**What Makes a Good Life?**

You have a steady job that pays the bills and puts your abilities to good use. You have loving relationships with your spouse, your children, extended family, and close friends. Your house provides enough space and security. Your golf league gives you a chance to unwind. Your volunteer work improves your community.

The specific details might vary, but most people would consider this scenario the basis for a pretty good life. Yet many of us who do check these boxes often feel like there's something missing.

A fascinating new study [published by Affective Science](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42761-020-00011-z#:~:text=The%20emotional%20correlates%20of%20psychological,but%20negative%20emotions%20less%20intensely%20) asked nearly 4,000 people from 9 countries (including the U.S.) what kind of life they wanted. The results suggest that there's an important dimension to improving Return on Life that many of us may be overlooking.

**1. A happy life**

Researchers began by asking participants to write down a simple statement that described their vision of an ideal life. Then, participants were instructed to rank 15 terms according to how closely they applied to that ideal vision.

The first five terms characterized happiness:

* Stable
* Comfortable
* Simple
* Happy
* Pleasant

If these words describe your life, it sounds like your basic emotional and physical needs are met. You feel good about where you are, and you most likely have the tools and long-term perspective necessary to make plans for where you want to go.

And, perhaps most importantly, with this groundwork in place, you can start building out other aspects of your life that will be more rewarding.

**2. A meaningful life**

The next group of words were meant to correlate with the sense of meaning people wanted in their lives:

* Meaningful
* Fulfilling
* Virtuous
* Sense of purpose
* Involves devotion

It's here that people who are truly intentional about their lives move past their own needs and start thinking about the bigger picture. Countless studies have drawn strong connections between doing good, happiness, and even longevity. People with the highest levels of job satisfaction are often less focused on their income level than they are on how their work makes life better for other people.

Meaning can become increasingly important to us as we age out of the workforce as well. Folks who kept their noses to the grindstone, doing work they didn't necessarily love to support their families, often struggle filling their days in retirement. On the other hand, retirees who did make meaning an important part of their working lives often turn to volunteer work, part-times jobs, or mentorship as a means to perpetuate that important sense of purpose.

**3. A psychologically rich life**

Not surprisingly, words under the "happy" and "meaningful" categories rated the highest among respondents.

But there was a third group of words that completed the picture of a good life for most people:

* Eventful
* Dramatic
* Interesting
* Full of surprise
* Psychologically rich

Why does the initial jolt of happiness after a big-ticket purchase wear off so quickly? Why do so many people change careers, move across the country, or enroll in continuing education classes?

Because if our lives are so "perfect" that we aren't challenged or surprised, we get bored. We need our curiosity to be stimulated. We need problems that we can only solve by rewiring how we think. We need obstacles to overcome. We need to try new things and make mistakes. We need opportunities to learn and grow.

Finding the right mix of happiness, meaning, and psychological richness is an ongoing process. You might find that the emphasis you place on each shifts as you progress through various transitions, and particularly as you near retirement. Let’s discuss how our suite of Life-Centered Planning tools can help you align and realign your assets to these important goals every step of the way.