

FINDING FULFILLMENT

The experience of happiness can be short-lived, and even significant achievements can leave you feeling empty and disappointed. A more enduring approach to seeking satisfaction in life is to strive for fulfillment.



WHAT IS FULFILLMENT?

While success can be seen and judged by others, fulfillment is an internal experience. It's the feeling that comes from living by your most important values and following a path in life that has meaning to you and brings you joy. Only you can know when you feel fulfilled.

Striving for fulfillment can bring success; the two objectives can be complementary. But achieving success can leave you without feelings of fulfillment or real happiness if your achievements aren't grounded in your values and what's most important to you.

Life has its ups and downs. It's healthy to experience a wide range of emotions in response to the circumstances of your life, from happiness, excitement, and comfort to fear, disappointment, and grief. Seeking fulfillment isn't the same as striving for happiness. Finding fulfillment takes the maturity to accept and appreciate all your emotions while dealing with what life brings to you by acting as the best version of yourself.

HOW CAN YOU FIND MORE FULFILLMENT IN LIFE?

Finding fulfillment is a process that begins with self-awareness and can require a shift in priorities and new habits of thinking and behavior:

Consider what's most important to you. Think about times in your past when you've felt deep joy and a sense of fulfillment. Were those experiences related to particular activities, the people you were with, or a challenge you met that was tied to something you found meaningful? These experiences of fulfillment can be clues to your values, what's important to you, and what brings you joy. Exploring your values is another way to think about who you are at heart and what's important to you. Find a list of personal values online, and choose five to ten that describe what's unique about you. Feelings of fulfillment come from living by your values and being true to yourself.

Notice the good in your life. Shift from thinking about what should happen or the way you want things to be, and notice the good in the way things are. Focus on appreciating what you have and what's good about your life right now. Learn to find joy in small pleasures. Practicing gratitude is one way to do this—taking a couple of minutes every day to list a few things outside yourself that you're grateful for. Practicing mindfulness is another—focusing on the present moment to notice and accept what is. Both practices can help to pull you away from negative thoughts about the past and worries about the future. A sense of fulfillment can come from savoring the joy in daily life.

Notice what brings you joy. You probably spend much of your time doing what others expect and need from you. Sometimes those activities are deeply satisfying, and sometimes they aren't. Even when you're very good at something, you may find it boring or even unpleasant. Notice when something you're doing energizes you and brings you joy. Think back to times in the past when you've also had those feelings. Find time for activities that bring you joy and are connected to your values.

Spend time with people who bring out the best in you. Pay attention to how you feel and act when you're with other people. Who makes you smile and feel good about yourself, and who makes you feel worse? Who inspires you to be the best version of yourself, and who brings out traits you're not proud of? Cultivate your most positive relationships. Mutually rewarding human connections are important to experiencing a sense of wellbeing and fulfillment.

Be open to change. Notice and look for opportunities in changes in the world around you. Work on changing yourself for the better, too. Be a lifelong learner and try new experiences. Learn better ways to communicate and manage your emotions. Feelings of fulfillment can come from self-improvement and discovering new interests and abilities.

Help others. Give something of yourself to improve the lives of others. You might do that by mentoring a work colleague, volunteering in your community, helping an older neighbor, or doing simple acts of kindness. It's human nature to feel good when you help others in meaningful ways.

Connect with something larger than yourself. While a sense of fulfillment is an internal experience, it's often fueled by recognition that you are part of something bigger than yourself. You might get that by experiencing awe in nature, from looking at the night sky, being in the mountains, or appreciating the wonder of a tree. You might get it through your faith or by being part of a group effort that has meaning to you.

Seek help. A professional counselor from your employee assistance program (EAP) can help you identify what's most important to you, and change patterns of thinking and behavior that are preventing you from experiencing greater fulfillment.