*). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 or *not at all* to 5 or *very much*). The BPIL demonstrates good construct validity through its positive relationships with another measure of purpose, the Life Engagement Test, and trait positive affect, and its inverse relationship with trait negative affect (Scheier et al., 2006). BPIL exhibited stability over 6 months (T1 to T2 *r* = .60) and 18 months (T2 to T3 *r* = .63). Additionally, the BPIL demonstrated acceptable internal consistency at all time-points (T1: α = .84; T2: α = .90; T3: α = .88) and served as a point of comparison with our idiographic operationalization of purpose.

**Striving-based purpose (SBP).** Given the ideographic and goal-directed nature of purpose, we assessed the centrality, self-organization, life aim, and derived meaning of personal strivings. Personal strivings were identified using open-ended descriptions of life pursuits to which people intentionally devote their time (Emmons, 1986). We adapted Emmon’s approach for the current study. We derived striving purpose items based on McKnight and Kashdan’s (2009) 3-part operationalization of purpose: centrality, self-organization, and life aim in addition to conceptual and empirical research indicating that purpose is a critical source of meaning (e.g., Leontieve, 2017; Martela & Steger, 2016).

In Part 1, participants chose their six most personally meaningful strivings at T1. As an aid, participants were given a list of broader categories their strivings may fall into (e.g., *“Working to improve the lives of others”*). In Part 2, participants answered follow-up questions about each of six strivings on a 7-point scale from 1 (*“not at all”)* to 7 (*“extremely*”). Items assessed centrality (*“It is part of who you are to pursue your striving”*), organization (*“You are clear about how to work toward your striving”*), the extent that each striving was an important life aim (*“You expect your striving to be important for you in the foreseeable future”*), and meaning/purpose derived from each striving (“*How much purpose and meaning do you derive from your striving*”). Finally, participants were asked to identify the single striving that best reflected their purpose. Answers keyed to their most purposeful striving were used as the basis for the present paper’s measurement.

To determine the best operationalization of purpose, we explored the factor structure of the derived scale. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted with one factor extracted by the minimum residual method (Harman & Jones, 1966). The final measure resulted in three items. Factor correlations between centrality and life aim, centrality and meaning, and life aim and meaning indicated acceptable separability. The alpha coefficient of the observed total score was .84.

***Happiness***

**Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).** The 4-item SHS assesses global subjective happiness using a 7-point Likert scale with different anchors (1 or *not a very happy person* to 7 or *a very happy person*; 1 or *less happy* to 7 or *more happy*; 1 or *not at all* to 7 or *a great deal*)based on individual items (“*Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on and get the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?*”). The SHS exhibits satisfactory convergent validity through its strong relationships with other happiness-related scales (such as the Satisfaction With Life Scale; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SHS demonstrates acceptable internal consistency in the present study (T1: α = .87; T2: α = .89 ; T3: α = .89) and prior work suggests acceptable test-retest reliability scores of 0.55 to 0.90 spaced 3 weeks to one year apart (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

**Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).** The SWLS is a 5-item scale which assesses one’s cognitive evaluation of life as desirable (“*In most ways, my life is close to my ideal*”). The SWLS was measured using a 7-point Likert scale (from 0 or *strongly disagree* to 6 or *strongly agree*) and demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (T1: α = .86). It demonstrates convergent validity through significant correlations to a single-item global life satisfaction measure and has lower correlations with the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5; Viet & Ware, 1983) indicating discriminant validity (van Beuningen, 2012). Test-retest reliability of the SWLS has proven to be acceptable at 0.82 across a 2-month period (Magyar-Moe, 2009).

***Well-Being***

**Balanced Measure of Psychological Needs (BMPN; Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012).** The 18-item BMPN uses a 5-point Likert scale (from 0 or *strongly disagree* to 4 or *strongly agree*) to measure a person’s general satisfaction of basic needs: autonomy (T1: α = .62; T2: α = .65; T3: α = .64), competency ( T1: α = .75; T2: α = .64; T3: α = .61), and belonging (T1: α = .70; T2: α = .65; T3: α = .67). Specifically, the BMPN uses 3 items each to assess autonomy satisfaction (“*I was free to do things my own way*”; T1: α = .65; T2: α = .70; T3: α = .67), autonomy dissatisfaction (“*I had to do things against my will*”; T1: α = .58; T2: α = .64; T3: α = .68), competency satisfaction (“*I was successfully completing difficult tasks and projects*”; T1: α = .85; T2: α = .81; T3: α = .82), competency dissatisfaction (“*I struggled doing something I should be good at*”; T1: α = .73; T2: α = .72; T3: α = .74), belonging satisfaction (“*I felt a sense of contact with people who care for me, and whom I care for*”; T1: α = .82; T2: α = .84; T3: α = .88), and belonging dissatisfaction (“*I was lonely*”; T1: α = .51; T2: α = .64; T3: α = .69). General satisfaction scores are created through calculating the average of satisfaction and reverse-coded dissatisfaction items. Evidence suggests that all three psychological need subscales are distinct and should be measured separately. While most subscales demonstrate acceptable internal consistency, those that fell below conventional standards are consistent with prior values (Sheldon & Hilpert, 2012). In the present study, the BMPN demonstrated acceptable construct validity through correlations with the Basic Psychological Needs Scale (BPNS; Gagne, 2003) and test-retest reliability over 6 months (T1 to T2; *r* = .50 for autonomy, *r* = .50 for competency, and *r* = .50 for belonging) and 18 months (T2 to T3; *r* = .52 for autonomy, *r* = .56 for competency, and *r* = .59 for belonging).

**Goal Specific Hope Scale (GSHS; Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wrobleski, 2009).** The GSHS is a 6-item scale which measures hope related to accomplishing a goal (T1: α = .88; T2: α = .89; T3: α = .88). It consists of two 3-item subscales which measure one’s agency in accomplishing the goal (“*I believe that I will meet this goal that I have set for myself*”; T1: α = .79; T2: α = .81; T3: α = .82) and their ability to visualize pathways towards completing the goal (“*If I had problems achieving this goal, I could think of lots of ways around these problems*”; T1: α = .85; T2: α = .81; T3: α = .77). Items are rated using an 8-point Likert scale (from 0 or *definitely false* to 7 or *definitely true*), and demonstrate acceptable internal consistency at all time points. The GSHS predicts one’s accomplishment of a goal better than the Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991), and construct validity is established through correlations of .30 to .48 between these measures (across 7 goals). The GSHS demonstrates acceptable test-retest reliability across 6-month (T1 to T2; .41 for total GSHS, *r* = .44 for pathways, and *r* = .34 for agency) and 18-month (T2 to T3; *r* = .47 for total GSHS, *r* = .44 for pathways, and *r* = .42 for agency) time points.

**Five-Dimensional Curiosity Scale (5DC; Kashdan et al., 2018).** The 5DC includes five 5-item scales that measure various dimensions of curiosity: joyous exploration (JE; *“I view challenging situations as an opportunity to grow and learn”;* T1: α = .84; T2: α = .88; T3: α = .87), deprivation sensitivity (DS; *“I can spend hours on a single problem because I just can't rest without knowing the answer”;* T1: α = .80; T2: α = .83; T3: α = .83), stress tolerance (reverse-scored) (ST; *“The smallest doubt can stop me from seeking out new experiences”;* T1: α = .82; T2: α = .86; T3: α = .82), social curiosity (SC; *“I ask a lot of questions to figure out what interests other people”;* T1: α = .81; T2: α = .85; T3: α = .84), and thrill-seeking (TS; *“Risk-taking is exciting to me”;* T1: α = .83; T2: α = .84; T3: α = .83). All items are rated using a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 or *does not describe me at all* to 7 or *completely describes me*) and demonstrate acceptable internal consistency at all time points. All curiosity dimensions demonstrate convergent validity with at least one measure of emotion or personality; for example, JE and ST are related to positive emotions, DS with openness to experience, SC with agreeableness, and TS with pleasure-seeking behaviors. However, the 5DC scores cannot be explained simply through the Big Five scores and each dimension remains relatively stable after 4-months, with *r* = .80 for JE, *r* = .67 for DS, *r* = .72 for ST, *r* = .59 for SC, and *r* = .79 for TS (Kashdan et al., 2018).

**Big Five Inventory-2-Short Form (BFI-2-S; Soto & John, 2017a**)*.* The 30-item BFI-2-S measures Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), Negative Emotionality (NE; formerly Neuroticism), and Open-Mindfulness (O-M; formerly Openness to Experience) on a 5-point Likert scale. Only C, NE, and O-M were examined in the present study (αs .71-.82).

**Self-Control Scale (SCS;** [**Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004**](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/ZMNQ)**).** The 10-item SCS measures the capacity to adapt the self to achieve a better fit with the environment. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (α = .80).

**Short Grit Scale–Perseverance (Grit-S; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009).** To measure perseverance in pursuing long-term goals, we used the authors’ slightly adjusted items for two of the four items from the original perseverance of effort subscale (from a forthcoming new version). Items included, *“I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge (c.f., “Setbacks don’t discourage me”* – Grit-S), *“I am a hard worker,”“I finish whatever I begin,”* and *“I am diligent. I never give up” (c.f., “I never give up”* – Grit-S) on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Data suggest that perseverance of effort demonstrates strong correlations with measures of well-being and achievement whereas the consistency of interests subscale has small to near-zero effects (Credé, Tynan, & Harms, 2017; [Disabato, Goodman, & Kashdan, 2019)](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/UJRa) (α = .85).

**Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS;** [**Brown & Ryan, 2003**](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/qbgB)**).** The 15-item MAAS items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale where higher scores indicate greater mindfulness (α = .93).

### Distress

**Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001).**The PHQ-9 uses nine diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) to assess depressive symptom severity (“*In the past two weeks, have you been bothered by… ​​Little interest or pleasure in doing things*”). Items are scored using a 4-point Likert scale (from 0 or *not at all* to 3 or *nearly every day*) based on symptom frequency within the past two weeks. The PHQ-9 demonstrates acceptable internal consistency (T1: α = .84; T2: α = .89; T3: α = .87) and convergent validity with measures of Major Depressive Disorder (Kroenke et al., 2001). The PHQ-9 exhibits discriminant validity through negative correlations with the WHO quality of life questionnaire (Molebatsi et al., 2020), and an acceptable test-retest reliability correlation of .95 taken 1 to 2 weeks after the initial questionnaire (Bian et al., 2010).

**State-Trait Inventory for Cognitive and Somatic Anxiety (STICSA; Grös, Antony, Simms, & McCabe, 2007).**The trait version of the 21-item STICSA measures cognitive (“*I think that others won’t approve of me*”; T1: α = .88; T2: α = .89; T3: α = .89) and somatic anxiety symptoms (“*My heart beats fast*”; T1: α = .84; T2: α = .90; T3: α = .86) using a 4-point Likert scale (from 0 or *not often at all* to 3 or *very often*), and demonstrated acceptable internal consistency across time points (T1: α = .90; T2: α = .93; T3: α = .92). STICSA indicates construct validity through the correlations with the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger et al., 1983; Roberts et al., 2015). The trait form of the STICSA has acceptable test-retest reliability, with a correlation of *r* = .66 for the cognitive subscale and *r* = .60 for the somatic subscale (Styck et al., 2022).

**Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998).** The 19-item SIAS assesses social anxiety by measuring fear and avoidance of social interactions (“*I have difficulty making eye contact with others*”) using a 5-point Likert scale (from 0 or *not at all characteristic or true of me* to 4 or *extremely true of me*). The SIAS shows acceptable construct validity in correlations to other anxiety measures such as the social phobia subscale of the Fear Questionnaire (Marks & Matthews, 1979) and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger et al., 1983), as well as acceptable internal consistency (T1: α = .94) and test-retest reliability of .92 across both 4-week and 12-week time points.

**Brief Experiential Avoidance Measure (BEAQ; Gámez et al., 2014).** As a shortened version of the Multidimensional Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (MEAQ; Gamez, Chmielewski, Kotov, Ruggero, & Watson, 2011), the 15-item BEAQ measures experiential avoidance (“*I’m quick to leave any situation that makes me feel uneasy*”). The BEAQ uses a 6-point Likert scale (from 1 or *strongly disagree* to 7 or *strongly agree*) and demonstrates acceptable internal consistency (T1: α = .86). The BEAQ demonstrates acceptable construct validity through correlations with other avoidance-related measures such as the MEAQ and the AAQ-II (Gámez et al., 2014), as well as acceptable test-retest reliability of *r* = .86 after one week (Schaeuffele et al., 2021).

**Distress Intolerance (McHugh & Otto, 2012).** The 10-item distress intolerance scale measures one’s inability to tolerate negative somatic and emotional states (“*It scares me when I am nervous*”). This scale was validated in clinical and non-clinical samples. These items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (from 0 or *never true* to 6 or *always true*) and demonstrate acceptable internal consistency (T1; α = .93). Construct validity was determined through comparisons of distress intolerance self-report scores and behavioral measures in both healthy and clinical populations (McHugh & Otto, 2012), and the scale has demonstrated acceptable test-retest reliability at *r* = .86 (Cakir, 2016).

***Experience Sampling***

**Day Reconstruction Survey.** Using the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM; [Kahneman et al., 2004](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/Z1vs)), participants were instructed to “think about yesterday as a story with five different chapters, or episodes” and select five episodes of any length that stood out as being particularly meaningful/memorable. Starting with their first episode from the previous day then proceeding chronologically, participants answered questions about their activities (using the Ultra-Brief Assessment of Situational Characteristics; [Rauthmann & Sherman, 2016)](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/vx4s) and another, more exhaustive list of activities created for this survey), interaction partners, emotions (using an affect grid adapted from [Russell, Weiss, & Mendelsohn, 1989](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/cwgO)), goals (difficulty, competence, effort, distress, joy, meaning, control, values-consistency, progress, and autonomy; adapted from [Emmons, 1986](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/bDaY)), negative and positive experiences, and emotion regulation strategies (adapted from [Heiy & Cheavens, 201](https://paperpile.com/c/kdlxet/ibV1)4) (see “Day Reconstruction Survey” in Supplemental Materials).

***Idiographic Goal Strivings***

**Personal Strivings Packet***.* We expanded upon Emmons (1986) to assess broader life strivings. In Part 1, participants chose their six most personally meaningful strivings at the present time. As an aid, participants were given a list of broader categories their strivings may fall into (e.g., *“Working to improve the lives of others”*). In Part 2, participants answered follow-up questions about each of six strivings on a 1-7 scale from *“Not at all”* to *“Extremely*.” Items assessed centrality (*“It is part of who you are to pursue your striving”*), organization (*“You are clear about how to work toward your striving”*), the extent that each striving was an important life aim (*“You expect your striving to be important for you in the foreseeable future”*), meaning and purpose derived from pursuit, effort, and success. Each Part 2 item was averaged across the six strivings for analyses. In Part 3, participants evaluated the extent to which their six strivings were in harmony/conflict. A research assistant described a hypothetical situation in which pursuing a striving (e.g., earn at least a 3.0 GPA) could negatively impact progress another (e.g., spend more quality time with friends and family) while other strivings may work harmoniously (e.g., striving for a more regular sleep schedule and striving to eat healthier). Participants rated the impact of their first striving (Striving 1) on Strivings 2 through 6 using a -2 (*very negative*) to +2 (*very positive*) where “0” indicated a *neutral* impact (see “Personal Strivings Packet” in Supplemental Materials)*.”*

### Stressful Life Event Interview and Personal Growth

**Stressful Life Events Interview.** We used a modified Life Events Schedule (LES) that contains a list of 134 life events that cause stress. This version of the LES has sufficient psychometrics (Needles & Abramson, 1990; Alloy & Clements, 1992). At T1, we asked participants to select events which they experienced within the past six months, and rate subjective impact using a 5-point scale (0 or *not at all* to 4 or *very much*). Based on these ratings, participants reported the top 5 most stressful events, upon which we based our follow-up questions. At T2 and T3, participants were asked to choose and subjectively rate three more distressing life events from the previous six months. By the end of the study, participants had identified and rated eleven life events that caused them stress.

At each follow-up, participants rated perceived stress (“*Because of [life event] I feel stress*”), ability to deal with each event (“*I feel I can deal with [life event]*”), ability to control consequences of each event (“*I feel I can control the consequences of [life event]*”), and impairment in work (“*Because of [life event], my ability to work is impaired*”), home (“*Because [life event], my home management (cleaning, tidying, paying bills, shopping, looking after home) is impaired*”), social leisure (“*Because of [life event], my social leisure activities (with other people such as in visits, outings, home entertaining, parties, bars, clubs, and/or dating) are impaired*”), private leisure (“*Because of [life event], my private leisure activities (done alone, such as reading, exercising, walking, collecting, gardening, or something else) are impaired*”), and relationships (“*Because of [life event], my ability to form and maintain close relationship with others, including those I live with, is impaired*”) due to each ongoing distressing life event. The SLE uses a 5-point Likert scale (0 or *very slightly or not at all* to 4 or *extremely*), and total scores were calculated through averaging the value of each item across all events.

Post-traumatic growth was measured at T3 using the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996) for each event, whether ongoing or not. Specifically, we selected a series of items from each PTGI subscale to assess how participants perceive relating to others (“*I have a great sense of closeness with others*”; α = .82, new possibilities in their life (“*I established a new path for myself*”; α = .70), their personal strength (“*I discovered that I am strong than I thought I was*”; α = .66), spiritual changes (“*I have better understanding of spiritual matters*”; α = .78), and overall appreciation of life (“*I changed my priorities about what is important in life*”; α = .66). The PTGI also used a 5-point Likert scale (0 or *I did not experience this change as a result of my life event* to 4 or *I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my life event*), and each subscale was scored through averaging items across events, and the total score was the mean of all items (α = .92).

# Data Analytic Approach

A series of hierarchical regressions were run with T1 SBP or BPIL entered as a predictor of T1, T2, and T3 distress, well-being, and life event outcomes. When possible, previous assessments of each outcome were entered as a covariate to examine residualized change in outcomes.

# Results

Means and standard deviations for SBP, BPIL, trait distress, trait well-being, and life event outcomes for T1, T2, and T3 are provided in Table 2.

## Well-Being

### Correlations with trait well-being at T1

In line with hypotheses, T1 SBP and BPIL were positively correlated with T1 subjective happiness, general and specific competence need satisfaction, overall psychological flexibility toward and harnessing distress in service of goal pursuit; overall hope and agency towards a specific goal; and joyous exploration. Further, T1 SBP and BPIL were negatively correlated with avoidance of distress while pursuing goals. T1 SBP was the only purpose measure positively correlated with T1 deprivation sensitivity and social curiosity, while T1 BPIL was the only purpose measure positively correlated with life satisfaction, general and specific belonging need satisfaction, general and specific autonomy need satisfaction, acceptance of distress in service of goal pursuit, pathways towards a specific goal, and stress tolerance. Similarly, T1 BPIL was the only purpose measure negatively correlated with dissatisfaction of the needs for belonging and competence. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL were correlated with autonomy need dissatisfaction or thrill seeking. As expected, most T1 trait well-being measures demonstrated positive correlations with one another, except for T1 needs dissatisfaction for belonging, competence, and autonomy, which largely demonstrated negative correlations with other T1 trait well-being measures and positive correlations with one another (see Table 5).

### Predicting changes in trait well-being at T2 and T3

T1 SBP and BPIL predicted increases in T2 overall hope, agency, and pathways towards a specific goal, and trended towards predicting increases in T2 specific competence need satisfaction. T1 BPIL predicted increases in T2 total psychological flexibility towards and acceptance of distress while pursuing goals and decreases in avoidance of distress while pursuing goals. T1 SBP predicted increases in T2 specific belonging need satisfaction, and unexpectedly, predicted increases in belonging need dissatisfaction. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted changes in T2 life satisfaction; total belonging, competence, and autonomy need satisfaction; autonomy need satisfaction or dissatisfaction; harnessing distress towards goal pursuit; joyous exploration; deprivation sensitivity; stress tolerance; or thrill-seeking (see Table 6).

T1 SBP predicted increases in T3 subjective happiness, while T1 BPIL predicted increases in T3 specific belonging and competence needs satisfaction. T1 SBP trended towards predicting increases in life satisfaction, total autonomy need satisfaction, and unexpectedly, specific belonging need satisfaction, and decreases in T3 avoidance of distress while pursuing goals. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted changes in T3 total belonging and competence needs satisfaction; or autonomy need satisfaction and dissatisfaction; overall psychological flexibility, acceptance of or harnessing distress while pursuing goals; overall hope, agency, and pathways towards a specific goal; joyous exploration; deprivation sensitivity; stress tolerance; social curiosity; or thrill seeking (see Table 6).

## Distress

### Correlations with trait distress at T1

T1 BPIL and SBP demonstrated a small positive correlation with one another. Expectedly, T1 depression, anxiety, social anxiety, experiential avoidance (as measured both by the BMEAQ and AAQ-II), and distress intolerance were negatively associated with T1 BPIL and positively associated with one another. T1 SBP was negatively associated with T1 experiential avoidance, as measured by the AAQ-II. In contrast, while T1 SBP exhibited negative relationships with all other T1 trait distress measures, none of these relationships were significant (see Table 3).

### Predicting changes in trait distress at T2 and T3

Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted changes in depression or anxiety at T2 or T3. While not significant, T1 SBP and BPIL unexpectedly exhibited positive relationships with T2 depression and anxiety. Similarly, T1 BPIL exhibited a positive relationship with T3 anxiety. Consistent with predictions, T1 SBP and BPIL exhibited negative relationships with T3 depression, and T1 SBP exhibited a negative relationship with T3 anxiety (See Table 4).

## Stressful Life Events Outcomes

### Predicting stressful life event outcomes at T2 and T3

T1 SBP and BPIL predicted greater ability to deal with T1 stressful life events at T2. T1 BPIL predicted greater control of consequences from T1 stressful life events at T2. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted stress, work impairment, home impairment, social leisure impairment, private leisure impairment, or relationship impairment related to T1 stressful life events at T2 (see Table 7).

T1 SBP predicted less control of consequences and home impairment from T2 stressful life events at T2. T1 BPIL trended towards predicting greater ability to deal with T2 stressful life events at T2. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted stress, work impairment, social leisure impairment, private leisure impairment, or relationship impairment related to T2 stressful life events at T2 (see Table 7).

T1 SBP and BPIL predicted greater strength from T1 stressful life events at T3. T1 BPIL predicted greater ability to deal with, overall post-traumatic growth and spirituality, while T1 SBP trended towards predicting greater ability to deal with overall post-traumatic growth and spirituality related to T1 stressful life events at T3. T1 BPIL trended toward positively predicting new paths and priority changes from T1 stressful life events at T3. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted stress, control of consequences, work impairment, home impairment, social leisure impairment, private leisure impairment, relationship impairment, or closer relationships with others related to T1 stressful life events at T3 (see Table 7).

T1 SBP and BPIL predicted greater ability to deal with T2 stressful life events at T3. T1 BPIL predicted greater control of consequences, overall post-traumatic growth, closer relationships with others, new paths, strength, spirituality, and priority changes, and less relationship impairment from T2 stressful life events at T3. T1 BPIL trended towards predicting more work impairment from T2 stressful life events at T3. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted stress, home impairment, social leisure impairment, or private leisure impairment from T2 stressful life events at T3 (see Table 7).

T1 BPIL predicted greater ability to deal with, while T1 SBP trended towards predicting greater ability to deal with T3 stressful life events at T3. T1 BPIL predicted less control of consequences from T3 stressful life events at T3, and T1 SBP trended towards predicting greater social leisure impairment, and relationship impairment from T3 stressful life events at T3. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted stress, work impairment, home impairment, or private leisure impairment from T3 stressful life events at T3 (See Table 7).

### Predicting changes in stressful life event outcomes at T3

T1 SBP trended toward predicting increases in relationship impairment from and T1 BPIL trended toward predicting increases in ability to deal with T1 stressful life events at T3. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted changes in stress, control of consequences, work impairment, home impairment, social leisure impairment, or private leisure impairment from T1 stressful life events at T3.

T1 SBP and BPIL predict increases in perceived ability to deal with T2 stressful life events at T3. T1 BPIL predicted increases in control of consequences and work impairment, and decreases in relationship impairment from T2 stressful life events at T3. Neither T1 SBP or BPIL predicted changes in stress, home impairment, social leisure impairment, or private leisure impairment from T2 stressful life events at T3.

# Discussion

Purpose demonstrated stronger and more consistent relationships with measures of well-being as opposed to distress, and those relationships were particularly pronounced when purpose was measured nomothetically versus ideographically. It may be that a person’s drive to pursue what matters to them is more relevant to the positive rather than the negative aspects of their lives, and that the extent of its influence is best understood when assessed across space and time as opposed to when it is tied to a specific goal.

People who reported more purpose tended to report higher levels of well-being concurrently and over time. This is not surprising given that purpose originated in the positive psychology literature and is often measured as an indicator of well-being (CITE; CITE). Likewise, previous research has demonstrated that purpose predicts resilient goal pursuit (CITE), happiness (CITE), life satisfaction (CITE), character strengths (CITE), and needs satisfaction (CITE).

In contrast, purpose had little impact on distress. While purpose was associated with fewer symptoms and less avoidance of aversive experiences at the samepoint, it did not predict changes in anxiety or depression over time. These findings may seem surprising given psychotherapeutic approaches such as CBT for chronic pain, ACT and Logotherapy, which emphasize goals, values, and meaning in mitigating psychopathology (CITE; CITE; CITE). Yet, with the exception of Logotherapy, these approaches do not target purpose-related constructs alone. They also target maladaptive emotion regulation through strategies such as cognitive restructuring, problem-solving, defusion, and acceptance. Further, in CBT for chronic pain and ACT, emotion regulation strategies are intended to improve personally meaningful functional outcomes rather than solely reduce symptoms (CITE; CITE). Imagine a person whose purpose in life is uplifting marginalized communities, but she also struggles with major depressive episodes. If she does not have effectives strategies for upregulating her mood, she may not have the motivation to engage in advocacy efforts such as coalition building and public speaking.

Alternatively, the present results may be better explained by how purpose, well-being, and distress were operationalized.

* Mental health
  + Anxiety as threat to meaning
  + Depression as loss of meaning
  + Purpose as antidote

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