

Does Purpose Only Benefit the Young?

We are seeing a revolution in later-life engagement, as many people remain active into their 70s, 80s and 90s. Research demonstrates the vital connection between commitment and good health.



In what ways do the “retirement” years provide new opportunities for creative, purposeful activity?

In recent years, scholars have been finding that positive, focused intentions can make all the difference for people in terms of activity, success and life fulfillment. For example, Stanford University psychologist Bill Damon has demonstrated various ways that youth can be encouraged to explore positive

purpose in their lives and the effects it has on early life: better relationships, better health and better academic achievement. But is a focus on exploring positive purpose beneficial only for the young?

We are witnessing a revolution in later-life engagement, as many people remain active into their 70s, 80s and even 90s. At the same time, research is accumulating on the positive effects of

staying engaged, active and vital. Patricia Boyle of Rush University Medical Center has found that people who look for ways to have more positive purpose in their lives may also limit the progression of disease. Her research shows that “engaging in meaningful and purposeful activities promotes cognitive health in old age.”

Boyle’s most recent study went even further to reveal that

“mental health, in particular positive psychological factors such as having a purpose in life, are emerging as very potent determinants of health outcomes.” She also discovered that it is important for each individual to find his or her own particular purpose, as it differs for everyone, and reaping the rewards seems to be tied to this observation. Boyle’s is just one of many recent studies that suggest that explorations of positive purpose and activity make a big difference in long-term quality of life.

Not surprisingly, the emerging picture of positive purpose, health and vitality has attracted the interest of those in the nonprofit sector as well as government. Encore.org, an organization spearheaded by social entrepreneur Marc Freedman, was an early entrant

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into the field with its annual Purpose Prize, which highlights inspirational “second acts.” It also gave us Experience Corps (now run by AARP), which bridged generations and enabled older adults to mentor struggling students. Encore.org has expanded to offer special fellowships, education and networking services for older adults. These combined efforts have impacted and improved the lives of tens of thousands of people.



The benefit goes both ways, and we are starting to see “reverse mentoring,” in which younger generations share perspectives and new skills with older people.

Other organizations, such as the Eisner Foundation, have looked at creative ways to support intergenerational learning for the betterment of the community. The Eisner Foundation points out that intergenerational activity is not just nice; it is necessary. Intergenerational work allows those who have built up an

experiences. For social, political and financial reasons, it would not be unrealistic to see future governments enact tax incentives for companies and individuals who are committed to later-life engagement. Many agencies are working to address the challenges associated with living longer lives, and with research such as Boyle’s coming to the forefront, finding ways to encourage purpose in retirement could help alleviate some of these concerns.

Exploration of beneficial purpose is not only for the young. As this outlook grows, we will see a big change in traditional concepts of retirement and fresh thinking about staying engaged during later life. Instead of a career path that winds down, or simply working longer to pay the bills, the focus may shift to purpose that evolves as we age. One can imagine how such a shift in mindset could transform individuals, communities and society.

Ericka Peterson contributed to this article.

Such connectivity allows older adults to engage in more productive, satisfying