



Meaningful Living

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A complex world

Our modern world is a diverse and fascinating place. But it is also a very complex and challenging place, full of consumerism, materialism, and virtual ‘realities.’

Some say we, as a human family, are in an existential, or spiritual, crisis. Many are pointing to the curious finding that depression and suicide rates have increased significantly worldwide since the end of World War II, despite the fact that most western countries have at least doubled their spending power (Seligman, 2002).

Why is that? We don’t know for sure, but the research is quite clear on one thing at least: as long as our basic needs are met, more money does not make us substantially happier. To feel truly happy and healthy on all levels—physically, emotionally and psychologically—we need to feel that there is meaning in our lives.

What does it mean to have ‘meaning’ in our lives?

While what is meaningful to one person can be something very different to another, there is one common denominator for what people, across cultures, races and religions, report as giving them meaningful happiness: it is that of being something for others. What all definitions share is an element of feeling inter-connected with someone or something other than oneself, and as importantly, feeling that one is able to *contribute* to those connections (Nielsen, 2011).

Whether it is contributing to one’s family, friends, the community, the environment, or a cause, what we humans describe as meaningful in our lives most often contain an element of having the opportunity to give of ourselves to someone or something beyond ourselves. The Greeks called it ‘eudaemonia’—the meaningful life.

Giving is receiving - literally!

Research shows that giving to others is one of the strongest predictors of increasing our happiness and health (Post, Neimark, & Moss, 2007). Personal pleasure is not to be dismissed, but it is having meaning in our lives that accounts for our deepest levels of happiness. When we give to others, we not only have higher and more meaningful levels of happiness, but we also are more resilient in the face of adversity and we recuperate more quickly from traumatic events.

Several studies have even found that giving is strongly associated with reduced mortality. For example, Oman, Thoreson, and McMahon (1999) followed almost 2000 individuals over the age of 55 for five years, and those who volunteered for two or more organizations had a 44 per cent lower likelihood of dying within the period of the study—14 per cent lower than those who exercised four times a week.

As is obvious from the studies showing the intimate links between generosity and our immune systems, giving is not just healthy for our physical health and longevity, but also for our psychological and emotional health. Thoits and Hewitt (2001) found that giving to others enhanced happiness, life satisfaction, self esteem, sense of control over life, physical health, and lowered depression in a sample of 2681 individuals. Several studies confirm that giving has a significant positive impact on mental health, happiness, hopefulness and social effectiveness (e.g. Billig, 2000; Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006).



*“We need to give
to ourselves to give
to others”*

Giving as a principle of living

Giving can be seen as a way of being, rather than any overt action as such. For example, just five minutes of gratitude will cause a shift in the nervous system to a calm state, called ‘parasympathetic dominance’, which is where heart, breathing, blood pressure and brain rhythm are synchronized (McCraty & Childre, 2004). In another study, after a month of practicing appreciation for 15 minutes a day, 30 individuals experienced a 100 per cent increase in the beneficial hormone dehydroepiandrosterone, as well as a 30 per cent reduction in the stress hormone cortisol (McCraty, Barriou-Choplin, Rozman, Atkinson, & Watkins, 1998). Gratitude, in other words, as an example of more subtle and internal ways of ‘giving,’ produces very similar health benefits to overt giving.

All of this doesn’t mean, of course, that we should aim never to be sad or have conflicted feelings. Beyond happy and sad is possibly the idea of treating all feelings, difficult or pleasant, with compassion and understanding, because it is through a generous and loving attitude toward ourselves that we manage to learn from negative emotions and actions, and ultimately, rise above such events.

Giving to others starts with giving to oneself

Research shows that in order to be able to give to others effectively—to live the meaningful life—we also need to give to ourselves (Post et al., 2007). In fact, if we don’t give to ourselves properly, we not only find it harder to give to others, but we also don’t receive the same health benefits from our giving. When we fly, we are told that in the event of emergency to put on the oxygen masks ourselves before we attend to others. In the same way it is hard to give to others if we don’t give to ourselves sufficiently of the ‘oxygen’ needed to be able to share of ourselves.

Helpful ways of being aware of how to give to and look after oneself are captured in the acronym SELF CARE AIMS (Nielsen, 2013b). All of these strategies have a strong evidence-base in the literature. In other words, they work!

SELF CARE AIMS

Sleep

Most adults need 7-8 hours of sleep each night. Sleep helps us boost our immune system and fight disease and mood swings. Try to avoid working or using technology before going to bed, as it has been shown to disturb or prevent sleep.

For more tips on healthy sleeping, visit: <http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au>

Exercise

The human body is made to move. Exercise not only improves our physical health but also increases endorphins, which fight depression and other mood disorders. Try to be active every day.

For more tips on exercise, visit: <http://www.physicalactivityaustralia.org.au>

Love & Laughter

We need to nurture relationships with our partner, friends and family, and we need to laugh and have fun with them. Meaningful and nurturing relationships help us de-stress and re-charge our batteries, and account for much of our mental health and happiness. Giving to self in this domain is about understanding how important the love and laughter we share with others is to us, and making sure that we nurture those relationships for that very reason.

Food

Our bodies need healthy food and to be hydrated for optimal health and happiness. Processed food, high in sugar and fat, has been linked to a number of diseases, including diabetes, high blood pressure, heart conditions and mood disorders.

For more tips on healthy eating visit: <http://www.nutritionaustralia.org>

Creativity

How creative we are varies from person to person, but most of us need a creative outlet in our lives. Whether it is creating or listening to music, painting, or simply having a hobby-craft, to feel that we can express our 'inner' self in some way can have a very positive impact on our health and happiness.

Achievement	Whether we are high achievers or not, humans need to feel that they are achieving something. This relates back to the meaningful life, as we tend to value the achievements that are of benefit to not only ourselves the most. Achievements can be small (e.g. reading a good book) or big (e.g. getting a degree) but we need to make sure that we are achieving something worthwhile regularly, preferably daily.
Residence	Whether we live in a camper van or a mansion, we need to feel that there is a space where we can be ourselves, and where we can recharge and gather ourselves. Luxurious things are not important, but order, cleanliness and aesthetic beauty are all aspects that tend to have a positive impact on our mood and state of mind.
Environment	Why is it that hospital patients who have a window with a view to nature recuperate quicker and need less pain medication than those patients who have no nature outside their window? We don't know exactly, but we do know that there are tangible health benefits from being in nature. Try and be in the natural environment daily.
Autonomy	<p>Self-determination theory (SDT) has shown that a significant portion of our happiness is determined by the extent to which we feel that we are free to make our own choices in life. Whilst many may live in a free country, we often make ourselves 'slaves' to, for example, technology, finding it hard to switch off when we are not at work. A significant part of looking after ourselves is to monitor and make sure that we have down time, and regularly feel a sense of freedom in our lives.</p> <p>Visit http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org for more information about SDT</p>

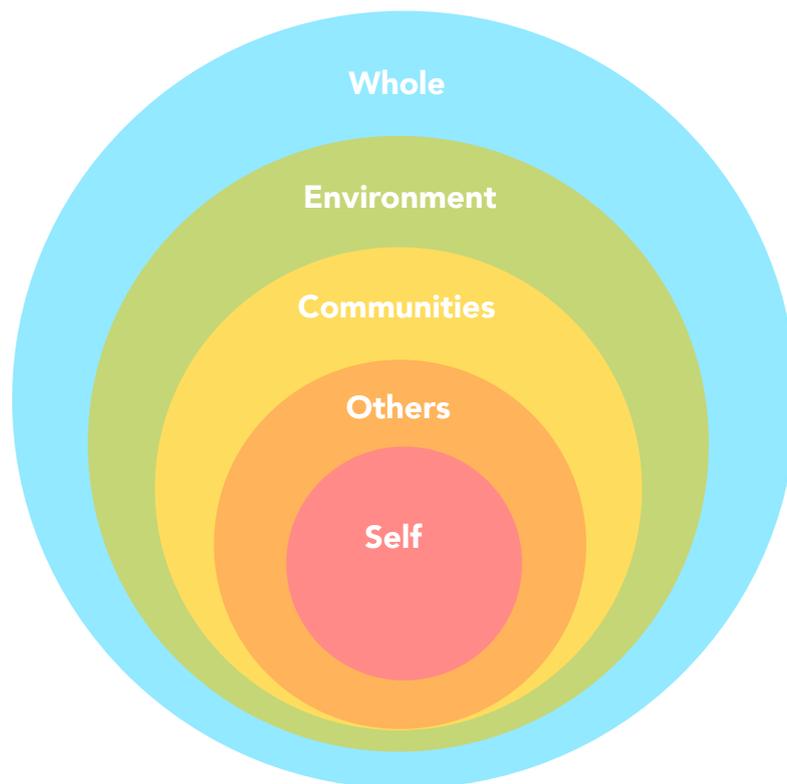
Income	<p>Money is an important resource and necessity for living. How we handle money, therefore, is important for our peace of mind. We need to be responsible and handle money with care, not accruing debt. At the same time, an income can be a means with which we can also give to others or worthy causes—and thus it relates to our meaningful living as well.</p>
Meditation & Mindfulness	<p>M is for meditation and mindfulness, as these two are very related. Studies show significant benefits to our health and happiness from practicing meditation and mindfulness. There are many ways to meditate and to become more mindful, but a key element is the active engagement of positive thoughts. Again, there are interesting links to the meaningful life, in that some of the greatest benefits of meditation and mindfulness have been observed when thoughts of compassion, understanding and empathy are employed to self and others.</p> <p>For meditation and mindfulness resources visit: http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/features/meditation-toolkit/ and http://www.freemindfulness.org</p>
Study (the world and self)	<p>Our brain cells are like our muscles—use them or lose them. Whether we are reading good literature for personal development or we are educating ourselves to better our careers, when we study we develop and strengthen synapses in the brain. It is also good to write in a personal diary in order to study oneself. To keep such a diary is to be in dialogue with the many parts of our complex natures, analysing and interpreting thoughts, feelings and actions for the sake of improvement.</p>

Most of us do not have all of the above areas in perfect balance all the time. But if we are at least aware of the key elements we need to look after, we can consciously work on having balance in these domains over time, rather than in any particular moment. For example, we may be behind with exercise one week but if we are aware of that, we can catch up the next. The SELF CARE AIMS (Nielsen, 2013b) help us to be aware of what we need to juggle in order to be healthy and happy—even if it is a ‘balance in motion’ most of the time.

Ways of giving

By the same token that one has to give to oneself in order to give to others, the meaningful life doesn't stop with just looking after oneself either. Looking after oneself is only the beginning, as it provides a steppingstone towards living the meaningful life.

The Five Domains of Giving (Nielsen, 2013a) is a way of thinking about giving as existing on a continuum from self (micro) to the whole (macro):



Self

Many people give to others but do not look after themselves sufficiently, which tends to decrease the benefits and enjoyment of giving in both the giver and the receiver. We must learn to give to ourselves, in order to have a surplus with which to give to others. Some evidence-based areas in which to give to self are explained above in SELF CARE AIMS (Nielsen, 2013b).

Others

Giving to others can involve giving to those who are closest to us, such as family, friends and co-workers, but it can also include doing random acts of kindness to strangers and people with whom we come into contact. What matters is not so much the frequency of the giving but rather the quality of such interactions, trying to be 'really there' for others.

Communities

Giving to the communities around us can involve giving to our workplace, volunteering, or supporting various aid organisations. Whether the giving is local or global, connecting with such communities expands not only our field of generosity but also our awareness of people outside our immediate circle.

Natural environment

The natural environment is a great healer of our physical and mental health, and giving back to the natural environment has perhaps never been more important than it is in our present day context. Think of how you can reduce your carbon footprint through tangible acts of giving, such as political activism, recycling, making your home more energy efficient and buying locally.

See <http://www.livinggreener.gov.au/home> for more tips.

The whole

The 'whole' can mean different things to different people, and that is the purpose of calling it the 'whole.' But it captures the idea that giving doesn't have to stop with the dimensions described above, but can include the planet, humanity as a whole, and even the stars above us. Whether one is spiritual, religious, or simply 'world conscious,' feeling that one is encompassed in the 'whole' and giving to the 'whole' is a way in which we can give to something 'bigger than ourselves'.

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