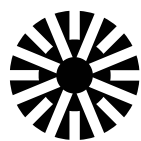




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NOVEMBER 20, 2018



Americans who find meaning in these four areas have higher life satisfaction

BY [PATRICK VAN KESSEL](#) AND [ADAM HUGHES](#)

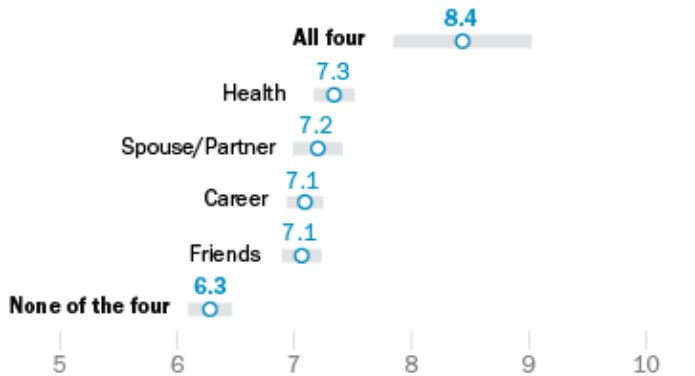


Discovering where people find meaning in life is a challenging task. One way is to give them an opportunity to write, in their own words, about the things that give them a sense

of meaning and satisfaction with their lives. When we asked U.S. adults in a survey conducted last year, respondents mentioned many different topics, with family emerging as [the most common source of meaning](#). But of the 30 topics that were studied, only four were universally associated with higher levels of life satisfaction: a person’s good health, romantic partner, friends and career.

Four areas of life universally associated with higher life satisfaction

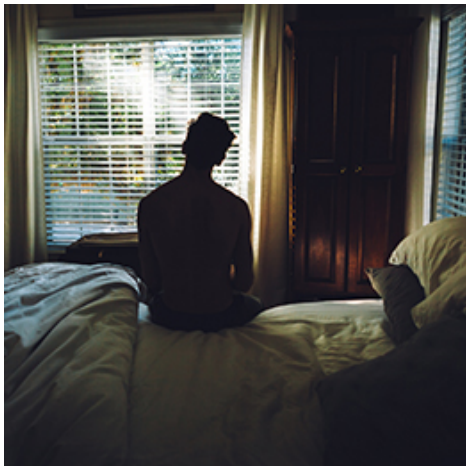
Average life satisfaction rating among those who mentioned _____ when describing what gives them meaning in life



Note: These differences persist in a statistical model that controls for demographic factors and response length and tests the associations between mentioning one of 30 topics in an open-ended response and respondents’ life satisfaction ratings on a 0-10 scale. The shaded region represents the standard error of each estimate, a measure of uncertainty.
Source: Survey conducted Sept. 14-28, 2017, among U.S. adults.

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Regardless of age, income, religion and other demographic factors, Americans who mentioned these parts of their lives as meaningful were more likely to rate their lives as satisfying than those who did not, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of responses from 4,492 adults surveyed in September 2017.



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Respondents were asked to rate their lives on a scale of zero to 10 before providing their open-ended responses. On average, Americans rated their life satisfaction at a 6.7 on a zero-to-10 scale with a majority choosing a value between five and eight. A follow-up question asked what made their lives meaningful or kept them going.

These are the four areas where people with higher life ratings said they found a sense of meaning:

Friends. One-in-five Americans mentioned friends when describing where they find meaning in life. “Our best friends live right across the street and we see them often, our kids get along like siblings and spend almost every free minute with each other,” wrote one respondent. “We are so close to our friends that our families started planning vacations together and doing them with friends is an amazing experience.” Those who mentioned friends rated their life satisfaction 6% higher on the zero-to-10 scale than those who did not.

Career. Americans’ jobs and careers had a substantial bearing on how highly they rated their lives, and the topic was mentioned by a third of all respondents when they were asked to describe what gives meaning to their lives. One respondent said, “I work in healthcare and when I can make a positive difference in the life of a patient I find that rewarding.” Another said, “My career is as close as realistically possible to my dream job. I’m allowed to exercise my creativity to come up with solutions to problems, and I’m handsomely compensated.” Those who mentioned their job or career rated their lives 8% higher than those who didn’t mention the topic, regardless of any other topics they may have mentioned.

Romantic partner or spouse. One-in-five Americans specifically brought up their spouse or romantic partner as someone who affects their sense of meaning and satisfaction. Regardless of their relationship status, those who mentioned their partner tended to rate their lives 9% higher than those who didn’t mention a partner. For some, it was the first thing that came to mind: “Being with my girlfriend is something I find very satisfying. We have a lot in common, and I never thought I’d find someone as special as her.”

Gratitude was a common theme among those who mentioned their partners: “I wake up every day knowing that I have met the love of my life and will spend the rest of my life satisfied in this regard.” Another respondent expressed a similar sentiment: “My husband and our son are the best things that I’ve ever been blessed to have in my life. I am grateful for them every day.” Others found particular meaning in being able to weather the

difficulties together: “I enjoy the companionship of my wife ... we’ve been through a lot, together, and we’re still best friends.”

Good health. Many Americans mentioned good health for themselves or their loved ones when describing what gives them a sense of meaning and satisfaction – 16% did so. Some were thankful for being able to maintain their health as they have aged: “I am strong and fit, and while I am facing the physical changes that you face as you age, I am doing what can be done to defer them.” Others were thankful for having medical support: “A doctor who helps to keep me healthy and improves my quality of life allowing me to take care of myself and living independently.”

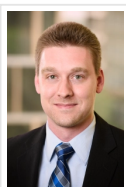
Some were simply glad that they were healthy and free of medical issues: “Good health. No worries about chronic medical issues or expensive medical care.” Others were simply thankful for being able to care for their family and keep them healthy: “Being able to provide for my family. To give them happy healthy, loving lives is most important, and meaningful to me.” Being healthy or having a healthy family clearly matters to Americans’ sense of meaning: Those who mentioned the topic rated their lives more highly than those who mentioned any other topic, placing themselves 11% higher on the life satisfaction scale than other Americans.

Note: See full methodology [here](#) (PDF).

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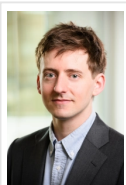
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