

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Brain Health Matters and Spirituality and Purpose Makes a Difference

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Today, amid the bustle of the holiday season, give a gift to yourself and take time to gain a new perspective about your sense of overall purpose. The BHI is looking at the role spirituality and sense of meaning play in protecting your brain health.

The need to feel useful, to have a purpose, is built into us as humans. The disturbances we experienced this past year have caused many of us to question the meaning in our life. It is hard to achieve spiritual health — to feel at peace with our lives — while we are dealing with angst, fear, chaos, and disruption. As a result, many of us may be feeling as if we have lost our sense of *connectedness* to deeper values.

Having a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives feels like our reason for living and can have profound effects on our spiritual health, which affects both our brain and body. Studies in the growing field of purpose in life research continue to show that finding meaning in our lives can increase our resilience to stress and improve our mood and brain performance, while preventing memory loss, slowing cognitive decline, and decreasing our risk of dying early.

One study even suggests that having experiences that expand our sense of meaning can lead to greater satisfaction with our life on a deeper level, and are valuable when it comes to increasing our overall health and well-being. In another study, purpose has been shown to be neuroprotective (brain-preserving). Older people at risk for dementia with a high purpose in life were only half as likely to develop Alzheimer's disease than those lacking a purpose.

A study published last year by *JAMA Network* said the connection between a low level of purpose in life and death remained true despite how rich or poor the study participants were, and regardless of gender, race, or education level. The researchers also suggested that having a life purpose appeared to be more important for decreasing risk of death than drinking, smoking, or exercising regularly.

We are all at our best when we dedicate part of our being, part of our living, to something greater than ourselves, according to Chris Palmer, MD, director of the Department of Postgraduate and Continuing Education at McLean Hospital and an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. In a recent article in *Psychology Today*, he said there are many things that give our lives purpose. To help find our purpose, he suggests we start by asking ourselves the big questions: Why am I alive? What do I love to do? What am I passionate about?

This holiday season, the Brain Health Initiative wishes you a brain healthier life. We are grateful for the opportunity to work with this amazing community that is full of strength, unity, grit, and resilience. Together, we will bridge the gap between brain span and lifespan as we enhance brain health, optimize brain performance, and reduce the incidence of brain illness across the lifespan.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

How can you cultivate a sense of purpose? How do you find meaning in a world that offers no shortage of stress and can all too easily be filled with the distractions of getting through the day? Even if your sense of purpose seems gone, there are several things you can do to find it again. The Brain Health Initiative suggests these tips for re-engaging your sense of purpose and supporting your brain health.

- **Change your attitude.** Don't define yourself by what you used to be. If you have recently retired or have been faced with a career change, focus on who you are now. What interests you? What will give you a sense of accomplishment?
- **Practice acceptance.** Replace negative thoughts with positive mantras. Approach your new purpose with confidence and you will be successful.
- **Find your "flow."** Flow is the highly focused mental state that makes you productive. When you are in flow, you become fully engaged and immersed in an activity, feeling relaxed, challenged, and interested, but not stressed. Find the types of activities that bring you to this place. Are there parts of your job that you love; that make you lose track of time? What hobbies can make an afternoon disappear? Who helps you forget your worries and unload past baggage and future concerns? Use these clues to help fine-tune what resonates with you most deeply in life.
- **Find what you love.** What do you see when you think about love? Relationships can often be the foundation to your sense of meaning and purpose. It may be your family, your pets (pets are family, too), your coworkers, the people or organizations you serve, or the community and causes you support. Love means different things to different people, but imagining what it means to you can often point you in the direction of your purpose. Think about why you are here and the legacy you want to leave behind.
- **Find your motivation.** What is worthy of your effort? Find those tasks that seem almost effortless. Remember that old saying: "Find something you love to do, and you'll never work a day in your life?" There is some truth in that. Take a look at the things in your life that you worked hard for to help you determine what type of pursuits are most worthy of your time—and your heart and soul.

- **Be flexible.** It may take some time before you find what gives your life meaning. Don't try to force something that doesn't work for you. Be willing to change direction until you find hope and comfort in what you are doing.
- And as always, **adopt a Brain Healthy Lifestyle**, including thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep
 - Social connection
 - Emotional wellbeing
 - Meaning and Purpose
 - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
 - Engaging with nature
 - General health
 - Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).