

MEANINGFUL PHOTOS

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **1X/DAY** | Duration: **15 MINS**

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Research suggests that finding greater meaning in life helps people cope with stress and improves their overall health and well-being—it's what makes life feel worth living. But finding meaning in life can sometimes feel like an elusive task. In our day-to-day lives, it can be easy to lose sight of the big picture—we tend to focus more on the mundane than the deeply meaningful.

Yet research suggests that there are potential sources of meaning all around us, from the moments of connection we share with others, to the beauty of nature, to the work that we do and the things we create. This exercise helps you bring these meaningful things into focus—literally. By having you photograph, then write about, things that are meaningful to you, it encourages you to pay closer attention to the varied sources of meaning in your life, large and small, and reflect on why they are important to you.

TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes per day for one week to take the photos. One hour to do the writing exercise. While it is not necessary to take a photograph every day, assume that the photography will take you a total of 90 minutes over the course of a week, with an additional hour for the writing.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Over the next week, take photographs of things that make your life feel meaningful or full of purpose. These can be people, places, objects, pets. If you are not able to take photos of these things—like if they're not nearby—you can take photos of souvenirs, reminders, websites, or even other photos. Try to take at least nine photographs.
2. At the end of the week: If you used a digital camera, upload your photos to a computer. If you used a non-digital camera, have your photos developed.
3. Then, once you have collected all of your photos and items, take time to look at and reflect on each one. For each photo or item, write down a response to the following question: "What does this photo represent, and why is it meaningful?"

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Steger, M. F., Shim, Y., Barenz, J., & Shin, J. Y. (2013). [Through the windows of the soul: A pilot study using photography to enhance meaning in life](#). *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 3, 27-30.

American college students (mostly white and female) were instructed to take 9-12 photographs of things that they felt made their life meaningful; one week later, they viewed and wrote about each photograph. Based on questionnaires, they reported feeling like they had more meaning in their lives, greater life satisfaction, and more positive emotion afterward than they had beforehand.

Who has tried the practice?

[South African adults](#) who did this exercise by posting on Instagram each day for one week immediately showed improvements in depression and anxiety symptoms. They also reported stronger appreciation for others, meaning, and satisfaction with life three months after.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Taking time to recognize and appreciate sources of meaning through photography can help make them more tangible and serve as a reminder of what matters most to you. This greater sense of meaning can, in turn, inspire us to pursue important personal goals and give us a sense of strength and purpose when coping with stressful life events. The use of photography might also benefit people who are more visual than verbal—something for therapists, parents, or teachers to keep in mind as they approach conversations about meaning, purpose, and values in life

SOURCES

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This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

