

6 Ways To Find Purpose In Life

According to St Ignatius of Loyola

Failing to consider our purpose in life isn't a new problem. As a young man 500 years ago, St. Ignatius of Loyola never took the time to consider his future. Instead, he spent his time chasing women and obsessing over fancy clothes. He also loved the bravado of shiny swords and military exploits. Eventually his way of life caught up with him when he was seriously injured by a cannonball during a battle. While in bed healing, he had time to think about his life and discover his purpose: to begin a new religious order. From that moment on he was a different man.

In hopes that it would help guide others, Ignatius wrote down some of the steps he took to discover his purpose in life. Here is some of his advice based on a chapter titled "Making a Good Election," from his book of *Spiritual Exercises*.

1. Pick the right time to think about it: If you aren't old enough or experienced enough, it's difficult to make the right choice for your future. A small child can confidently proclaim that he will play professional basketball, but a 36-year-old ought to know better. You can only make a big decision once you've identified at least some of your natural talents, and what activities you like and dislike. Even more important is that you don't make big decisions at a time when you're worried or distracted. It may seem like a quick fix to get things back on track, but it rarely works out because you're not thinking your future through rationally when you're unsettled.

2. Imagine yourself in the future: Ten or 20 years from now, are you happy with your choice? Could you take it or leave it? For me, I imagined being a professional artist and it made me break out in a cold sweat even though I have some talent for painting. Then, I imaged being a priest and immediately felt a sense of contentment. Doing this exercise may not provide everyone with such a decisive result, but it's a good start.

3. Ask the people who know you best: Crazy idea, I know, to ask someone else for help! The people who know you best might surprise you with how much insight they have into your life. Observing from a neutral point of view, they see daily what makes you happy, so asking them for input isn't such a bad idea. This request for help includes prayer, because who knows you better than God? When you're confused, praying and talking to friends offers much needed clarity about your own, particular purpose in life.

4. Think about how the rest of your life is affected: Once you find your purpose, you'll know it, because everything else falls into place, too. Are your chosen career, lifestyle, and goals good for your health, family, and friendships, or do they only cause headaches such as increased working hours at a job you hate, social pressure, or unrealistic expectations? Take, for example, a high-paying job that you're offered but in order to qualify for it you must commit to long hours and travel that keeps you away from family. This sort of job might seem wonderful in theory, but in reality might be a diversion from your true purpose in life, which is at least in part to be happy with your family. Considering life as a whole helps you to keep from falling into the trap of overvaluing one single factor.

5. Pretend you are another person giving advice to yourself: What would you say to you? Would you be disappointed in your choices? Pleased? This exercise is helpful in promoting a rational, objective thought process that minimizes emotional thinking. Another variation on this would be to imagine a person much like yourself who has asked you for advice on a big decision. How would you advise him? What sorts of factors would you remind him are important when making big, life-altering decisions?

6. Imagine you are living your last moments: Are you happy with the way you have lived your life? If not, what can you change? If you die tomorrow and had to give advice to others based on your regrets, what is it you would want to change? It might be a path not taken, or it might be misplaced priorities. There is something about considering death that helps bring life into focus, and this is an exercise that would be helpful for any of us on a regular basis. We might not all be famous sports stars, but each of us has a life set before us, a purpose for which we are made, and once we find it nothing could possibly make us happier.