



# **Find Your Purpose**

## **Using Science**

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky

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## **My Offer to You**

Thank you for reading my book! I am convinced that the science-based strategies described here will help the vast majority of readers like you strengthen their personal sense of meaning and purpose in life. In fact, I will put my money where my mouth is, and make you a money-back offer. If you can prove to me that you bought and read this book, and did all the exercises, but you still feel that you did not enrich your personal sense of meaning and purpose, I will happily give you any profit I made on the sale of the book to you. Just send your receipt and your written answers to all the exercises in the book to [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org). I hope that demonstrates my confidence that this book will help you find your purpose using science!

## Endorsements

*Dr. Tsipursky has done a terrific job approaching this important topic from a scientific perspective. He not only demonstrates that we don't need to imagine the supernatural to find a purpose in life, but he shows how modern research in fields such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience provide demonstrable strategies that allow us to create a purpose—our own purpose.*

**- Dr. Bo Bennett** holds a Doctorate in Psychology, hosts “The Dr. Bo Show,” and wrote *Logically Fallacious* and *Year to Success*

*A unique and intriguing project, well-researched, and well worth your testing out in practice. No one has done anything like this before. And it's a field much in need of work like this.*

**- Dr. Richard Carrier** holds a Doctorate in History and wrote *Sense and Goodness without God* and *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt*

*Dr. Tsipursky has done a great job bringing the power of meaning and purpose to the rational and scientific among us. This topic is so frequently treated as a purely religious or spiritual inquiry that it can be a very difficult process for the skeptically-minded. The need for meaning is a fundamentally human one, and no belief system can claim ownership of it. As a math major from MIT and a former software developer, it would have been a blessing to me to have this book when I began my search for purpose! Well done, Dr. Tsipursky.*

**- Tim Kelley** is Founder of the True Purpose® Institute and wrote *True Purpose: Twelve Strategies for Discovering the Difference You Are Meant to Make*

*Perhaps you have wondered to yourself, “What is my meaning and purpose in life?” If so, you have plenty of company in the wondering department but may struggle to come up with answers to that question. Well, if you are ready to explore, then Gleb Tsipursky’s workbook, Find Your Purpose Using Science, may be just what you are looking for to get the exploration going. Tsipursky, a college professor and scholar of scientific and research-based approaches to answering big questions has put together a step by step guide to help you reflect on what you really and truly care about, match that with what you are actually doing with your life, and set up a plan to move toward more meaningful and purposeful living. Along the way, Tsipursky highlights the personal stories of people who, as he does himself, discover unexpected and positive energy for living life in a meaningful and fulfilling way.*

- **Bart Worden** is the Executive Director of the American Ethical Union

*This workbook meets an important new need for the nation's growing demographic of rational thinkers. One of the most significant societal changes in the past few decades has been a burgeoning population of Nones – those who have rejected or are disinterested in the myriad options organized religion offers. They are mainly young people who face the challenge of negotiating their way through in a fast changing and challenging world. One of their crucial questions is how to fill the “gap” in one's sense of meaning and purpose that religion provided for older generations. Gleb Tsipursky brings useful tools, based on the fruits of recent scientific and academic research, to those seeking to use reason in their personal search for meaning and purpose.*

- **Dr. Barry A. Kosmin** is a Research Professor of Public Policy and Law at Trinity College, the Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, and wrote *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans* and *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society*

*Find Your Purpose Using Science clearly is one of the centerpieces of humanist education, and it should be. In my position as an American Humanist Association Education Consultant and former Director of the Kochhar Humanist Education Center, I am in the most fortunate position of recommending it to the AHA's chapters and affiliates. It should serve as one of the centerpieces of our educational program since it provides clear and practical research-based strategies for figuring out a personal sense of life's meaning and purpose.*

- **Dr. Bob Bhaerman** holds a Doctorate of Education with a specialty in curricular development and is an American Humanist Association Educational Consultant and former Director of the Kochhar Humanist Education Center

*Professor Tsipursky shows us that, while there is no obvious purpose to life, meaning is ours for the making. Science shows us how meaning-making is important for our happiness, and especially how community helps us discover what truly fulfills us, then helps us act on it.*

- **Maria Greene** is the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association

*Dr. Gleb Tsipursky departs from the affirmation of the late Dr. Stephen Jay Gould, which suggests that the scientific method and religious approaches are differing magisteria, that is, they are asking distinct sets of questions, which, even when they overlap a bit, remain focused on different values. In Tsipursky's view, justice issues, meaning, value and even*

*purpose issues, which are central to many religious people, can be generated very clearly from evidence based studies that use the scientific method. For conservative evangelicals like Rick Warren, there can be no purpose without a biblical warrant. Dr. Tsipursky, without rancor, demonstrates successfully to my mind that this is simply not true, and that one can live not only an ethical and moral life without religion, but a responsible, compassionate and justice-seeking life. I found it insightful throughout.*

**- Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini** holds a Doctorate of Divinity Degree, is a senior minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus, and wrote *Nothing Gold Can Stay: The Colors of Grief*

*Find Your Purpose Using Science is an effective reason-based path to deepen meaning and connect with your life's purpose. Using techniques supported by his own research and that of dozens of other scholars, Dr. Tsipursky guides readers through proven purpose discovery exercises. With his warm, engaging, and vulnerable style he shares his own personal struggle, and that of many others, to reconcile the world of science and reason with the more elusive and subtle pings of the human heart – to create a life that is larger than oneself. He guides readers through a number of activities to create their own narrative from within, to reveal their life's purpose, align their entire life with it, guide them in times of uncertainty, chaos and despair, and empower them to achieve the impossible. Dr. Tsipursky's voice is unique, speaking to the hope, idealism, angst and empowerment of the current global population, the largest population in human history, who are uniquely suited to remake our world with their life's purpose, and use science to approach life's big question, “Why am I here?”*

**- Brandon Peele**, Global Purpose Advocate, PlanetPurpose.org, Founder & Purpose Coach, The EVR1 Institute

*Dr. Gleb Tsipursky's book Find Your Purpose Using Science provides a great overview of the subject. It is a must read for those who are charting their trajectory in life and are seeking to create their own meaning and purpose.*

**- Mark W. Gura** is a TV/radio Host, the Executive Director of the Association of Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Buddhism, and wrote *Exploring Your Life: Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Spirituality* and *Atheist Meditation Atheist Spirituality*.

*Filled with thought provoking exercises as well information on what research has shown works to provide meaning and purpose to people's lives. While Dr. Tsipursky doesn't answer the question of what your purpose in life is, he does guide you so that you can discover for yourself what your highest order goals really are. Knowing what you really want to accomplish in life provides a foundation for you to live your life, fully and with purpose.*

**- Jennifer Hancock** is the Director of Humanist Learning Systems and wrote *The Humanist*

*Approach to Happiness: Practical Wisdom and The Humanist Approach to Grief and Grieving*

## **Dedication**

*This book is dedicated to my partner in life, Agnes Vishnevkin, the source of so much meaning and purpose for me in my life, as well as the editor of this book. Thank you so much for being you!*

*The majority of the profits from this book are pledged to Intentional Insights and other philanthropic work committed to helping people find meaning and purpose in life, and refine and reach their goals through improving their thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns.*

## **Acknowledgements**

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# Find Your Purpose Using Science

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky

[President and Co-Founder, Intentional Insights](#)

[Tenure-Track Professor, The Ohio State University](#)

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For more information on this book, including for bulk discounts, email [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org) or write to 6161 Braet rd., Westerville, OH, 43081.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	12
Meaning and Purpose Questionnaire (MPQ) .....	17
Meaning and Purpose: Relevance to Daily Life.....	18
Meaning and Purpose: Mental and Physical Well-Being.....	21
Meaning and Purpose: Thinkers.....	23
The Science of Meaning and Purpose .....	25
Meaning and Purpose: Research-Based Strategies.....	34
Strategies: Highest-Order Goals.....	35
Strategies: Life Vision .....	38
Strategies: Self-Reflection .....	40
Strategies: Social and Community Connections .....	46
Strategies: Serving Others .....	50
Strategies: Meaningful Work.....	55
Strategies: Reflecting on Purpose and Meaning with Others .....	60
Strategies: Making a Specific Plan .....	64
Activities to Gain a Stronger Sense of Meaning and Purpose .....	65
Conclusion .....	67
Bibliography .....	69
Appendix.....	74
Intentional Insights Starter Package: Values and Meanings Group.....	75
Intentional Insights Starter Package: Rationality Group .....	99

## Introduction

What is the meaning and purpose of life for you? Please take a moment to reflect on this question. Whether you have asked yourself this question before or not, it is very helpful to check in from time to time, and ask yourself, with an open heart and open mind, once again. After all, your answer may shift over time, including by reading this book, which lays out a science-based path to help you find a deep sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Using science to address life's meaning and purpose may seem surprising to many. After all, the traditional mainstream approach believes that science can't answer big life questions – that's the job of religion.



*Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan*

Well, actually there's been a wave of recent research in psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and other disciplines on how we can find a rich sense of meaning and purpose in life. The workbook combines an engaging narrative, academic research, and stories from people's everyday lives, and provides a set of exercises to help you figure out your personal sense of meaning and purpose. In writing this, I drew on my own scholarship on meaning and purpose, and my experience in giving workshops, teaching classes, creating videos, and writing blog posts that translate such research into practical strategies for finding life meaning and purpose.

Now, many people who come to my workshops and classes are looking for a simple, clear,

and straightforward answer to what life is all about. They want certainty about life's meaning and purpose. Well, I'd love to address life's meaning and purpose for all people and for all time, but I can't give the absolute right answer to the big question of "what is the meaning of life." I don't deal in sound bites and dogmas.

What I can do in this book is provide you some clear and practical research-based strategies for figuring out a personal sense of life's meaning and purpose. In other words, I offer the answer to the question "what is the meaning of life for you?"

Those who attended [my workshops and classes on this topic](#) found these techniques very helpful.

One participant stated in an anonymous feedback form that s/he gained "a better understanding of what it means to search for meaning, with the research basis especially greatly contributing to my comprehension." A second noted that after attending the workshop, "I have a much better sense of how to consider questions of meaning and purpose." A third wrote that "from attending this workshop, I have gained the basic knowledge for greater self-exploration."

Several chose to give videotaped interviews about their experience in a workshop on meaning and purpose. They kindly permitted me to include their names and links to their videotaped feedback, for example [Ryan Mulholand](#); [Brenda Penn](#); [Karen Thimmes](#), and [Jake Calaway](#). Their descriptions of their experience testifies to how much they benefitted from engaging with the research-based strategies to finding a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life.

I got in touch with some of these workshop participants a few weeks after the workshop, to see whether it influenced them in the long term. It did. The most illustrative statement came from Ryan, whose story I will share throughout this book. Ryan, who is a 21-year-old college student, stated that when he first came to the workshop, "my original highest order goals revolved largely around living a comfortable life." Yet in the course of the workshop, he realized that "the issue with this mindset was that it was too shallow and self-centered for me to be content with for long." As a result of the workshop, he stated that "I reached several conclusions in what I desired most out of life. I figured out that I wanted to build a life that was centered around bettering myself and other people. I wanted to be someone who constantly was learning and growing, while at the same time, being a teacher of sorts to help those around me... With these thoughts in mind, I promptly changed my major and have since then, begun to work toward making these wants into realities." His full statement describing his experience is available [here](#).

You can gain similar benefits by engaging with the content and exercises in this workbook, which offers:

- Stories from people's everyday experience finding life's meaning and purpose
- Some diverse approaches to this question informed by recent research and

contemporary thinkers

- Pragmatic and straightforward strategies for working out the meaning and purpose of life for yourself

Let me give a real-life example of how the workbook helps people, by once again turning to Ryan. He read through a draft of the workbook, and described his thoughts as follows. “The majority of the book’s content focuses on exercises to help you establish the initial ideas of what hold the greatest amount of meaning and purpose... The total sum of initial work is no more than two hours, but what is that compared to the time that will be spent living life as you see fit? It is in this investment of time, both initially and continually, that you will come closer and closer to your objective. The reason for the need to revisit your plans and goals is because your answers may change. In short, life happens, and with it comes new experiences. If you do take the time to evaluate your purpose and meaning in life, then, with time, you will achieve the goals you set forth.” For his full evaluation of his experience with the book, click on [this link](#).

John, currently 27 and studying to become a teacher, also read a draft version of the workbook. Unlike Ryan, he did not go to any previous workshops or engaged with any other Intentional Insights content beforehand. This is what he wrote about his experience: “I was able to gain a new perspective on my own life and priorities. Its research-based strategies for evaluating one’s purpose and meaning have helped me develop a clearer vision for my future. I am currently pursuing a new set of goals—both personally and professionally—that align with my values. In short, I have clearer understanding of who I am and of my place in the community.” I hope the workbook will help you like it helped Ryan and John.

The first section of this workbook describes the relevance of meaning and purpose to people’s lives; the second section deals with studies and thinking on finding life’s meaning and purpose; and the third section relates the strategies and tools for figuring out your own sense of life’s meaning and purpose. Some of you may wish to skip straight to the third section, and you are welcome to do so, after taking the questionnaire described below.

This workbook comes out of my engagement with a nonprofit organization, [Intentional Insights](#). The nonprofit’s [mission](#) is to empower people to refine and reach their goals by providing research-based content to help improve thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns. One of the areas we focus on is helping people reach their life goals, such as finding meaning and purpose in life. Intentional Insights delivers such content through in-person presentations, through online channels such as [free online classes](#), [videos](#), and [blogs](#) devoted to this topic, and workbooks such as this one. Our work has been covered in mainstream media such as [The Columbus Dispatch](#), [The Examiner](#), and [elsewhere](#).

As part of that organization, I led the creation of a comprehensive program offering participants practical and pragmatic strategies for figuring out their personal answers to life's big questions. This program draws from my research on how people found purpose and

meaning in diverse historical contexts (Tsipursky, [“Having Fun;” “Citizenship;” “Conformism;” “Living ‘America’”](#)), and research by many others as well, from a variety of disciplines. As a historian of science, I research the intersection of history, psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, specifically focusing on meaning and purpose, emotions, decision making, and agency in historical contexts. Thus, I am in the fortunate position of having scholarly expertise in combining research from many different fields into a cohesive whole, and translation of this information for a broad audience. I am especially grateful to have collaboration and feedback from experts in a variety of disciplines, which includes psychology, social work, and therapy, ([Dr. Joe Guada](#) and [Dr. Bo Bennett](#)), education ([Dr. Bob Bhaerman](#)), cognitive neuroscience ([Dr. Carlos Cabrera](#)), philosophy ([Dr. Richard Carrier](#) and [Dr. Amy White](#)), religion ([Unitarian Universalist Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini](#) and [United Methodist Rev. Caleb Pitkin](#)) and many others. All the good things in this book are the combined result of all of these efforts, while I take full and sole responsibility for any mistakes and oversights.

Before proceeding, let’s clarify some terms. Scholars on meaning and purpose define these words differently than they are used in common language. Researchers use “purpose” to refer to a broad aspiration in life that motivates one’s everyday activities. They use “meaning” as a more overarching term to refer both to one’s life purpose, but also one’s broad comprehension of one’s life, self, and the world. However, since life meaning and purpose are used interchangeably in everyday speech, I will use them interchangeably in this workbook (Steger et al. [“Acceptance”](#)).

Now, you may say that well, research and strategies based on it are all well and good, and they may work for the majority. And it’s helpful to learn about people’s personal stories, such as the one Ryan chose to share. Yet how do I know the strategies in this workbook will help me to get a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in my life?

Excellent question! I know the feeling. I often read studies and advice based on them, and am not sure whether the conclusions of studies would be relevant to my life. And while personal stories are gripping and powerful, they don’t necessarily apply to me. Moreover, as this book will describe, there are many ways one can try to gain a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. How would you know what are the best ones to pursue for you?

This is why it’s so important to evaluate and quantify your personal sense of meaning and purpose, and to tie the quantification to the different types of meaning-making activities that you may choose to do. To help you accomplish that quantification, I developed a tool, the “Meaning and Purpose Questionnaire (MPQ),” based on research on meaning and purpose, my own and that of others as well (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, Kaler, [“The Meaning in Life Questionnaire”](#); [McDonald, Wong, Gingras](#)). The MPQ will provide a baseline for you to evaluate your own progress in finding meaning and purpose. You can get a printable copy of the MPQ [here](#). Moreover, we have developed a web app, Find Your Purpose and Meaning, which enables you to take the MPQ at regular intervals and graph your sense of meaning and

purpose over time, available [here](#). Doing so will help you understand:

- whether you are making progress in gaining a deeper sense of meaning and purpose
- what specific activities are most impactful for you in having meaning and purpose in life
- finally, how to customize the science-based strategies to gain the most benefit for yourself.

Sign up to the Intentional Insights [newsletter](#) to learn more about the app and our other offerings that help people refine and reach their goals. Also check out the Intentional Insights [Facebook Page](#), [Twitter](#), and [Pinterest](#) to engage with our content, ask us any clarifying questions, and improve your ability to gain a richer sense of life purpose.



## Meaning and Purpose Questionnaire (MPQ)

**Directions:** Please think for 5 minutes about your sense of meaning and purpose in life. Then rank the following statements on a scale of 1 to 10, from 1 being “ABSOLUTELY NOT TRUE” to 10 being “ABSOLUTELY TRUE.” Below each, write an explanation of why you answered the way you did.

1. I have a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life
2. I have a clear understanding of what gives my life meaning and purpose
3. I actively search for a sense of meaning and purpose in life
4. I actively reflect on my sense of meaning and purpose in life
5. I engage in activities that help me experience meaning and purpose in life
6. I engage in social service that helps others have better lives
7. I have meaningful social and community bonds
8. I have social connections that help me experience meaning and purpose in life
9. I help others find meaning and purpose in life
10. I am satisfied with my sense of meaning and purpose in life

## Meaning and Purpose: Relevance to Daily Life

After you've taken the MPQ, read onward!

Imagine the following scenario: you have been raised in a deeply evangelical household. From an early age, your parents taught you to pray daily and told you that the purpose and meaning of life were found in God. Attending Sunday school reinforced this message. So did the television shows that your family watched, the books that they gave you to read, and the music to which they encouraged you to listen. You grew up in this environment throughout your early teenage years, attending religious elementary and junior high schools. Then, you went off to a public high school, because your parents could not afford a religious high school. There, you met an environment that challenged your beliefs that the purpose and meaning in life were to be found only in God. You started to question and doubt, maybe even attended meetings of the local [Secular Student Alliance](#) affiliate to find out what it was all about. You wanted to explore more broadly, but were afraid of losing your sense of purpose and meaning in life.



*Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan*

This is the story of many young people I have come to know. They were deeply confused about meaning and purpose in life, questioning what it was all about. This questioning correlates with the [growing number of “nones,”](#) people without any religious affiliation in American society, especially among younger adults. Many nones, and [especially college aged](#)

[youth](#), are seeking for answers that don't necessarily include a God as part of the equation ([Astin, Astin, Lindholm](#)).

This workbook makes a further contribution to this public conversation. It is based on my experience with many people that I have engaged with in my role as a [professor](#) and also as President and Chief Insights Officer of [Intentional Insights](#), a nonprofit I co-founded.

So why do people come to my classes and workshops? Why do they trust me to have any more expertise in finding meaning and purpose in life than the next guy? Perhaps my own story can help answer this question.

I struggled with the question of life's meaning and purpose throughout my youth. My parents tried to sell me on their view of the meaning and purpose of life. They pushed me to become a doctor or lawyer, make a lot of money, go to synagogue, and not worry about reflecting on life's big questions.

But I was a bit of a rebel. I didn't really listen to them. Instead of going to synagogue, I spent long and lazy afternoons and evenings with my friends – hanging out, walking, playing cards, drinking, and arguing, often about the meaning and purpose of life. I particularly remember one conversation when I was 18. My two closest friends and I stayed up until 5 a.m., playing cards, drinking, and trying to convince each other that our individual vision of the meaning and purpose of life was the best one. At the same time as I argued with my buddies and expressed a false bravado, I always felt a certain emptiness in the depth of my stomach, a feeling that I lacked meaning and purpose in life.

Going to college prompted further thought. Listening to professors and reading great books caused me to rethink the meaning and purpose of life many times. I really gained a richer perspective, but never a clear answer to my question – “What is the meaning and purpose of life for me?”

So far, my story resembles that of many students, unsatisfied with the traditional answers given by parents and religious venues, who came to my classes and workshops wanting to find meaning and purpose in life. However, my life took a different route in my last year of college. I broke with my parents' wishes for me to go to medical school, prompting a pretty serious family conflict, and instead went into history. I decided to study how people in the Soviet Union, where my family came from, found purpose, happiness, and fun in life.

Since that time, I have conducted extensive research on how individuals in modern societies found meaning and purpose in life (Tsipursky, [“Conformism;” “Living ‘America’”](#)). I also applied these techniques to myself, and filled that deep pit in my stomach, developing a rich and strong sense of personal life meaning and purpose. Later in this book, I will share these strategies, and my own answers to the question of “what is the meaning of life for you?”

This background gave me an evidence-based perspective on diverse techniques and strategies for finding life's meaning and purpose in the contemporary world, as well as in my own life. After becoming a [professor at The Ohio State University](#), I have taught many college

students, and I have oriented my classes to helping them figure out their personal answer to this big life question.

Seeing how much my students benefited, I decided to use my knowledge and background to help the broader community in Central Ohio. I began to give workshops to community groups on finding life's meaning and purpose. Finding that people gained a lot from these workshops, I collaborated with a group of other enthusiasts to create a meet-up group, Columbus Rationality, which gave regular presentations on reason-based, rational approaches to life. This meet-up thrived. Other people around the country who heard about this group wanted similar benefits.

We then decided to found [Intentional Insights](#), and this workbook is one of the products we offer. Our nonprofit also offers plenty of other products and services to help individuals evaluate reality clearly, make effective decisions, and refine and reach their goals. Those who gained the benefit of our offerings had great feedback. Here are some quotes from participants in videotaped workshops on [making decisions](#) and [evaluating reality rationally](#):

"I really enjoyed the workshop. It helped me to see some of the problems I may be employing in my thinking about life and other people... Something I gained from this workshop are tools to help me be a less stressed-out person."

- "I have gained a new perspective after attending the workshop. In order to be more analytical, I have to take into account that attention bias is everywhere. I can now further analyze and make conclusions based on evidence. With relation to the fundamental attribution error, it can give me a chance to keep a more open mind. Which will help me to relate to others more, and have a different view of the 'map' in my head."
- "From this workshop, I have gained the knowledge of how to better assess the conflicts in a situation and how to resolve the issues... The benefits of this workshop for those who participate can include: greater self-awareness, greater strategic planning, and greater satisfaction with life."

### **Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following**

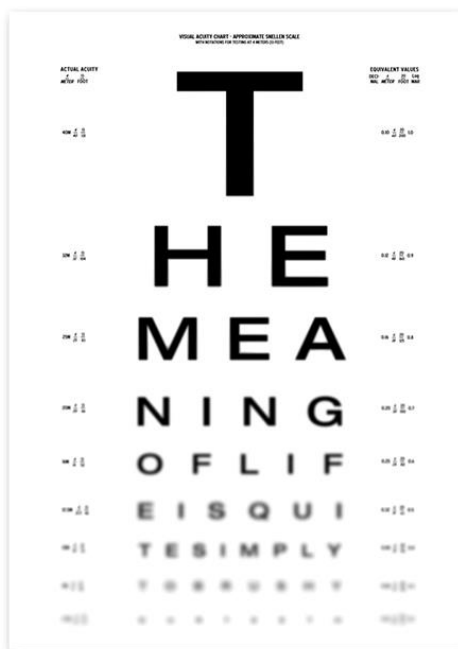
Take a few minutes to think about what is the relevance of a personal sense of meaning and purpose in life for you on an everyday level, and what you can gain from having a clear answer to the question of "What is the meaning and purpose of life for me?"

Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.

# Meaning and Purpose: Mental and Physical Well-Being

What is the benefit of finding a sense of meaning and purpose in life?

Well, research shows people who have a clear answer have better lives ([Seligman](#)). They can deal much better with both everyday life and the most challenging situations. The classic research on meaning and purpose comes from Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who lived through the concentration camps of the Holocaust. He described how those who had a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives were most likely to survive and thrive in the camps. He conducted research demonstrating this both during and after his concentration camp experience ([Frankl](#)).



A strong sense of meaning and purpose has powerful benefits for mental and physical wellbeing.

*Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan*

Recent studies illustrate that people who feel that their life has meaning and purpose experience a substantially higher degree of mental well-being. For example, [Michael F. Steger](#), a psychologist and Director of the [Laboratory for the Study of Meaning and Quality of Life](#) at Colorado State University, found that many people gain a great deal of psychological benefit from understanding what their lives are about and how they fit within the world around them. His research demonstrates that people who have a strong sense of meaning and purpose have greater mental well-being in general. They are more satisfied on a day-to-day basis, as well as at work (Steger, Dik, and Duffy, [“Measuring Meaningful Work”](#)). Adolescents, in another

study, are shown to feel less depressed, anxious, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors the greater their search for, and sense of, meaning (Brassai, Piko, and Steger, [“Meaning in Life”](#)).

A deeper sense of life meaning and purpose also predicts better physical health. Greater meaning and purpose has been associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease (Boyle et al. [“Effect of a Purpose in Life”](#)). An increased sense of life meaning and purpose correlates with reduced risk of heart attack, the leading cause of death in the United States, and stroke, another of the [top five](#) leading causes of death (Kim et al. [“Purpose in Life and Reduced Risk;”](#) [“Purpose in Life and Reduced Incidence”](#)).

Brain scans using functional magnetic resonance imaging indicate that a deep and rich sense of meaning and purpose decreases the production of cortisol, a stress hormone, resulting in better mental and physical health alike (Heller et. al, [“Sustained Striatal Activity Predicts Eudaimonic Well-Being and Cortisol Output”](#)). With such benefits for mental and physical well-being, it's no wonder that a strong sense of life meaning and purpose predicts longevity, whether in the United States or around the world (Boyle et al. [“Purpose in Life”](#)).

### **Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following**

Take a few minutes to think about what kind of mental and physical health and well-being you can gain from cultivating a rich and deep sense of meaning and purpose. What specific benefits of the ones described above would you most appreciate getting, or avoiding losing?

Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.

## Meaning and Purpose: Thinkers

How do we find such meaning and purpose in life, then?

According to faith-based perspectives, the meaning and purpose of life is to be found only in God. An example of a prominent recent religious thinker is Karl Barth, one of the most important Protestant thinkers of modern times. In his [The Epistle to the Romans](#), he calls modern people's attention to God in Christ, where the true meaning and purpose of life must be found.

Another example is [The Purpose Driven Life](#) (2002), a popular book written by Rick Warren, a Christian mega church leader. Warren's book epitomizes the traditional faith-based perspective on meaning and purpose in life. In his book, he argues that the most basic question everyone faces in life is "Why am I here" and "What is my purpose?" The answer that Warren provides is that "real meaning and significance comes from understanding and fulfilling God's purposes for putting us on earth." The book describes five specific purposes that Warren claims God has for all of us: 1) We were planned for God's pleasure, and thus the first purpose is to offer real worship; 2) We were formed for God's family, and thus the second purpose is to engage in real Christian fellowship; 3) We were created to become like Christ, so the third purpose is to learn real discipleship; 4) We were shaped for serving God, so the fourth purpose is to practice real ministry; 5) We were made for a mission, so the fifth purpose is to live out real evangelism.

While Warren represents the mainstream faith-based view, some thinkers disagree with the notion that religion is the only way to find meaning and purpose in life. The prominent philosopher John Dewey argued for a pragmatic and naturalistic approach to evaluating life's big questions, such as finding meaning and purpose. He called for empirical testing and validation of any abstract claims, grounding out such claims in how they would guide behavior, and then evaluating whether such conduct would be beneficial. In other words, Dewey's approach to meaning and purpose would involve seeing how any framework of thinking about meaning and purpose actually guided human action, and then evaluating whether that action actually led to a richer and deeper sense of meaning and purpose ([Dewey](#)).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his 1957 [Existentialism and Human Emotions](#), advances the notions of "existentialism," the philosophical perspective that all meaning and purpose originates from the individual. The challenge for modern individuals, according to Sartre, is to face all the consequences of the discovery of the absence of God. He argues that people must learn to create for themselves meaning and purpose.

The well-known philosopher Paul Kurtz argued for a new approach that he calls *eupraxsophy*. He uses the term, which literally means "good practice and wisdom," to



describe a specifically secular and non-religious approach to life. In the tradition of Dewey, he argued for a pragmatic, naturalistic, and empirically validated approach to human values and big life questions, including meaning and purpose in life. Kurtz specifically emphasized the important role of placing humanity within its context of the natural world while also orienting toward hope and optimism about the future ([Kurtz](#)).

A more recent prominent thinker is Greg Epstein. In his 2010 [Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe](#), he advocates striving for dignity as a means of finding “meaning to life beyond God.” According to Epstein, “we are not wicked, debased, helpless creatures waiting for a heavenly king or queen to bless us with strength, wisdom, and love. We have the potential for strength, wisdom, and love inside ourselves. But by ourselves we are not enough. We need to reach out beyond ourselves – to the world that surrounds us and sustains us, and most especially to other people. This is dignity” (93).

Sam Harris, in his book, [Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion](#) (2014), states that “Separating spirituality from religion is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It is to assert two important truths simultaneously: Our world is riven by dangerous religious doctrines that all educated people should condemn, and yet there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit” (6).

Likewise, in his 2015 books [Atheist Meditation](#) [Atheist Spirituality](#) and [Exploring Your Life: Mindfulness Meditation and Secular Spirituality](#), Mark W. Gura agrees with Harris that atheists and humanists can use meditation as a means to access secular forms of spirituality, to attain stress-release and self-actualization without beliefs, or faith in God(s), pseudoscience or the supernatural, but he goes a step further. Gura argues that secular meditation can also produce a psychological state of mind that is, in-and-of-itself, a source of meaning and purpose, if meditation is used as the source of contentment in one's life. Gura's point is that sources of meaning and purpose that are external to ourselves change, expire, and are likely to disappoint us, while secular forms of meditation can provide an internal equilibrium that is under our own control.

Are they correct? Can we have meaning and purpose, which fall within the sphere that Harris and Gura refer to as spirituality and Epstein terms dignity, without belonging to a religious community?

### **Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following**

Take a few minutes to think about which of the perspectives described above speaks most strongly to your personal beliefs and worldview, and why. How does your particular worldview bear upon your sense of meaning and purpose in life?

Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.



# The Science of Meaning and Purpose

What does the research show? First, it is vital to recognize that studies do indicate that a strong religious belief correlates with a rich sense of meaning and purpose. Research on the psychology of religion illustrates that “for many, the most salient core psychological function of religion is to provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life” ([Batson and Stocks, 149](#)) Survey-based studies affirm such individually-oriented psychological research. For example a study of the population of Memphis found that the extent to which religion has salience in a person’s life correlates with a heightened sense of meaning and purpose (Petersen and Roy, [“Religiosity, Anxiety, and Meaning and Purpose”](#)). Another study used the General Social Survey, which tracks demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions across the United States. The researcher investigated how the degree of belief in God relates to a personal sense of life purpose. The data showed that people who indicated they are confident in the existence of God self-report a higher sense of life purpose compared to those who believe but occasionally doubt, and to nonbelievers (Cranney, [“Do People Who Believe in God Report More Meaning in Their Lives?”](#)).

Parallels exist in global comparative research on religion and life purpose. One study encompassed 79 countries, using the World Values Survey. It found that more religious people in more religious countries experience a greater sense of life satisfaction across a variety of dimensions, including life meaning and purpose (Okulicz-Kozaryna, [“Religiosity and Life Satisfaction Across Nations”](#)). A 2007 survey by Gallup of 84 countries used the following question: “Do you feel your life has an important meaning or purpose?” The report on this survey highlighted the following as the brief summary: “Takeaway: Regardless of whether they affiliate themselves with a religion, more than 8 in 10 respondents across 84 countries say their lives have an important meaning or purpose. However, religion does make a difference: Those who claim no religious affiliation are more than twice as likely as those who do claim one to say they do not feel their lives have an important purpose” (Crabtree and B. Pelham, [“The Complex Relationship Between Religion and Purpose”](#)).

Such generalized takeaways provide support for mainstream opinions and religion-oriented thinkers who use such findings to support their claims that religion is the way to gain meaning and purpose. Yet digging deeper into the data raises questions about the evidence for such claims. For example, the study cited above on 79 countries also found that more religious people have less life satisfaction, including a sense of meaning and purpose, in less religious countries. Moreover, forms of worship that do not promote social connectedness do not correlate with a heightened sense of life satisfaction. Other studies illustrate similar findings. For instance, religious affiliation with community belonging leads to a higher degree of life satisfaction than religious devotion in private settings ([Bergan and McConatha, “Religiosity and Life Satisfaction”](#)). Another investigation underscored that extrinsic religious devotion, meaning a focus on religion for means such as in-group participation and social status,

correlates with higher happiness and life meaning. However, intrinsic religious orientation, defined as religion that is deeply personal and defining one's lifestyle, does not correlate with a greater sense of happiness and life meaning (Sillick and Cathcart, [“The Relationship Between Religious Orientation and Happiness”](#)). These results show that socially-oriented religious practice in religious communities leads to a stronger sense of life meaning and purpose, while private and inner-oriented religious practice does not. In that case, is it religion or social and community bonds that lead to a deep sense of life meaning?



*Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan*

Research conclusively demonstrates that social affiliation is key to a deep sense of life purpose, regardless of religious affiliation. As an example, 4 studies showed significant correlation between whether people experience a sense of belonging and their perception of life meaning and purpose. Study 1 highlighted a correlation between questions asking for a sense of belonging and life purpose at the same time. Study 2 strove to remove the possible biasing that may occur by asking these questions at the same time. It first asked people about their sense of belonging, and 3 weeks later inquired into their sense of life meaning. The data was similarly indicative of a clear correlation between belonging and life meaning. Studies 3 and 4 primed participants to experience a sense of belonging and a variety of other experiences, and found that priming people to experience belonging resulted in the highest perception of life meaning for study participants (Lambert et. al., [“To Belong Is to Matter”](#)). A meta-review of many studies on life meaning and purpose similarly indicates social belonging

as vital to a sense of life purpose (Steger, [“Making Meaning”](#)).

Such findings should not be surprising. Much recent social neuroscience underscores the vital role of social bonds for how our brains function. Indeed, our brain is inherently designed to be sociable, as part of our evolutionary development. The force of evolution selected for mutations that make our brains more social, as human ancestors best survived in groups, and those most capable of being socially oriented tended to outcompete those who were not. Thus, social neuroscience research indicates that when we engage with others, we experience an intimate brain to brain linkup. That neural bridge lets us affect the brain and thus the body of everyone we engage with, just as they do to us. The more strongly we connect with someone emotionally, the greater the mutual force. The resulting feelings have far-reaching consequences that ripple throughout our body, as our brain releases hormones that regulate all biological systems. A sense of meaning and purpose is thus neurologically correlated to social connectedness, and consequently our mental and physical well-being ([Goleman](#)).

In fact, research shows that the important thing is simply to *have* a sense of meaning and purpose in life, regardless of the source of the purpose. Going back to Frankl, his research suggests the crucial thing for individuals surviving and thriving is to develop a personal sense of individual purpose and confidence in a collective purpose for society itself, what he terms the “will-to-meaning and purpose.” Frankl himself worked to help people find meaning and purpose in their lives. He did so by helping prisoners in concentration camps, and later patients in his private practice as a psychiatrist, to remember their joys, sorrows, sacrifices, and blessings, thereby bringing to mind the meaning and purposefulness of their lives as already lived. According to Frankl, meaning and purpose can be found in any situation within which people find themselves. He emphasizes the existential meaning and purposefulness of suffering and tragedy in life as testimonies to human courage and dignity, as exemplified both in the concentration camps and beyond. Frankl argues that not only is life charged with meaning and purpose, but this meaning and purpose implies responsibility, namely the responsibility upon oneself to discover meaning and purpose, both as an individual and as a member of a larger social collective.



*Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan*

Frankl's approach to psychotherapy came to be called [logotherapy](#), and forms part of a broader therapeutic practice known as existential psychotherapy. This philosophically-informed therapy stems from the notion that internal tensions and conflicts stem from one's confrontation with the challenges of the nature of life itself, and relate back to the notions brought up by Sartre and other existentialist philosophers. These challenges, according to Irvin Yalom in his *Existential Psychotherapy*, include: facing the reality and the responsibility of our freedom; dealing with the inevitability of death; the stress of individual isolation; finally, the difficulty of finding meaning in life ([Yalom](#)). These four issues correlate to what existential therapy holds as the four key dimensions of human existence, the physical, social, personal and spiritual realms, based on extensive psychological research and therapy practice ([Cooper](#); [Mathers](#)).

Other research on finding meaning and purpose confirms the vital role of self-reflection, as shown by a meta-review of recent studies (Steger, ["Making Meaning"](#)). As one example, a study found that a sense of personal meaning and purpose, and thus one's personal identity, rests on the creation of personal stories we tell ourselves about our selves and our lives. Brain scans using functional magnetic resonance imaging scanning compared two sets of study participants. One set engaged in an activity called autobiographical remembering, namely recalling the concrete details personally significant memories. The second set reflected on the meaning of what they recalled and the broader implications of their memories for their lives, what is called autobiographical reasoning. The findings from brain scans showed that those who engaged in autobiographical reasoning, as opposed to simply remembering, derived meaning and purpose from their past experiences (D'Argembeau et. al., ["Brains Creating](#)



[Stories](#)"). Another study using such brain scans suggests that reinterpreting the meaning of past events and thus altering our internal narratives about the past and our place in the world is an effective way of improving our emotional well-being (Ray et. al., "[Individual Differences in Trait Rumination and the Neural Systems Supporting Cognitive Reappraisal](#)"). These and other studies provide data from cognitive neuroscience supporting Frankl's perspective of self-reflection on our past and present as being key to finding meaning and purpose in life.

So then why do studies show that a sense of life meaning and purpose correlates with religion? One reason is that so much of the research on this question has been conducted in the United States. And it just so happens that in the United States, religious communities have come to provide the kind of things that contribute to a sense of life meaning and purpose.

For example, in the contemporary United States, religion is the main venue that provides strong social and community connections. Likewise, within religious circles in the United States, there is much more focus on finding meaning and purpose, and clear answers are provided. The prominent anthropologist Clifford Geertz specifically described religion as a system for helping people find meaning and purpose through giving answers to the problem of the existence of chaos and suffering ([Geertz](#)). Furthermore, religion has been [one of the most common sources of ritual experiences](#), especially in the United States. [Research on rituals](#) shows their importance in maintaining and transmitting cultural values, including what a specific culture perceives as the key elements of meaning and purpose. [Scholars also highlight](#) how rituals serve as a vital contributor to social bonding and community belonging. Religious communities also provide many opportunities for serving others. These three factors – reflection on life's basic questions, strong community and social ties, and civic engagement – are the three key sources of how people acquire a strong sense of meaning and purpose, according to the research.



*Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan*

Other societies with less religious predominance in the public sphere do not necessarily suffer from a lesser sense of meaning and purpose ([McMahon](#)). While in the US, religion is a predominant if weakening social force, this is not the case for all other societies, either today or in the past. Plenty of other societies had and have much less religious presence in the public sphere. Purpose and meaning also do not correlate with levels of wealth – surprisingly, many contemporary poorer countries have a greater average sense of meaning and purpose among their citizenry than those in rich countries (Oishi and Diener, [“Residents of Poor Nations Have a Greater Sense of Meaning in Life”](#)).

How do people in more secularly-oriented societies than the United States gain a sense of meaning and purpose? Well, here is an example. Mike met regularly with friends and acquaintances from his neighborhood in a large building. There, he enjoyed listening to presentations about big life questions: on the meaning of life, on the nature of morality, on ethical behavior, etc. He participated in study circles that engaged with these questions in more depth. Mike sang, danced, and enjoyed musical performances there. Together with others, he volunteered to help clean up the streets and build housing for poor people in the neighborhood. Through these activities, Mike gained social bonds and community connections, a chance to serve others, and an opportunity to reflect on life’s big questions – all the components that lead to a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Mike’s full name is not Michael, but Mikhail, and his experience describes the prototypical experience of former Soviet citizens in state-sponsored community activities. The former

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev described in his [memoirs](#) how much he and other Soviet citizens enjoyed such events: according to him, “everybody was keen to participate” (35). The Soviet Union is typically perceived as a militaristic and grey society, with a government that oriented all of its efforts to taking over the world. [Well, that’s simply not true](#), as the Soviet authorities put a lot of effort into providing its citizens with opportunities to find meaning and purpose in life, as well as fun and pleasure – although they also certainly wanted to spread communism throughout the world, and put a lot of efforts into this goal as well (Tsipursky, [“Active and Conscious;” “Having Fun”](#)).



*This early 1960s photograph shows a performance from a scene in a Soviet opera, named “Arkhimed,” held at a Soviet club. The photograph comes from the private archive of M. A. Lebedeva. For more on “Arkhimed,” see my scholarly work (Tsipursky, [“Having Fun”](#)).*

To understand how the USSR’s government helped its citizens gain a greater sense of meaning and purpose, [I spent](#) a decade investigating government reports in archives across the Soviet Union, exploring national and local newspapers, read memoirs and diaries, and interviewed more than fifty former Soviet citizens. The answer: to a large extent, through [government-sponsored community and cultural centers called kluby \(clubs\)](#). In many ways these venues replaced the social function provided by churches, offering Soviet citizens social and community connections, chances for serving others, and venues to reflect on meaning and

purpose in life, in a setting that combined state sponsorship with grassroots engagement. Soviet clubs also hosted rituals and celebrations, which served to help people enjoy themselves and find meaning and purpose, and also to further the government's political agenda (Tsipursky, [“Integration, Celebration”](#)).



*This photograph shows a banquet held after a performance of “Arkhimed.” The photograph also comes from the private archive of M. A. Lebedeva.*

Present-day societies with a more secular orientation than the United States have similar stories to tell, as illustrated by research on contemporary Denmark and Sweden. Most Danes and Swedes do not worship any god. At the same time these countries score at the very top of the “happiness index,” have very low crime and corruption rates, great educational systems, strong economies, well-supported arts, free health care, and egalitarian social policies. They have a wide variety of strong social institutions that provide community connections, opportunities for serving others, and other benefits that religion provides in the United States ([Zuckerman](#)).

From another cultural perspective, a significant strain in Eastern worldviews holds the search for meaning and purpose itself as irrelevant. For instance, Legalism, a Chinese philosophical tradition, rejected the notion that one should even try to find a purpose in life, and focused only on pragmatic knowledge. A more prominent and better-known Chinese belief system, Confucianism, holds that one should find meaning and purpose in everyday existence, focusing on being instead of doing, and not devote much effort to finding meaning and purpose outside of this everyday experience ([Tu](#)).

Informed by an Eastern-based philosophy, Alan Watts promoted the idea to western



audiences that the sense of self is an illusion, that we are all part of a larger whole. He advocated abandoning the search for an individual meaning and purpose, which he perceived as a harmful western cultural construct ([Watts](#)).

Another Eastern-informed perspective comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn. This prominent scholar and popularizer of meditation and mindfulness proposed relying on these practices to find your life purpose. Specifically, he discussed the importance of meditating on our personal vision and blueprint of what is most important in life in order to grasp our innermost values ([Kabat-Zinn](#)).

As you see, there are a wide variety of perspectives on meaning and purpose. Believing in God and going to church is far from the only way to attain these qualities. You can gain them in non-religious venues that provide opportunities for community ties and a chance to reflect on life meaning and purpose, just as religious communities have traditionally offered.

Furthermore, research indicates that those who [engage with such deep questions](#) in a setting that does not expect conformity to a specific dogma overall gain a deeper perception of meaning and purpose (Wong, [“Meaning in Life”](#)). In other words, the most impactful sense of meaning and purpose stems from an intentional analysis of one’s self understanding and path in life and a consequent experience of [personal agency, the quality of living intentionally](#). To be clear, one can find deep meaning and purpose from belief in a higher power, but it is best if one comes to that conclusion oneself after deep self-reflection and analysis, as opposed to just conforming to group and social norms. Yet in the United States there are few non-explicitly religious channels to reflect on life meaning and purpose. This workbook provides one such channel, drawing on academic studies as does all Intentional Insights content. The next section lists specific research-based strategies and exercises for gaining purpose and meaning in life.

### **Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following**

Take a few minutes to think about how this information about the research on meaning and purpose impacts your own perspective on your personal sense of meaning and purpose.

Write down your thoughts and then proceed onward.

## **Meaning and Purpose: Research-Based Strategies**

## Strategies: Highest-Order Goals

*“What is the meaning of life for me?”*

So how do you as an individual find purpose and meaning in life? As mentioned earlier, research underscores that it does not matter how you get this sense of meaning and purpose in life. What’s most important is that you *experience* your life as having a meaning and purpose. The key question is not “What is *the* meaning of life?” but “[What is the meaning and purpose of life for you?](#)” Each of us is free to formulate her or his own answer to this question. By doing so you get a personal sense of life meaning and purpose, thus gaining [agency](#) and greater capacity to understand and achieve your own personal life goals.

Easier said than done, right? How do you figure out a personal sense of meaning and purpose? Let’s start with the strategy of Highest-Order Goals, a research-based strategy for helping people move toward the kind of future they want by identifying their long-term outcomes ([Halvorson](#)).

What kind of a life do you want? Think about several adjectives that would characterize the kind of ideal life you want.

Many go with a happy life, but there are some challenges with this concept. Happiness is defined as a mental or emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy. Yet there is a dark side to happiness. Research shows that people who are always trying to pursue happiness, just for happiness' sake, are likely to feel worse as a result of this pursuit when they inevitably fail to become as happy as they'd like to be. Also, people who are oriented exclusively toward personal happiness sometimes disregard and even undermine the happiness of others ([Seligman](#)). In one study, researchers surveyed 397 people over a month-long period, examining whether people thought their lives were meaningful or happy. One key difference: Happiness was linked to being a taker rather than a giver, whereas meaningfulness went with being a giver rather than a taker ([Baumeister et al.](#)).

Here are some additional concepts that others in my workshops and classes used as their ultimate orientation:

- **Balanced:** balancing all life areas well
- **Beautiful:** having a life full of aesthetic beauty
- **Diverse:** having a life that draws from many different sources and incorporates them into one’s own framework of thinking, feeling, and behavior
- **Dynamic:** constantly changing and varying, providing a sense of excitement and opportunity
- **Flourishing:** sense of living within an optimal range of human functioning and well-

being, and thus having the best life possible in all areas

- Healthy: having great physical and mental health and well-being
- Impactful: making a strong and positive impact on the lives of others and on the world as a whole
- Fulfilled: satisfaction as a result of fully developing one's abilities or character, of enacting and living one's values regarding both oneself and your community
- Meaningful: finding meaning in life, generally through connection to the broader world and other people. This term for many people overlaps with "purposeful"
- Mindful: constant self-awareness, situational awareness, and other-awareness
- Rich: having a life with active, engaged, and deep participation in ideas and experiences
- Successful: succeeding at all aspects of life

There are plenty of other concepts besides what is included in this list. You might want to create your own list of whatever has relevance for you. I personally prefer happy, fulfilled, and flourishing. Ryan's highest order goals are dynamic, diverse, rich, and meaningful.

### **Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to complete the following:**

Write down your highest-order goals, using the kind of concepts listed above:

Fill in the blank: "I want a life that is

- \_\_\_\_\_,
- \_\_\_\_\_,
- \_\_\_\_\_,
- \_\_\_\_\_"

If you get stuck, apply the "Five-Fold Why" approach ([Kaufman](#)). This technique is helpful for understanding your highest-order goals. Basically, as you strive to come up with adjectives to describe your ideal life, whenever you come up with an adjective, ask yourself "why" you want to have that. Do so as many times as needed until you get at the core basis of what you want. How do you know you got at the core? When you are confident that the answer is "because I want \_\_\_\_\_ as a basic component of my ideal life," you have a pretty solid probability that you are getting at the roots of your personal vision of your ideal life.

It is often helpful to start by thinking about your current goals (big or small) or past meaningful goals/New Year's resolutions, etc. For example, John's goal was to lose weight. He could ask himself, "why do I want to lose weight?" Let's say he answers: "to be healthier." Then, he can ask himself: "well, why do I want to be healthier?" and so on, until he reaches the core. To learn more about this and evidence-based strategies discussed below, sign up to the

Intentional Insights [newsletter](#). To ask clarifying questions about how to apply these strategies, to share your own experience, and to help others engaging with InIn content, check out the Intentional Insights [Facebook Page](#), [Twitter](#), and [Pinterest](#).

## Strategies: Life Vision

*“What is my life vision?”*

Many organizations have a vision statement. For example, the [vision for Intentional Insights](#) is a world where individuals, organizations, and governments rely on research-based strategies to improve constantly their ability to evaluate reality clearly and make effective decisions that enable all of us to live optimally happy, healthy, fulfilling, and flourishing lives.

For individual people, a life vision statement fulfills the same function. A life vision statement is essentially an elaboration on your highest-order goals. To come up with a life vision statement, you will define each of the adjectives you chose for your highest-order goals. The result of this process will be your life vision statement. For some people, it works to put their vision statement in a sentence, while for others bullet points describing each of the highest-order goals may work better.

For me, sentences work well. My highest-order goals are having a life that is optimally happy, fulfilling, and flourishing. *Happiness* to me means creating the kind of life that provides moderate but systematic stimuli that cause me to experience mental and physical well-being, on a daily level and in the long-term future. *Fulfillment* to me means fulfilling my values by constantly improving my understanding of my world and myself, and sharing my knowledge with others to help them expand their understanding of themselves and the world around them, while benefiting the local and global community through my actions, on a daily level and in the long-term future. *Flourishing* to me means knowing that I rely intentionally on evidence-based strategies, adapted to my own preferences, to pursue constant optimization of all of my life areas and thus help ensure that I live the best life possible, on a daily level and in the long-term future.

Sentences also work well for Ryan. His highest-order goals are: *Dynamic* – I seek a life that is changing constantly. I am one who is never content for long with the same old routines, and constantly craves novel stimulation. Specifically, I hope to put myself into a position that has a constantly changing atmosphere and requires new demands each time a challenge is placed. *Diverse* – I seek a life that is also very broad, meaning I incorporate many new ideas into my life and thinking. Specifically, I hope to learn as much as I can about a vast array of subjects, especially new cultures. Having the opportunity to incorporate these new cultures into my thinking will greatly expand my worldview and bring new understanding as to how others experience and perceive their own realities. *Rich* – I seek a life that also contains great depth. What I mean by this is that I would like to be more than someone who is a “tourist” of sorts. I do not want to simply observe new ways and ideas, but to be an active participant in engaging what new cultures, ideas, and experiences have for me. *Meaningful* – I seek a life

that has something to offer me. What I mean by this is that I want a life where I assign my own meaning to the experiences that I have and the ways that I live. I want to give my life the kind of meaning that will allow me to sustain my own happiness for as long as possible. To me, this means being able to help others in any way, shape, or form. Such activities are what give me the greatest feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction.” See [this link](#) for his answers to the exercises in this workbook.

**Set aside 10 to 15 minutes to complete the following:**

- Develop your life vision statement by writing an elaboration of your highest-order goals by writing a one or two-sentence definition of each of the adjectives you chose. You can use either the bullet point or sentence format.
- One way to start is by creating a dream/vision list. Think about what you want to see, do, experience, be, and have in the course of your life. Some of these may be in the next week or month, some may be more long-term items. List at least 20 things, then look for patterns. This will give you an idea of your higher order goals and serve as the start to your personal vision.
- Don’t overthink it! All you need to do is come up with a rough draft for now. You will return regularly to this life vision statement as you develop greater self-understanding.

## **Strategies: Self-Reflection**

*“What do I think is my personal meaning and purpose in life?”*

Self-reflection is an excellent specific strategy for gaining a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life. Frankl helped people find purpose and meaning in life through helping others to remember their joys, sorrows, sacrifices, and blessings, thereby calling to mind the meaningfulness of their lives as already lived. Steger found that through self-reflection many people gain a great deal of psychological benefit by understanding what their lives are about and how they fit within the world around them.



## Journaling

One intentional approach to gaining life meaning and purpose involves occasionally stopping and self-reflecting about our lives and experiences we can find an individual sense of purpose and meaning through the lives that we have already lead. A great way to do so is through journaling – it can help us [deal with stress](#), [process sorrows](#), [experience personal growth](#), [learn more effectively](#), and gain positive emotions through expressing [gratitude](#) (Baikie and Wilhelm, [“Emotional and Physical Health Benefits of Expressive Writing”](#); [Hiemstra](#)).

### **Set aside 30 to 60 minutes to complete the following:**

- First, take 5 minutes to think about how actively you reflect on your own sense of purpose and meaning in life, as informed by the following MPQ questions: “I actively search for a sense of meaning and purpose in life” and “I actively reflect on my sense of meaning and purpose in life”
- Next, reflect about your life purpose and meaning by taking 5 to 10 minutes to journal about each of the following:
  - 1) What were important recent events in your life?
  - 2) Which of them involved stresses and adversity, and how can you reframe them to have a better perspective on these events?
  - 3) What did you learn from these events?
  - 4) What are you grateful for in your life recently?
  - 5) What was your experience of life meaning and purpose recently?

Why these 5 prompts? Because they are specifically formulated to help you reflect on your recent memories and create a personal narrative in a way that helps impart meaning and purpose into your life. However, you should feel free to adapt these prompts to your personal preferences if these questions do not resonate with the way you prefer to formulate your thoughts. The key is to have prompts that help you engage in self-reflection and instill meaning and purpose into your experience of daily life.

Try such journaling every day for the upcoming week. Then, at the end of the week, review your journal and note bigger takeaways that you gained from writing down your reflections. I

would encourage you to integrate journaling and regular reviews of your journaling into your everyday life practice, as a way of gaining the research-based benefits of journaling, including a greater sense of life meaning and purpose.

For an example, here is what Ryan realized after some self-reflection: “I believe that my purpose in life is to constantly try and make others better than they originally were. My greatest joy comes from knowing that in some way, I have made the lives of others easier in some way... I do realize that I am indeed working towards living the life that I want to, I just hadn’t realized it until now. I come closer to living the way I would like through even the most minor of interactions with others, because in some way, I always seek to try and make other feel better or make them better than they already were.”

## Meditation

Meditation is another great tool to gain that sense of meaning and purpose through self-reflection and introspection. Imagine your body singing with joy and awe from the deepest core of your being to your very fingertips as you experience a rich and deep sense of purpose and meaning. In your heart and mind, you are experiencing a state of transcendent confidence about your place in the world and your purpose for being here. With that personal sense of life meaning, you feel fully connected to every part of yourself, to all other people, and to the natural world and even universe as a whole. This is my experience, and that of many others, as we meditate on our sense of purpose and meaning in life.

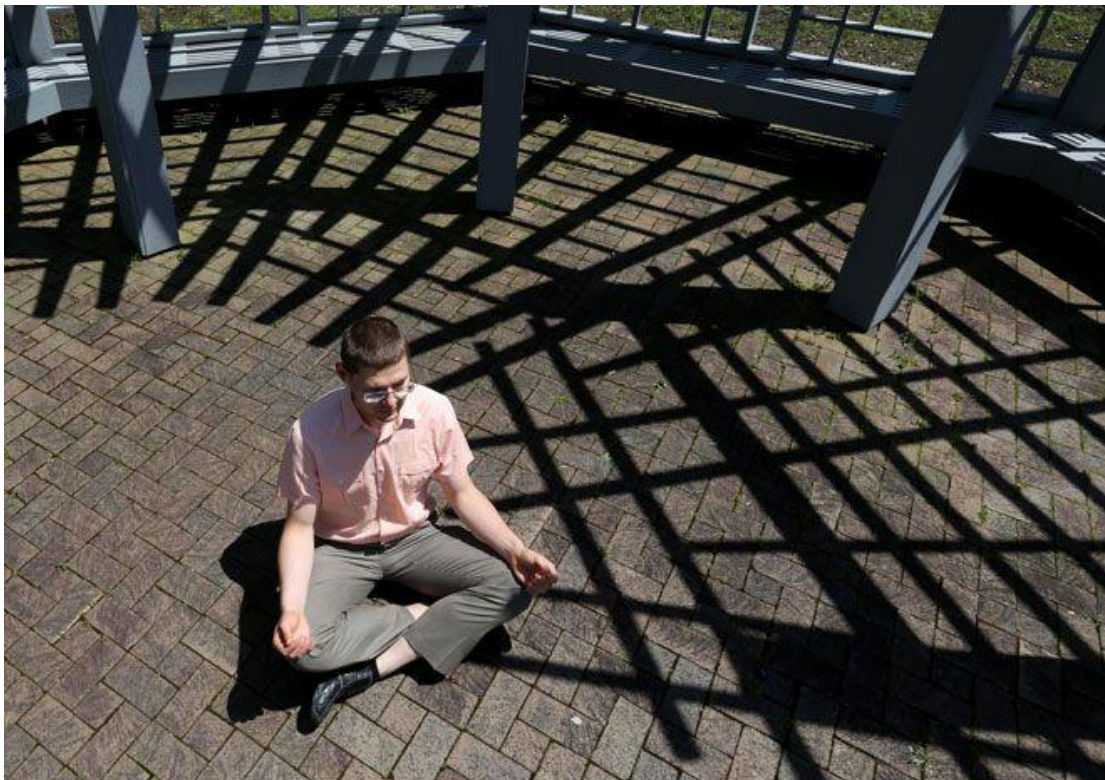


*This is a photo of the author meditating in an empty classroom at the Ohio State University, where he is a professor. Photo credit: [Jessica Phelps/The Newark Advocate](#)*

The growing scientific literature on meditation shows its benefits in a wide variety of areas. For example, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the most prominent figure in the field of meditation research, has [shown the benefits](#) of meditation for alleviating pain, dealing with stress, and addressing a wide variety of other physical health concerns. Meditation also improves [social and emotional](#) well-being, as well as catalyze our body and mind's internal resources for both

[healing and development](#) (Lindberg, “[Integrative Review of Research Related to Meditation, Spirituality, and the Elderly](#)”; Shapiro, Schwartz, and Santerre). Research in cognitive neuroscience suggests the [particular promise](#) of visualization meditation for a variety of areas in our mental and physical well-being (Andresen, “[Meditation Meets Behavioural Medicine](#)”).

“Isn't meditation itself a religious practice?” That's a question I often get asked by many people wary of religiously-informed approaches to big life questions such as meaning and purpose. Certainly, meditation has been traditionally practiced in religious contexts, especially in Eastern religions. Yet in the last few decades, non-religious forms of meditation have taken off and spread widely. Due to the work of Kabat-Zinn and many other medical professionals, meditation is practiced widely in hospitals and other medical settings. Even the US army is [integrating meditation](#) into its arsenal. Prominent secular notables, such as [Greta Christina](#), [Sam Harris](#), and [Mark W. Gura](#) have written about their experience. I myself have helped lead and organize a meditation group at the Humanist Community of Central Ohio called [Rational Mindfulness](#), where reason-oriented humanist folks get together monthly for evidence-based meditation practices.



*This is a photo of the author meditating in the Inniswood Gardens in Westerville, OH. Photo credit: [Eric Albrecht | Dispatch](#)*

## **Set aside 10 to 20 minutes to complete the following:**

First, sit or lie in a meditative position, whatever you prefer. Then, close your eyes and take several deep breaths to center yourself and calm your mind. Next, envision what it would be like to feel transcendent confidence about your personal sense of life purpose at the very core of your being in the center of your chest, and let yourself bask in the joy and awe of that experience. Then imagine that sense of awe and joy spreading from the very core of your being slowly outward – through your chest, your head, your feet, and through your very fingertips. As your mind wanders, bring it back calmly, peacefully.

With that sense of purpose and meaning about your place in the world, let that experience flow out from your fingertips and connect you to every other person on Earth, to the natural world, and to the universe itself. Next, focus on reflecting on that sense of meaning and purpose, and notice what associations rise up in your mind as you do so. Contemplate, without judging, these associations, whatever they might be. Remember there is no absolute right answer, each of us has to develop a personal sense of meaning and purpose. Don't feel that these associations have to be clear and concrete, developing a personal sense of meaning and purpose takes time. Hold these associations in your mind as you slowly draw back from the universe, from the natural world, from other people, and back within yourself. Now take several deep breaths, center yourself, and open your eyes. I suggest you then journal about your experience and what kind of associations you had during your meditation, as that will help you gain clarity about your personal sense of meaning and purpose and your place in the world.

Now, there are many who don't get that much out of it when they try such a meditation for the first time. I suggest you experiment with this meditation once a day every day for the next week, and journal about your experience. Then, at the end of the week, review your journal and note what your experiences have been over this time. If you find you still aren't gaining much, don't feel obliged to go onward. Meditation is not for everyone, but I encourage you to give it a fair shot. It may be just the thing for you!

## Strategies: Social and Community Connections

*“What kind of community and social connections do I have?”*

As mentioned earlier, studies indicate that those with substantial social and community ties overall have a much stronger sense of life meaning and purpose. Certainly, some people can find meaning and purpose in life with little or no community ties, but research suggests such bonds are highly beneficial for most of those who are searching for a deep sense of life meaning. While in the United States religion provides the main venue for such community and social bonds, secular venues are growing in number. There are many national and international secular groups, and most have local affiliates:

- [American Atheists](#)
- [American Ethical Union](#)
- [Americans United for the Separation of Church and State](#)
- [Atheist Alliance International](#)
- [Black Nonbelievers](#)
- [Center for Inquiry](#)
- [Council for Secular Humanism](#)
- [Foundation Beyond Belief](#)
- [Freedom From Religion Foundation](#)
- [Hispanic American Freethinkers](#)
- [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#)
- [Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers](#)
- [Oasis Network](#)
- [People of Color Beyond Faith](#)
- [Recovering from Religion](#)
- [Secular Coalition for America](#)
- [Skeptics Society](#)
- [Society for Humanistic Judaism](#)

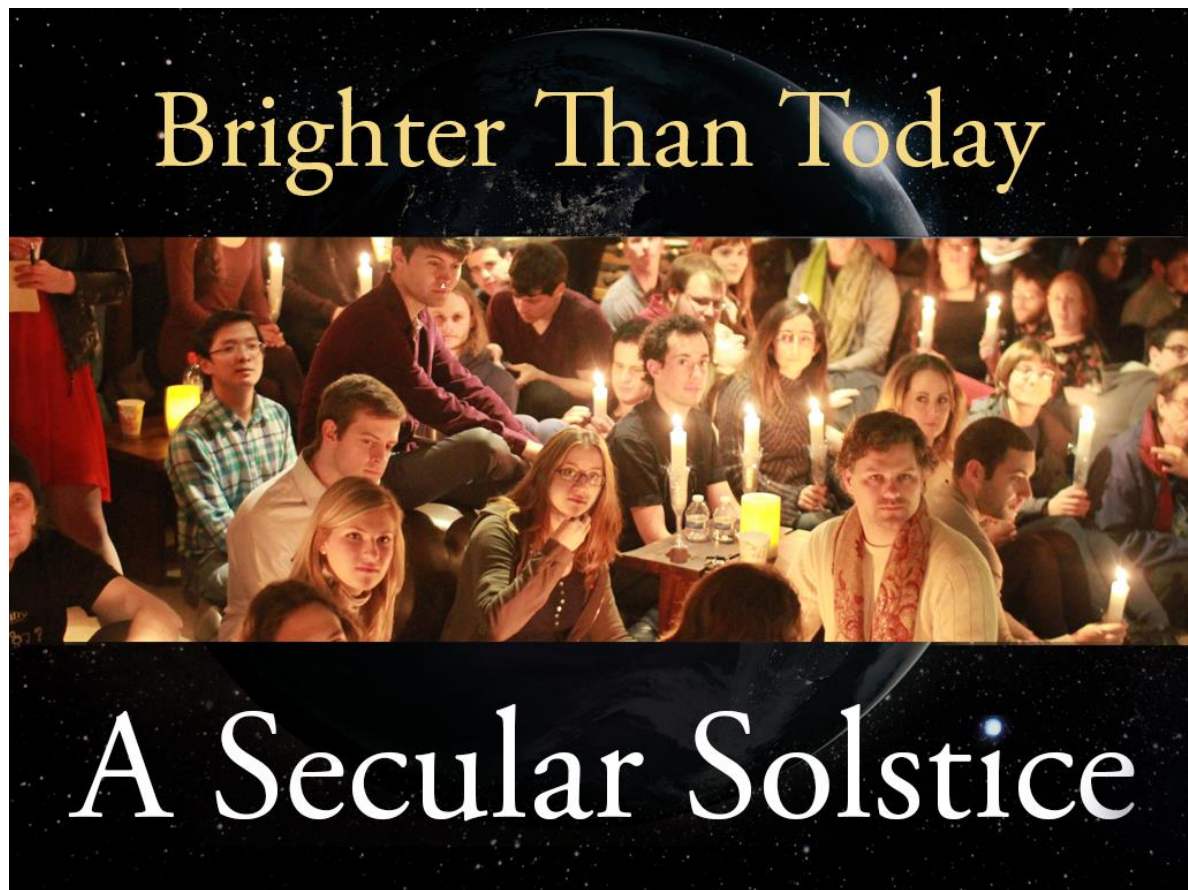


- [Sunday Assembly](#)
- [The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science](#)
- [United Coalition of Reason](#)
- [and many others, with a list here](#)

Those in college and high school can go to [Secular Student Alliance](#) affiliates, while children and teenagers enjoy lively discussions and fun at [Camp Quest](#). Venues that include both believers and non-believers also exist, such as [Unitarian Universalist](#) congregations, including the [First UU church](#) in Columbus, OH, that I attend with [Agnes Vishnevkin](#), fellow Intentional Insights co-founder and my wife. Within UU congregations, specific subgroups exist for those who are secularly-oriented, part of the [UU Humanist Association](#).

If you want to gain a rich sense of life meaning and purpose, without an externally imposed framework, check out local affiliates of these national organizations. You can find a place to reflect on deep life questions from reason-based perspectives, and gain an opportunity to enter communities where you can form strong social bonds and great friendships.

Likewise, these groups provide an opportunity for non-religious celebrations and rituals. Right here in Columbus, OH, the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#) offers secular celebrations of the [Summer Solstice](#), the [Winter Solstice](#), and other secular holidays. The [First Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbus](#) provides a welcoming space for both believers and non-believers to celebrate secularized rituals from a variety of faith traditions. Over the last few years, secular folks have been organizing major national events, most prominently the [New York Winter Solstice](#), but also events such as [Darwin Day](#) and a whole host of other [secular holidays](#) with ritual elements. If your own local secular community does not currently host such holidays, I would encourage you to show initiative and agency to organize such celebrations, on the basis of resources provided in the links given above.



*[Image credit of Adam Lee's "Daylight Activism" blog](#)*

**Set aside 15 to 20 minutes to complete the following:**

- Think about your community and social connections, especially as informed by the following questions on the MPQ: “I have meaningful social and community bonds” and “I have social connections that help me experience meaning and purpose in life”
- Consider whether you would benefit from stronger social and community bonds. If so, look up various groups that meet nearby that you might be interested in attending, and make specific and concrete plans to go to some of these in the near future. Encourage these groups to hold the kind of events that would give you the strongest sense of meaning and purpose, such as celebrations and rituals, and other events.

Here is what Ryan wrote: “I have taken the time to reflect upon what sorts of groups I participate with to providing me with a measure of meaning and understanding. Intentional



Insights has provided me with the means to serve others and at the same time, provided me with the chance to share with a group of like-minded individuals, what I feel purpose and meaning has for me. In the future, I will be expanding this group to include the Humanist Community of Central Ohio (HCCO), a group of secular-humanists who will provide me an even greater sense of community.”

## Strategies: Serving Others

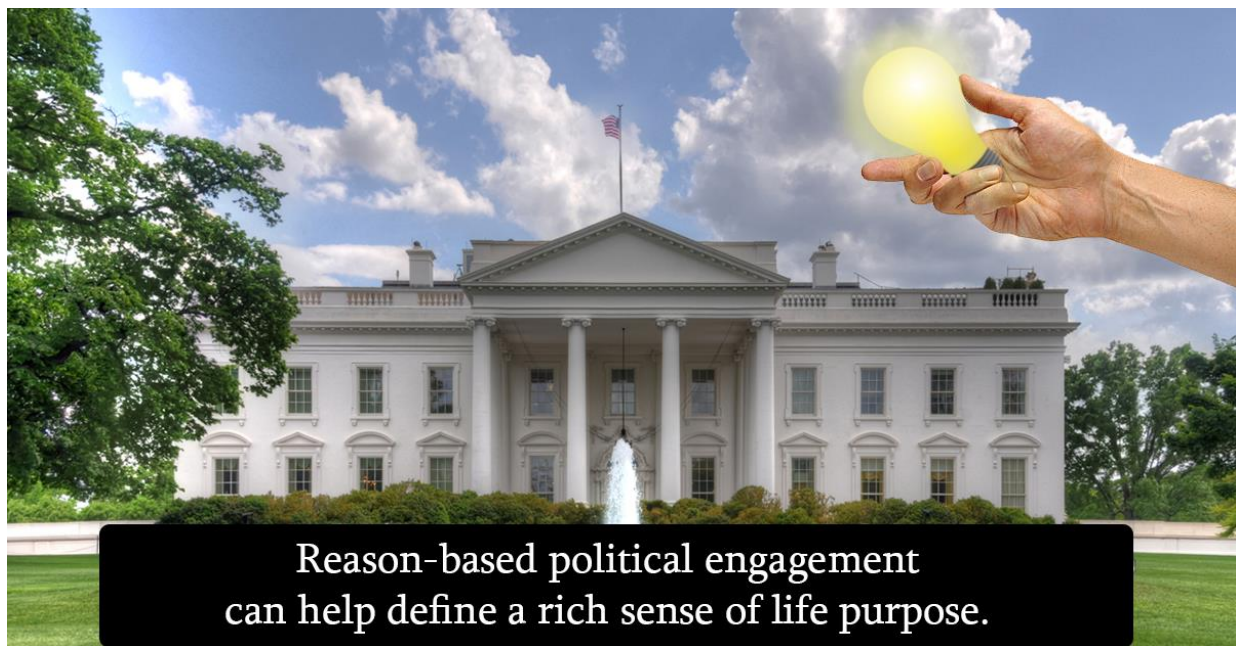
*“How well do I serve others?”*

I remember how in November 2013 Agnes and I, together with a great bunch of people, organized a [spaghetti dinner fundraiser](#) at our [Unitarian Universalist](#) church. The event was a big success, with more than 120 attendees, a music program, a raffle and silent auction. We raised more than \$2000 for the [Mid-Ohio Food Bank](#). It might surprise you that the dinner organizers and volunteers came from Columbus secular humanist, atheist, and skeptic groups, including the [UU secular humanist group](#), as this religious denomination embraces [believers and non-believers alike](#). The dinner honored the [Flying Spaghetti Monster](#), a light satire meant to promote reason-based scientific education in biology classes. No belief in a deity was required to participate in civic engagement at this dinner – in fact, the event was explicitly oriented toward secular folks.

Studies indicate that [opportunities to serve others](#), such as in [civic](#), [private](#), or [professional](#) settings, as well as [charitable giving](#), result in a stronger sense of purpose and meaning in life (Dik, Duffy, and Steger, [“Measuring”](#); [“Enhancing”](#)). This does not mean that serving others is necessary for a strong sense of meaning and purpose, but such civic engagement generally helps contribute to gaining this sense. Volunteering together with members of your community enables the creation of strong social bonds, which adds further to a sense of meaningfulness ([Goleman](#)). In the United States, religion offers the main venue for community belonging, and also for working with others to pursue civic engagement. Civic engagement ranges from donating one’s time to bring about a better world such as through the spaghetti dinner fundraiser described above, to pursuing social justice through advocacy and lobbying, as exemplified by [BREAD](#), the main interfaith social justice organization in Central Ohio.

But here’s the thing: there are more and more secular communities around, and they are actively participating in civic engagement. Just here in Columbus, besides the FSM dinner, the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#) does regular [blood donations](#), which were featured in the [main newspaper in Central Ohio](#), participates in [LGBTQ activism](#), and promotes other forms of [social and economic service to others](#). The local chapter of the [United Coalition of Reason](#) hosted a walk-a-thon to benefit the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, part of a broader national effort by the [Foundation Beyond Belief](#). And [COUNT](#), a Columbus secular group, is explicitly dedicated to volunteering. Agnes and I have also led a year-long effort to get BREAD to [open up its doors to secular folks](#), and then [successfully mobilized](#) a large contingent of non-believers to attend this event. National secular organizations, such as the [Secular Student Alliance](#) and the [Secular Coalition for America](#), increasingly promote civic

engagement. More and more opportunities are emerging for [nonbelievers who want to volunteer](#) together with others who share their value system, whether for more secular-themed causes [such as Camp Quest, reason-based summer camps for children and youth](#), or [social justice](#) in general. A particularly promising new trend in civic engagement is [Effective Altruism](#). This movement is devoted to using well-reasoned, evidence-based approaches to find the most effective ways to improve the world, especially through charitable giving. Effective Altruism is endorsed by philosophers such as [Peter Singer](#) and composed of organization such as [Giving What We Can](#), [GiveWell](#), and [80,000 Hours](#).



*Courtesy of Cerina Gillilan*

Civic engagement can also mean political engagement. How does this work in practice?

You pass through the long security line at the United States Capitol building in Washington, DC. While the line of tourists streams forward into the Exhibition Hall, you turn right, and head to the Senate appointment desk. There, you sign in, get an ID badge, and are guided by a security officer to a large meeting room. You mingle with political staffers, reporters, and various notables. Soon, your state's Senator walks in. You introduce yourself, talk to the Senator one-on-one for several minutes, describe what you care about, and how s/he can help improve US policy. The Senator hears you out, responds to your concerns, and connects with you on a human level.

This story may sound unreal, but it does happen. I'm living proof, as that is my story. I, along with Agnes, met with Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown at the constituent coffee hour that he holds regularly. We talked with him about the issues we cared about, such as using reason and

science to inform education and family planning. We also shared with him about Intentional Insights and [its mission](#) of translating complex academic research into practical strategies and tools that help people achieve their goals in daily life. He heard us out and expressed support for our issues and perspectives, and endorsed the mission of Intentional Insights. I was especially surprised when, after I told him I research [meaning and purpose](#) and [decision-making practices](#) in the Soviet Union, he started speaking Russian to me. Apparently, he studied Russian as his undergraduate major, and still remembered it, which impressed me quite a bit.



*[Photo credit of Senator Brown's office, from the 6/12/14 constituent meeting](#)*

We met Senator Brown as part of the [Secular Coalition for America's 2014 Lobby Day and Policy](#) conference. We received training in how to lobby politicians, panel presentations on how to advocate for reason-based political decision-making, and supporting materials on the benefits of using science and data to inform policy. Such political advocacy offers an indirect but powerful means of serving others through influencing the government to adopt the most rational approaches in serving the public good. Moreover, the event offered the opportunity to develop and cultivate social and community bonds with fellow Americans who cared about reason-oriented political decision-making. I was excited and enthused to meet so many others

across the country who wanted the government to make decisions based on rational evidence, not on traditional [cached thinking patterns](#), [gut reactions](#), [genetic differences](#), or [anti-science](#) dogmatic claims.

You don't have to go to Washington to lobby your politicians. I carried my enthusiasm back home to Ohio, and indeed Ohio holds an annual [Ohio Secular Summit](#), where you can lobby your state representatives the same way that Agnes and I lobbied Senator Brown. And you can do so with other members of your community. For example, the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#) organized a [speaker to present](#) about the Ohio Secular Summit before it occurred, and then Agnes compiled a [blog post](#) based on the experiences of those who participated. Ohio also has a [highly active forum](#) for political activities of interest to reason-minded individuals, where you can find out about relevant issues. Besides lobbying your representatives in person, you can call them, send them letters, e-mail them, [sign petitions](#), and so on, and know you are participating in a broader action with others who care about the government making rationally-informed policies. To locate your own state forum, check out the [Secular Coalition for America's state chapters](#). Also, consider getting engaged in local politics, by [learning about how local politics works](#), by voting in all elections and especially local ones, by being a poll watcher and vote counter, by running for local office, and [in many other ways](#).

The Ohio Secular Summit [blog post](#) describes how those who participated found it an empowering and meaningful experience. This demonstrates on a concrete level the research-based evidence of how we can gain a sense of purpose and meaning from serving others through political advocacy, especially when united together with members of our community in a way that helps cultivate social bonds. Calling, sending letters, e-mailing, and signing petitions is harder to translate into a visceral sense of meaning and purpose. I would suggest stopping and thinking through intentionally about how you serve others through your political advocacy to advance the public good. Through such actions, you can become a true [agent](#) of change in your society, and find meaning and purpose through helping create a world where the government relies on research-based strategies to evaluate reality clearly and make effective decisions, enabling all of us to live optimally happy, healthy, fulfilling and flourishing lives. Not coincidentally, this is the [vision of Intentional Insights](#).

What are the practical takeaways here? To gain a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life it helps to participate in civic engagement with others from your community. It might be more challenging if you are a non-believer, but I would encourage you to take the initiative to push your local groups and organizations to do service for the social good. You will likely help yourself and others find a more powerful perception of life meaning, increase mental and physical well-being for yourself and others, and [gain greater agency](#) through achieving your personal and social goals. Here, altruism and egoism combine for the win!



**Set aside 15 to 20 minutes to complete the following:**

- Think about your social service, especially together with others in your community and social circles, and draw on the following MPQ question: “I engage in social service that helps others have better lives”
- Consider whether you would benefit from engaging in more civic engagement, especially with others in your community and social circles. If so, investigate opportunities to do such activities and make concrete plans to collaborate with other members of your community to do volunteering, political advocacy, and other forms of civic engagement.
- If you have trouble knowing where to start with finding civic engagement activities, here are some options: Search Meetup.com for civic engagement/volunteer groups, check with your local chamber of commerce, library, and local non-profit organizations. As you look through them, think of the kinds of activities you would enjoy and which organizations include those activities. Additionally, consider small ways to help people you know (or even strangers). Can you offer a ride to someone? Make or deliver a meal to someone who is sick? The possibilities are endless!

## Strategies: Meaningful Work

*“How well do I find a sense of meaning and purpose in my work?”*

For many, the workplace is the last place they expect to gain a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Yet I hope to demonstrate to you that you can find meaning and purpose even there, if you apply the broad three-fold framework outlined above.

When most people think about meaning and purpose in their work, they think of the phrase “pursue your passion.” That’s not bad advice. Pursuing your passion is one great way of finding meaning and happiness in your work. [I did so myself](#) when I decided to become a professor and later the President of Intentional Insights. Popularizing research-based strategies to help people reach their goals through improving their thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns is incredibly motivating for me. I get shivers of pleasure when I receive emails from people thanking me for improving their lives. I’m very tempted to stay up long into the night to produce more articles and videos that would help spread such messages broadly, energized by the thought of how much better the world would be and how much happier others would be if they had access to these tools – it’s better than coffee!

However, you can very much find meaning in work that does not match your true passion! The research shows that you actually can make pretty much any work significantly more meaningful (Rossoa, Dekasb, Wrzesniewskic, [“On the Meaning of Work”](#)). Since studies indicate that a rich sense of meaning and purpose, including in one’s work, contributes in important ways to [your mental and physical health and wellbeing](#), it’s wise to try to make your work more meaningful.

Before diving into the strategies to do so, let me clarify that I use the term “work” to refer not only to the typical 9-5 job, but more broadly to any area in which you bring value to others in ways that they financially support. For example, the government supports schools because students bring value by becoming educated to make a better society for us all; house-husbands and house-wives bring value by taking care of the home, and are supported by their partners; as President of Intentional Insights, I get financial support through donations from people who appreciate the benefits our organization brings to the world, such as the book that you are reading, blogs, videos, online classes, etc., as listed [here](#).

**Set aside 10 to 20 minutes to complete the first strategy:**

*The first strategy is informed by self-reflection.* First, think about the connection of your everyday work tasks to your personal long-term goals at systematic, regular intervals (Steger,

Dik, and Duffy, [“Measuring Meaningful Work”](#)). For myself, being the President of Intentional Insights helps me accomplish my long-term goal of improving the world and helping people have better lives. But that higher purpose tends to be lost in the everyday tasks of writing articles, fundraising, answering emails, etc. So every week on Saturday afternoon, I sit down to review what I did that week, and think about how it helped bring about the kind of world where I want to live. I imagine that world, visualizing all the details of how much better off other people are, how they make wiser decisions, how much less suffering and more joy there is in the world. I let myself feel how good it would be to live in that world, and how great it is that my daily work activities help bring that world into reality. I then write in my journal about my feelings and thoughts, making sure I have a record I can refer back to any time I get lost in the everyday business of my work activities. Journaling is a great strategy to gain a higher sense of meaning and purpose in life more broadly, as [research suggests](#). I also encourage and support others at Intentional Insights to connect their long-term goals to their daily tasks, and orient to creating an organizational culture that endorses such meaning-making activities.

While improving people’s lives happens to be my goal, you should think about your own goals. Let’s take the case of people who only do their jobs for the salary. If so, then take the time to sit down at systematic intervals and think about what your salary helps you accomplish. Does the money help you accomplish your goal of having financial stability and security? Does it help you have the kind of lifestyle you want? Does it help you support your family well? Visualize the specific things that the salary does for you – imagine that world thoroughly, and feel all the positive emotions you get from that world. Then, write down your feelings and thoughts, and refer back to them whenever you’re feeling like you need to recall the reasons you’re doing what you’re doing.

Try doing so right now. Think through all of the things described in the paragraph above, take the time to visualize them, and journal about your experience. Commit to doing so once every three days for the next two weeks, and then assess the results from your journaling.

### **Set aside 10 to 20 minutes to complete the second strategy:**

*Try building community spirit and social bonds through your work.* Plenty of studies indicate that [community and social bonds contribute strongly](#) to a sense of meaning and purpose in life. This applies to the sphere of work as to any other sphere of life, according to the scientific literature (Milliman et. al, [“Spirit and Community at Southwest Airlines”](#)). In my own role at Intentional Insights, I strive to create opportunities to engage with fellow participants on projects together, and aim to collaborate in a positive and supportive manner. Such collaboration around mutually exciting projects in a positive manner is one important



way of building social bonds in the workplace. Moreover, I make sure to engage in regular meetings with InIn participants where we talk about topics not directly related to our mutual work, but to other things going on in our lives. Doing so helps enrich the professional relationship and turn it into a deeper and more meaningful one, where both people feel supported by the other. Likewise, I occasionally organize social events where all InIn participants can gather to socialize together, especially to celebrate important organizational milestones and accomplishments.

You can do some of the same in your own work. Most types of work provide opportunities to work with others on mutual projects together, and you can do your part to be a great team player who supports and encourages others well. Likewise, take initiative in setting up meetings with coworkers and talk about things not only related to work, but more broadly about life as a whole. While an increasing number of people work from home, videoconference calls can provide an opportunity to both collaborate on work projects and talk about non-work topics.

So take 5-10 minutes right now to brainstorm about things you can do to create greater community spirit and social bonds in your workplace. Then, decide on one of these strategies to try out in the next week. Write out what specific steps you will take to implement this strategy.

### **Set aside 10 to 20 minutes to complete the third strategy:**

*Engage in serving others through your work.* Social service to others is one of the keystones of greater meaning and purpose in life, as [numerous studies](#) reveal. Research specifically on the workplace has found that the same concept applies to work as to anything else (Steger, Dik, and Duffy, [“Measuring Meaningful Work”](#)). So I and my fellow InIn participants are lucky ducks, as the organization by its very nature is oriented toward helping our audience have better lives. Furthermore, one of our key principles is providing mutual coaching and mentoring for participants in the organization, which both builds social bonds and serves others. It is important, however, to reflect occasionally on how I specifically help others have a better life. To do so, I both journal about this topic, and collect quotes from emails, blog comments, and other sources where people express gratitude to the organization for the help it provided to them. Likewise, I share these quotes with others and encourage an organizational culture where we highlight and celebrate each other’s mutual accomplishments in helping others improve their lives. For example, at the end of every Board Meeting, all the Board members go around in a circle and praise another Board member for something great that they did to advance the organization’s mission and improve the lives of others. Doing so helps the person who is praised feel good and gain meaning and purpose, while also helping

build community and social bonds.

Now, what if you're not a lucky duck in the same way that I am? Let's say you have a regular 9-5 job that does not explicitly serve others, what then? No worries! You must be getting paid for providing some sort of social value, right? Sit down and consider the kind of social value that you provide to others. What is it about what you do that helps others have better lives – whether your customers, your co-workers, your boss, the owners or shareholders of your company, taxpayers if you're a government worker, etc.? Journal about it and also collect any positive feedback provided from others about your work. Take steps to solicit such feedback, since some workplaces do not have optimal systems to provide it. Look for both formal and informal opportunities to support and coach others in your workplace, and get support and coaching from your coworkers. Likewise, many workplaces provide an opportunity to engage in social service activities together with others from your work, such as building homes through Habitat for Humanity, volunteering in a soup kitchen, etc. Also, consider donating a part of your salary to the most effective charities, especially those ranked highly by organizations associated with the [Effective Altruism](#) movement, which is devoted to using well-reasoned, evidence-based approaches to improve the world. Such civic engagement can help you gain greater meaning and purpose through your work activities from serving others outside of the direct context of your work. Again, make sure to stop and consider the positive impact that you have for others through journaling, to ensure that you gain the full benefit for cultivating a deep sense of life purpose.

Again, take 5-10 minutes right now to brainstorm about things you can do to serve others through your workplace. Then, decide on one of these strategies to try out in the next week. Write out what specific steps you will take to implement this strategy.

“What if my supervisor doesn't want me to do meaning-making activities at work?” That's a concern sometimes brought up by those who are concerned about uptight bosses. Well, I hear you. Some supervisors don't yet realize the benefits for employee [mental and physical health and wellbeing](#) that comes from a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their work. First off, I'd suggest you talk to them about the research on this topic. Now if the argument about the mental and physical wellbeing of employees doesn't satisfy them, I suggest you bring up research about how creating a meaningful workplace contributes to the bottom line to well-known companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Southwest Airlines, Tom's of Maine, Ben & Jerry's Homemade, and many others (Wagner- Marsh and Conley, [“The Fourth Wave”](#)). If they're skeptical that they can actually create a sense of meaning and purpose in the workplace, I hope the examples in this and my previous article will help convince them otherwise, and [here's some research](#) on other ways to do so.

Still, regardless of what your supervisor might think, a great deal of these activities are under your own control. Remember, you're working for yourself, not for anyone else. You're doing what you're doing for your own reasons and goals. Always remember that and [be](#)

intentional and show agency in getting what you want from your work, including a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

## Strategies: Reflecting on Purpose and Meaning with Others

*“How well do I reflect with others on purpose and meaning?”*

We’re sitting around a table in our home with about eight guests and discussing the nature of truth and morality. Some believe that truth is generally black and white – either something is true or not. Others insist that truth has many gray areas. Folks disagree on whether it is always moral to tell the truth or whether there are higher morals than the truth.

One scenario was brought up by a participant in her thirties—let’s call her “Anna”—who became a humanist about six months ago. She comes from a deeply religious household and is openly humanist with her nuclear family but not to her extended family. She had a big annual family reunion coming up in two weeks, and Anna didn’t know what to do. Should she just conform and pray aloud over dinner along with everyone else? Should she bow her head silently without praying along with the others? Should she keep her head up and refuse to do anything to appear to conform? Should she walk out of the room when the others were praying?

She also didn’t know what to do about the family tradition of everyone dressing up and going to church on Sunday as part of the reunion. She wasn’t sure how to handle conversations with extended family members about her faith perspective. Anna was lost and confused. While she didn’t want to cause a scene, she did want to be authentic with the people in her life. She asked everyone for advice and feedback on her dilemma, and other participants provided her with empathy, as well as diverse perspectives from their own backgrounds and life journeys.

One participant in his fifties stated that for him, family bonds are more important than sharing one’s real feelings, and though he has been a humanist for two decades, he has not revealed this to his extended family because that would cause a major rift. Another woman talked about her own experience of coming out gradually to various family members and friends, over time, in private, personal conversations. She found that doing so helped her preserve the relationships and helped the people in her life feel respected and acknowledged. They both advised Anna against making any sort of public statement at the reunion, either through words or actions.

Several others disagreed. One participant described how she came out publicly to family members at just such an event to get it over with quickly. She said there was a burst of drama and emotional pain, but then it ended—like ripping off a Band-Aid. Another participant suggested that Anna get the job done by e-mailing the family members beforehand in order to prevent any drama at the reunion. That way, anyone who wanted to talk to her could do so

privately. Two other participants simply refused to acknowledge any value higher than being true and authentic to oneself and one's perspective. They stated that Anna should do only what would reflect the truth.

In the end, Anna decided to write an e-mail to her extended family members. I talked with her at a subsequent gathering, and she described how e-mailing family members in advance worked out really well. Those who cared enough about the issue to have a private conversation pulled her aside to do so. Others simply accepted it. She sat in silence without bowing her head at the dinner and did not go to church with the others. No drama, minimal pain, and she still got the truth out there.

Participants gained a great deal from attending this event. On the feedback sheets passed around after the event, one participant wrote "I gained greater insight into how other people navigate difficult discussions regarding truth and values, when not all parties agree." Another wrote that now s/he will "always question 'my truth'" and will engage in "thinking more about what I hold true." A third wrote that "building a sense of community is what I gained."

[This discussion](#) was part of a long-running group that my Agnes and I hosted at our place, entitled "Values and Meanings," under the umbrella of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#). This meet-up group provided an interfaith, reason-oriented venue for people to reflect in a community setting on life's meaning and purpose and on their values and ethics from an evidence-based perspective. During any similar discussions you may have, research demonstrates that it is especially beneficial to write down how the helpful thoughts expressed by others informed and changed your thinking. By writing these down you will remember and understand them better, and thus think about this topic in a richer and more thorough way ([Klauser](#); [Masicampo and Baumeister](#)).

Now, "Values and Meanings" represents only one type of discussion group that provides insights on life's big questions from a reason-based perspective. What about other types of groups that might help people find meaning and purpose while also gaining other benefits?

"Why don't they teach this in high school?" Or even college, for that matter. That's the reaction that my wife and I had when we first came to [Columbus Rationality](#) meetings. This subgroup of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#) hosts a wide variety of events devoted to discussing and promoting rational thinking strategies.

Agnes and I aren't alone in our reactions – many attendees report similar experiences. After an [event on effective decision making](#), one participant reported in feedback sheets distributed afterwards that "this was a great presentation that will help me make more effective decisions"; another stated "discussing decision-making together with other members of this group really helped me realize some problems with my decisions and how I can make better decisions in the future"; a third wrote "I will think more deeply and thoroughly, and make a clear plan, before committing to major life decisions."

Another Columbus Rationality event, [on rational approaches to violence](#), illuminated the

motivations behind using physical force, the approaches taken by different martial arts to violence, the application of objective risk analysis to physical force, and gaining situational awareness. The audience was highly impressed with what they learned, with one participant reporting that “I will be much more likely to think rationally about physical force,” and another stated that s/he “enjoyed reflecting on this challenging topic in a community with others.” Many of those who started coming as regular participants end up giving talks about various topics of interest to them, such as Agnes on making decisions; myself on [setting and achieving goals](#); Caleb Pitkin, a Methodist Pastor, on being [rational and religious](#); and plenty of others.

These two groups combine all the research-based strategies of gaining purpose and meaning, by providing:

- A venue for reflecting on these deep life questions
- A means of building and cultivating social and community connections
- A way to help others, through assisting them in finding clearer answers to life’s big questions

Columbus Rationality in particular both provides all of the former, and in addition promotes rational thinking, which is a great [goal factoring](#) approach. Goal factoring is a method to help you understand the most effective ways to achieve your end goals (check out this very helpful [goal factoring template](#)). It was created at the Center for Applied Rationality, one of the many great resources listed on the [Intentional Insights resource page](#). You can also check out this website for [some meet-ups](#) dedicated to this goal.

### **Set aside 15-25 minutes to complete the following:**

- Think about opportunities to reflect on purpose and meaning with others in your community and social circle, and draw on the following MPQ question: “I help others find meaning and purpose in life”
- Consider whether you would benefit from engaging in more opportunities to reflect on purpose and meaning together with others in your community and social circle. If so, investigate opportunities to engage in such activities, and make specific and concrete plans to do so.

Well, what if you don’t happen to have such groups nearby? Why not take the initiative to organize one? To help you out, Intentional Insights offers two **free** starter packages. One is for “Values and Meanings,” and includes an introduction giving guidelines on how to organize and implement a “Values and Meanings” group, several blog posts describing a typical “Values and Meanings” session, a facilitator’s guide, a feedback sheet, and participant handouts for

eight events. We also offer a “Rationality” group starter package for those who would like to start up groups for engaging with research-based strategies on rational thinking and emotional intelligence. This package includes an introduction giving guidelines on how to organize and implement a “Rationality” group, several blog posts describing “Rationality” events, several videos of these events, an organizer’s guide, a participant handout, a presenter’s tip sheet, a feedback sheet, and potential topics for discussion.

The packages are available in the Appendix to this book. You are also welcome to get in touch with us at [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org) for information on how to get Word document copies of the package that you can revise for your needs. We would also be glad to connect you to past and current participants in “Columbus Rationality” and “Values and Meanings.” They would be happy to give you tips on setting up such a group in your area.

## Strategies: Making a Specific Plan

*“What specific plan will I make to find greater meaning and purpose in life?”*

At this point, you should be ready to make a plan of the specific and concrete steps you will take to find greater purpose and meaning in life. Now, doing so might sound like a daunting task – why not jump in to meaning-making activities?

Well, here’s why – I want to help you maximize the chance for your success. Working on finding greater meaning and purpose in life is a long-term project. A great deal of research shows that making a specific plan for any such activity makes it much more likely for people to succeed, since connecting long-term goals to short-term tasks is powerfully motivating ([Halvorson](#)). Making such a plan will also help you focus ([Masicampo and Baumeister](#)). Overall, research shows that planning your implementation steps thoroughly, asking yourself when and where you will do a particular task, what will remind you, and what positive reinforcement you will give yourself for accomplishing your goal raises the average chance of completion from 35% to 80% ([Ayres](#)). As part of Intentional Insights, we offer a wide variety of resources to help you achieve your goals, such as this [video of a workshop](#) dedicated to this topic.

I would strongly encourage you to create a specific plan in order to connect clearly your long-term desired outcome of finding greater meaning and purpose in life to concrete short-term steps you will take to get there. Your plan should be informed by the exercises you did throughout this workbook. Decide on what specific steps you will take, and write down how, when, and where you will do them, what will serve as a reminder for you, and what positive reinforcements you will give yourself for accomplishing your goals. The plan should be flexible and experimental, revised according to your needs as you discover more about yourself and what activities are best suited to help you find meaning and purpose in life.

Create a schedule for yourself to retake the MPQ and revise the plan on a regular basis. Once a week works best for most people. Use your initial MPQ as the baseline, and see where and how it improves over time. Focus on the areas that you feel are most beneficial for you to find purpose and meaning in life, as well as areas that offer the lowest-hanging fruit based on your individual situation. Below is a template that you can use to make your own plan of activities template to attain greater purpose and meaning. For a Word copy of this template that you can customize to your personal needs, please e-mail us at [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org). For other similar resources, sign up to the Intentional Insights [newsletter](#), and follow our [Facebook Page](#), [Twitter](#), and [Pinterest](#).



## Activities to Gain a Stronger Sense of Meaning and Purpose

**1) What specific steps will you take to gain a sense of meaning and purpose in life? When answering this question, consider all of the following:**

A) Regularly taking the MPQ questionnaire, whether through the [app](#) or in another format, if you decide this would be beneficial for you

B) Self-reflection activities

*Journaling systematically about your sense of meaning and purpose*, and reviewing your journaling regularly. Consider these prompts:

- What were important recent events in your life?
- Which of them involved stresses and adversity, and how can you reframe them to have a better perspective on these events?
- What did you learn from these events?
- What are you grateful for in your life recently?
- What was your experience of life meaning and purpose recently?

C) *Meditating on your sense of meaning and purpose*

**2) Taking advantage of opportunities to:**

A) *Gain stronger social and community bonds*

B) *Increase your civic engagement with others in your social circle and community*

C) *Find meaning and purpose in your work*

D) *Reflect on life meaning with others in your social circle and community*

**3) For each of the specific steps above you chose to pursue, write down the following:**

A) Why do you think that opportunity might benefit your long-term goals?

B) How will you engage with that opportunity?

C) When and how often will you engage with that opportunity?

D) Where will you engage with that opportunity?

E) What will serve as a reminder for you to engage with that opportunity?

F) What obstacles might arise to challenge your engagement with that opportunity?

G) How will you overcome these obstacles?

H) How will you use positive reinforcements to encourage yourself to engage with that opportunity?

**4) What steps will you take to revise this plan regularly based on your growing self-discovery of what activities are most suited for your personal search for meaning and purpose in life?**

**5) How will you take advantage of various resources you have available to support you in your path to find meaning and purpose in life?**

## Conclusion

While this is the conclusion of the book, I hope this is the start of your own journey to find a deeper and richer sense of meaning and purpose in life using science-based strategies! I am optimistic that using the tools described in this book can help you deal with any sense of emptiness and meaninglessness you might experience in the depth of your stomach, and gain substantially greater mental and physical well-being.

I want to encourage you to use the various resources available to you as you cultivate your personal sense of meaning and purpose. You can engage in virtual discussion of meaning and purpose in life on Intentional Insights [blog posts](#) and [videos](#) dedicated to this topic. We created an [online class](#) dedicated to helping you find purpose and meaning together with others. We are working on a Facebook group where you can build virtual community bonds, reflect on purpose and meaning, and help others find their life purpose. Moreover, we have developed a web app, Find Your Purpose and Meaning, which enables you to take the MPQ at regular intervals and graph your sense of meaning and purpose over time, available [here](#). We can send a weekly reminder e-mail for you to retake your MPQ and do your planning revisions. We offer the option to do spot-checking of the MPQ, as well as reviewing journaling notes, reviewing your plan and its revisions, etc., and providing references that might help you optimize your search for meaning and purpose. For all of these services, e-mail us at [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org). Our [resources page](#) lists some high-quality non-Intentional Insights resources that you can use to help yourself gain greater meaning and purpose. Our [newsletter](#) provides much more information and special offers available only to subscribers. So do the Intentional Insights [Facebook Page](#), [Twitter](#), and [Pinterest](#), which provide an opportunity to engage with both InIn core participants and other people like you looking to cultivate a richer sense of life purpose.

Good luck on your journey to find greater purpose and meaning in life! I would love to hear back from you about your experience – visit us at [www.intentionalinsights.org](http://www.intentionalinsights.org) and our social media to share what you learned, to provide feedback on what you gained and on how we can improve our content, to access our additional resources, and engage with other like-minded folks working to [gain greater personal agency](#) and have an intentional life. If you found this book impactful for you, please consider leaving an honest review on its [Amazon page](#) to let others know about your experience. Also, please share about this book and other Intentional Insights resources with others who you think might benefit from them. They will thank you for it! For bulk order discounts, get in touch with us at [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org). I would be personally eager to hear about your thoughts at [gleb@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:gleb@intentionalinsights.org), and also on my personal [Facebook page](#) and [Twitter](#). I hope

this book helps you and others you know find your purpose using science!

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## Appendix

# Intentional Insights Starter Package: Values and Meanings Group

Prepared by Gleb Tsipursky

[Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights](#)

## **Introduction: Values and Meanings Starter Package**

“Values and Meanings” is a discussion group that provides reason-minded individuals with a chance to talk about our individual values and more broadly address the meaning and purpose we find in our lives. The goal is to create a safe space to share, listen, and explore values and meanings together without debating, arguing, explicit advice-giving, or trying to convince others that our individual values and meanings are the correct ones. Instead, the event orients toward mutual respect and tolerance, compassionate listening, and supporting others in the way they prefer to be supported. To get in touch with past and current organizers of the “Values and Meanings” group, please email [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org), they would be happy to share about their experience.

## **Before the Event**

1. To plan for each event, the organizers decide on the event theme, which should deal with some specific issue that would prompt discussion and reflection about our individual values, and address the meaning and purpose we find in our lives.
2. Next, the organizers find readings dealing with the event theme (the Starter Package includes 8 sets of readings as part of the handouts)
3. Then, the organizers promote the event through their social channels, especially through their connections to any community groups that gather together reason-minded individuals. It is helpful for this event to be an official event of a specific community group to which the organizers belong (for example, the one in Columbus, OH, is part of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#)). This benefits both the community group and the organizers, taking some logistical and promotion burdens off them.

Finally, before the event, the organizers print out handouts for the event participants and facilitators, and arrange the space as needed for the discussion groups and potluck (the Starter package includes facilitator handouts participant handouts).

## **During the Event**

1. The event begins with a potluck and socializing, for an hour or so.
2. Structured Part 1 (40-45 minutes)
  - 2.1. Next comes the first structured part of the event (see the blog posts included as part of the Starter Package about how the structured event typically goes)
  - 2.2. The structured part starts with the event facilitators gathering groups of no more than 7 around a table, with one facilitator per group (so cap the number of participants at 7 per event facilitator).
  - 2.3. Next, there are introductions and an icebreaker that give participants the opportunity to talk about a recent event they experienced in the last month or so that made them think about their values and meaning and purpose in their lives.
  - 2.4. After everyone had a chance to speak without being interrupted, there is a brief round of responses.
  - 2.5. Next comes a 10-minute break.
3. Structured Part 2 (55-60 mins)
  - 3.1. After the event resumes, the discussion moves on to the main theme of the day. This part of the event begins with a brief reading relating to the theme.
  - 3.2. Then we go around the room to give everyone a chance to share their thoughts on the reading as well as their personal thoughts about the theme, prompted by some discussion questions in the handout.
  - 3.3. After everyone had a chance to speak without being interrupted, the event moves into a moderated discussion where we respond to each other's individual thoughts and explore further everyone's perspectives.
  - 3.4. The structured part of the event ends with a brief verbal reflection by all about what they learned from their experience, and then the participants fill out a feedback form (the feedback form is included as part of the Starter Package).
4. Next, everyone again has an opportunity to socialize with each other, and discuss their experience.

## **After the Event**

The organizers evaluate the feedback forms to learn about what the participants thought

about their experience and what they suggested about opportunities for optimizing the event.

Then, the organizers make any changes to the structure and content of the event that they deem worthwhile to improve the experience of the participants at the next event.

1. Finally, they start planning for the next event.

## Blog Post: Values and Meanings: A Secular Perspective

*(Blog courtesy of [Intentional Insights](#))*

*Series: [Finding Meaning and Purpose](#)*

**Written by: Gleb Tsipursky**

*([Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights](#))*

How can you collaborate with others to reflect on meanings and values from a secular perspective?

We're sitting around a table in our home with about eight guests and discussing the nature of truth and morality. Some believe that truth is generally black and white – either something is true or not. Others insist that truth has many gray areas. Folks disagree on whether it is always moral to tell the truth or whether there are higher morals than the truth.

Participants gained a great deal from attending this event. On the feedback sheets passed around after the event, one participant wrote “I gained greater insight into how other people navigate difficult discussions regarding truth and values, when not all parties agree.” Another wrote that now s/he will “always question ‘my truth’” and will engage in “thinking more about what I hold true.” A third wrote that “building a sense of community is what I gained.” [This discussion](#) was part of a long-running group that my wife and I hosted at our place, entitled “Values and Meanings,” under the umbrella of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#). This meetup group provided an interfaith, reason-oriented venue for people to reflect in a community setting on life's meaning and purpose, on their values and ethics, from an evidence-based perspective.

Reflecting on purpose, meaning, values, and morals together with others in your community and social circle builds upon and combines all the previous strategies mentioned in earlier Intentional Insights [blog posts](#) as contributing to finding meaning and purpose in life. It provides:

1. A venue for reflecting on deep life questions
2. A means of [building and cultivating social and community connections](#)
3. A way to help others, through assisting them in finding clearer answers to life's big

questions

Thus, participating in such discussion groups offers the trifecta of all elements that research shows combine to help people gain a sense of meaning and purpose in life – [reflecting on meaning and purpose](#), acquiring stronger [community and social bonds](#), and [helping others](#). During similar discussions you may have, it is especially beneficial to write down how the thoughts expressed by others informed and shifted your thinking. Research shows that writing these down helps you [remember and understand them better](#), while also [minimizing distracting and unhelpful thoughts about unfulfilled plans](#).

Well, what if you don't happen to have such a group in your locale? Why not take the initiative to organize one? To help you out, Intentional Insights offers a **free** "Values and Meanings" starter package. This package includes an introduction giving guidelines on how to organize and implement a "Values and Meanings" group, several blog posts describing a typical "Values and Meanings" session, a facilitator's guide, a feedback sheet, and participant handouts for eight events – drop us a line at [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org) for information on how to get one. We would also be happy to connect you to past and current participants in "Values and Meanings" who can give you tips on setting up such a group in your own locale. Look forward to hearing from you about your experience!

1. Do you think you might benefit from engaging in more opportunities to reflect on purpose, meaning, values, and morals together with others in your community and social circle?
2. If so, what specific and concrete steps can you take to achieve this outcome?
3. Can you find a group in your locale that gets you what you want? If there is no such group, but you would like one to exist, what steps can you take to organize such a group?



## **Blog Post: Values and Meanings: Truth**

*(Blog courtesy of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#))*

**Written by: Gleb Tsipursky**

**(Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights)**

What do secular people think about “truth”? What kind of values do they associate with this term and what kind of meaning do they find within it? How would you answer this question?

“Truth” was the topic of the latest “Values and Meanings” Discussion and Potluck. The goal of this event is to provide nonbelievers with a forum to talk about our individual values and the kinds of meanings we find in our lives. It aims to create a safe space to share, listen, and explore together without debating, arguing, or trying to convince others.

We began with a potluck and socializing. The structured part of the event started with introductions and an icebreaker that gave participants the opportunity to talk about a recent event they experienced in the last month or so that made them think about your values. After everyone had a chance to speak and a brief round of responses, we moved on to the main theme of the day.

Participants read a number of quotes about truth, such as:

*“The truth.” Dumbledore sighed. “It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution.”*

- J.K. Rowling

*The challenge remains. On the other side are formidable forces: money, political power, the major media. On our side are the people of the world and a power greater than money or weapons: the truth. Truth has a power of its own. Art has a power of its own. That age-old lesson – that everything we do matters – is the meaning of the people’s struggle here in the United States and everywhere.*

- Howard Zinn

*Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular*

*knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life.*

- George Jacob Holyoake

The full list of quotes is [posted here](#).

Next, participants shared their perspectives about truth. Far from everyone shared the same perspective. Some believed that truth was generally black and white, either something was true or not. Others drew attention to the multitude of gray areas when determining truth and the need to perhaps phrase things as provisionally true or probably true. The scientific method came up in regard to the latter, with wide acknowledgment that scientific knowledge was provisionally true, and would be updated later based on information. Another thing that came up was truth and morality: is it always moral to tell the truth or are there higher morals that the truth? We agreed to disagree.

A key theme involved the challenge faced by secular people in how to deal authentically and integrally with mainstream societal perspectives on religion. Participants shared about how their sense of truth evolved as they moved away from their religion, and also their challenges in dealing with family members and other important people in their lives in regard to religion. There was also a discussion of the exceedingly high political impact of religion in our society as the determinant of truth: the upcoming Ohio Secular Summit on January 28 was mentioned as one means of dealing actively with this issue, with an [HCCO program](#) devoted to this topic on January 11.

Overall, those who came reported that they really enjoyed the opportunity to build community and have a serious discussion with fellow nonbelievers. On the feedback sheets passed around after the event, one participant wrote “I gained greater insight into how other people navigate difficult discussions regarding truth and values, when not all parties agree.” Another wrote that now s/he will “always question ‘my truth’” and will engage in “thinking more about what I hold true.” A third wrote that “building a sense of community is what I gained.”

## **Blog Post: Values and Meanings: Celebrations**

*(Blog courtesy of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#))*

**Written by: Gleb Tsipursky**

**(Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights)**

"Celebrations" was the topic of the "Values and Meanings" Discussion and Potluck that was held on December 21st. The goal of the "Values and Meanings" discussions is to provide nonbelievers with a forum to talk about our individual values and the kinds of meanings we find in our lives. It aims to create a safe space to share, listen, and explore together without debating, arguing, or trying to convince others.

Preliminary activities included a potluck, introductions and an icebreaker, where participants had the opportunity to talk about a recent event they experienced in the last month or so that made them think about our values. After everyone had a chance to speak and a brief round of responses, we moved on to the main theme of the day - "Celebrations".



*Courtesy of Gleb Tsipursky*

Participants read a number of quotes about celebrations, and these quotes are listed at the bottom of this post. Next, participants shared their perspectives about celebrations, especially in association with the late December holidays. Participants in the discussion drew attention to the history of festivals around the solstice dating back many thousands of years, long before organized religion co-opted these festivities. In the darkest time of the year, human beings gathered together for mutual warmth and shared light around the fire for ages. Such celebrations, it was pointed out, are not an explicitly religious activity, they are simply a way and part of being human.

Nonbelievers choose a variety of ways to mark the holidays. Some incorporate certain elements of religion into their celebration. For instance, one participant described how his family draws different elements from Christianity, Kwanza, Hanukah, and other religious traditions, and combines them into a unique mix. Others talked about their family traditions, the meaning and community they experienced as children in celebrations religious and secular alike, and how they strive to bring out the positives from their childhood experience, while leaving behind the dogma. Some still celebrate these holidays with religious family members, and have to endure religious activities they would rather avoid, in order to minimize family tensions.

However, for many, these holidays have become a means of celebrating in a secular fashion. For instance, for Christmas, some visit Asian restaurants and do other explicitly non-Christmas activities on this day, while still taking the day off and enjoying themselves. Another means of celebration discussed was attending explicitly secular events, such as the Humanist Community of Central Ohio's Winter Solstice Banquet, or "A Secular Solstice" in New York. Others found meaning in doing social justice activities, such as HCCO's Annual Blood Drive.

Some nonbelievers choose to avoid participating in these celebrations altogether, both due to the religious and the commercial nature of the holidays. They discussed the off-putting effect of consumerism around the holidays, and a number chose to avoid engaging in the gift-giving tradition. Some chose to instead donate money in the names of their family members and friends to charities, while others asked friends and family members to give them a list of preferred gifts.

Overall, we had a great conversation about celebrating holidays as an atheist and the challenges some of us have balancing traditions, family members, and gift giving. Those who came shared that they really enjoyed the opportunity to build community and have a serious discussion with fellow nonbelievers. On the feedback sheets passed around after the event, one participant wrote that he gained a "fuller understanding of the interconnectedness of many cultures, especially during the holidays."

### **Quotes used during the discussion:**

Celebration is not owned by any one culture and especially not by any one religion. It is part of our humanity. - [R. Elisabeth Cornwell](#)

When we gather with friends and family for a holiday, feelings of gratitude flow spontaneously. We are glad to be together, pleased that we have come from far and near, glad for this special day and the special meal. If such feelings can be educated, at our holiday toast we can freely express their actual sources, both natural and social, in the past and in the present.... An entirely secular giving of thanks is possible and necessary, and if we're not shy about voicing it, it will find its own shape. In stumbling to do so, we'll notice some remarkable things. Reverence for the forces beyond ourselves, normally projected onto a deity, is no less deep for finding its actual sources, and our bond with each other need not be weakened by being expressed without reference to a supreme being. Celebrating in this way does something new for us. - [Ronald Aronson, "Living Without God"](#)

It should be possible to remain a committed atheist and nevertheless find occasions such as Christmas useful, interesting and consoling – and be curious as to the possibilities of importing certain religious ideas into the secular realm. The real issue is not whether God exists, but where one takes the argument to once one decides he evidently doesn't. We invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day: the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses; and the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise. God may be dead, but the urgent issues that impelled us to make him up still stir and demand resolutions which do not go away. ... The secular world often sees in rituals such as communal singing or eating a loss of diversity, quality and spontaneity. Religion seems bossy. But at its finest this ritual-based bossiness enables fragile but important aspects of life to be identified and shared. Those of us who hold no religious or supernatural beliefs still require regular, ritualized encounters with concepts such as friendship, community, gratitude and transcendence. We need institutions that can mine, harvest and mold precious ideas for us, remind us that we need them and present them to us in beautiful wrappings – thus ensuring the nourishment of the most forgetful sides of ourselves. The wisdom of the faiths belongs to all of mankind, even the most rational among us, and, throughout the liturgical year, deserves to be selectively reabsorbed. Religions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone. - [Alain de Botton](#)

## **Facilitator Guide: Values and Meanings**

### **Agenda**

- 1) Welcome
- 2) Introductions and Response
- 3) Readings and Discussion
- 4) Closing
- 5) Feedback Form

### **Welcome [3:30pm]**

This is a discussion group to talk about our individual values and the kinds of meanings we find in our lives.

For those who have participated before, you may notice some small changes in the format. That's because we are continuing to tweak the format for each session to see what works best in response to your feedback.

We'd like to make this a safe space so that everyone can feel free to talk about their values, meanings, and stories.

- Focus on sharing and listening
- Avoid debating, arguing, or trying to convince others
- To help all share freely and feel respected, please refrain from interruptions and crosstalk, meaning talking over others
- When someone finishes speaking, please wait for a few seconds in order for the impact of their words to sink in before sharing your own thoughts
- Sometimes preparing to speak keeps us from listening. It might be helpful to write down your thoughts to better focus on listening.
- Please refrain from making statements that others may see as judgmental.

Please avoid giving advice to others, unless they ask for advice. If you wish, you can say what you have done or would do in similar situations, but focus on yourself, not on the other person.

- In order to help everyone feel comfortable talking about their values and experiences, it's important to respect the privacy of others. This means that if you want to share about something you heard during this discussion, do not attach a name to the story (for example: someone shared that \_\_\_\_\_)
- Moderated discussion – moderator's goals:
  - o Limited time
  - o Rein in interruptions and crosstalk, and ensure that a few seconds pass between sharing
  - o Avoid extended conversation on any individual topic
  - o If you have any comments that you didn't have a chance to share, you can follow-up with individual participants after the meeting
- Please do your best to help the moderator accomplish these goals, so that we all can have the best discussion possible. Any questions?

### **Introductions and Response**

- Go around the room – brief introductions (or pass) (2-3 mins per person)
  - o Please introduce yourself and share something that you've experienced in the last month or so that made you think about your values. After everyone had a chance to speak, we will have a chance to respond briefly to what everyone shared. In the meantime, please avoid responding to the speaker, so that everyone feels respected and heard.
- Brief Response
  - o At this time, you can choose to respond briefly to what other people shared. Please keep your comments to 1-2 minutes and avoid long exchanges. Try to respond to people who have not yet been responded to.

### **Break, 10 minutes [4:15pm]**

### **Readings and Discussion [4:25pm]**

- 8 minutes to read quotes to yourselves, think about them & take notes if you like

Go around the room to give a brief response (or pass). After everyone had a chance to speak,



we will have a chance to discuss what everyone shared. In the meantime, please avoid responding to the speaker, so that everyone feels respected and heard.

General discussion – moderated. Please keep your comments to 1-2 minutes and avoid long exchanges. Try to respond to people who have not yet been responded to.

**Closing [aim for 5:15pm - no later than 5:35pm. Can skip final questions if necessary.]**

- Go around the room – brief final comments (or pass) (1-2 min)
  - Ask participants the following: “What will you take away from the discussion? How has the discussion impacted your thoughts on this topic, if in any way?”

**Distribute Feedback Form**

## **Participant Handout: Values and Meanings Discussion on Celebrations**

### **Topic: Celebrations**

#### **Introduction**

Please take 2-3 minutes to introduce yourself and share something that you've experienced in the last month or so that made you think about your values.

#### **Response**

After everyone had a chance to speak, we will respond briefly to what everyone shared.

#### **Break (10 min)**

#### **Readings**

Celebration is not owned by any one culture and especially not by any one religion. It is part of our humanity.

- R. Elisabeth Cornwell

"When we gather with friends and family for a holiday, feelings of gratitude flow spontaneously. We are glad to be together, pleased that we have come from far and near, glad for this special day and the special meal. If such feelings can be educated, at our holiday toast we can freely express their actual sources, both natural and social, in the past and in the present.... An entirely secular giving of thanks is possible and necessary, and if we're not shy about voicing it, it will find its own shape. In stumbling to do so, we'll notice some remarkable things. Reverence for the forces beyond ourselves, normally projected onto a deity, is no less deep for finding its actual sources, and our bond with each other need not be weakened by being expressed without reference to a supreme being. Celebrating in this way does something new for us."

- from Ronald Aronson, "Living Without God"

It should be possible to remain a committed atheist and nevertheless find occasions such as Christmas useful, interesting and consoling – and be curious as to the possibilities of importing certain religious ideas into the secular realm. The real issue is not whether God

exists, but where one takes the argument to once one decides he evidently doesn't. We invented religions to serve two central needs which continue to this day: the need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses; and the need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability to failure, to troubled relationships, to the death of loved ones and to our decay and demise. God may be dead, but the urgent issues that impelled us to make him up still stir and demand resolutions which do not go away. ... The secular world often sees in rituals such as communal singing or eating a loss of diversity, quality and spontaneity. Religion seems bossy. But at its finest this ritual-based bossiness enables fragile but important aspects of life to be identified and shared. Those of us who hold no religious or supernatural beliefs still require regular, ritualized encounters with concepts such as friendship, community, gratitude and transcendence. We need institutions that can mine, harvest and mold precious ideas for us, remind us that we need them and present them to us in beautiful wrappings – thus ensuring the nourishment of the most forgetful sides of ourselves.

The wisdom of the faiths belongs to all of mankind, even the most rational among us, and, throughout the liturgical year, deserves to be selectively reabsorbed. Religions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone.

- [Alain de Botton](#)

## **Discussion Questions**

- How does this topic relate to your life?
- How do your personal values and meanings impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?
- How does your participation in the Humanist Community of Central Ohio impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?

## **Sharing**

Please take 3-4 minutes to share your thoughts on the topic, whether by responding to the readings, answering the questions, or simply speaking from your personal experience.

## **Discussion**

After everyone had a chance to speak, we will have a broader discussion about this topic.

### **Conclusion Questions**

- What will you take away from the discussion?
- How has the discussion impacted your thoughts on this topic?

## **Participant Handout: Values and Meanings Discussion on Truth**

### **Introduction and Response**

Please introduce yourself and share something that you've experienced in the last month or so that made you think about your values. After everyone had a chance to speak, we will have a chance to respond briefly to what everyone shared.

### **Break (10 min)**

### **Readings**

If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.

- Mark Twain

The truth is rarely pure and never simple.

- Oscar Wilde

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."

- J.K. Rowling

The challenge remains. On the other side are formidable forces: money, political power, the major media. On our side are the people of the world and a power greater than money or weapons: the truth. Truth has a power of its own. Art has a power of its own. That age-old lesson – that everything we do matters – is the meaning of the people's struggle here in the United States and everywhere.

- Howard Zinn

We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language. I began to ask each time: "What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth?" Unlike women in other countries, our breaking silence is unlikely to have us jailed, "disappeared" or run off the road at night. Our speaking out will irritate some people, get us called bitchy or hypersensitive and disrupt some dinner parties. And then our speaking out will permit other women to speak, until laws are changed and lives are saved and the world is altered forever. Next time, ask:           What's           the           worst           that           will           happen?

- Audre Lorde

My people are going to learn the principles of democracy, the dictates of truth, and the teachings of science. Superstition must go. Let them worship as they will, every man can follow his own conscience provided it does not interfere with sane reason or bid him act against the liberty of his fellow men.

- Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life.

- George Jacob Holyoake

## **Discussion Questions**

- How does this topic relate to your life?
- How do your personal values and meanings impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?
- How does your participation in the Humanist Community of Central Ohio impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?

## **Sharing**

Please take 3-4 minutes to share your thoughts on the topic, whether by responding to the readings, answering the questions, or simply speaking from your personal experience.

## **Discussion**

After everyone had a chance to speak, we will have a broader discussion about this topic.

## **Conclusion Questions**

- What will you take away from the discussion?

- How has the discussion impacted your thoughts on this topic?



## **Participant Handout: Values and Meanings Discussion on Transitions**

### **Introduction**

Please introduce yourself and share something that you've experienced in the last month or so that made you think about your values.

### **Readings**

Change requires a background of relative stability, because change is a matter of comparisons.

- A. C. Grayling

All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy, for what we leave behind us is a part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter into another.

- Anatole France

If we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we aren't really living.

- Gail Sheehy

All change is not growth, as all movement is not forward.

- Ellen Glasgow

### **Discussion Questions**

- How does this topic relate to your life?
- How do your personal values and meanings impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?
- How does your participation in the Humanist Community of Central Ohio impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?

### **Sharing**

Please take 3-4 minutes to share your thoughts on the topic, whether by responding to the readings, answering the questions, or simply speaking from your personal experience.

## **Discussion**

After everyone had a chance to speak, we will have a broader discussion about this topic.

## **Conclusion Questions**

- What will you take away from the discussion?
- How has the discussion impacted your thoughts on this topic?

## **Participant Handout: Values and Meanings Discussion on Friendship**

### **Introduction**

Please take 2-3 minutes to introduce yourself and share something that you've experienced in the last month or so that made you think about your values.

### **Response**

After everyone had a chance to speak, we will respond briefly to what everyone shared. Please keep your comments to 1-2 minutes to ensure everyone has a chance to participate fully.

### **Break (10 min)**

### **Readings**

Think where man's glory most begins and ends, and say my glory was I had such friends.

- William Butler Yeats

Be courteous to all, but intimate with few, and let those few be well tried before you give them your confidence.

- George Washington

The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing... that is a friend who cares.

- Henri Nouwen

Anybody can sympathize with the sufferings of a friend, but it requires a very fine nature to sympathize with a friend's success.

- Oscar Wilde

Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art.... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.

- C.S. Lewis

The transition from acquaintanceship to friendship is typically characterized by an increase in both the breadth and depth of self-disclosure. In the early stages of friendship, this tends to be

a gradual, reciprocal process. One person takes the risk of disclosing personal information and then 'tests' whether the other reciprocates.

- Beverley Fehr, University of Winnipeg sociologist, author of Friendship Processes.

Since justice, friendship, and community are closely related, it is far worse to abuse a close friend or family member than it is to abuse a stranger.

- Aristotle

Friendship consists of a mutual feeling of goodwill between two people. There are three kinds of friendship. The first is friendship based on utility, where both people derive some benefit from each other. The second is friendship based on pleasure, where both people are drawn to the other's wit, good looks, or other pleasant qualities. The third is friendship based on goodness, where both people admire the other's goodness and help one another strive for goodness. The first two kinds of friendship are only accidental, because in these cases friends are motivated by their own utility and pleasure, not by anything essential to the nature of the friend. Both of these kinds of friendship are short-lived because one's needs and pleasures are apt to change over time. Goodness is an enduring quality, so friendships based on goodness tend to be long lasting. This friendship encompasses the other two, as good friends are useful to one another and please one another. Such friendship is rare and takes time to develop, but it is the best. Bad people can be friends for reasons of pleasure or utility, but only good people can be friends for each other's sake.

- Aristotle

## **Discussion Questions**

- How does this topic relate to your life?
- How do your personal values and meanings impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?
- How does your participation in the Humanist Community of Central Ohio impact your thoughts on this topic, if at all?

## **Sharing**

Please take 3-4 minutes to share your thoughts on the topic, whether by responding to the readings, answering the questions, or simply speaking from your personal experience.

## **Discussion**

After everyone had a chance to speak, we will have a broader discussion about this topic.

## **Conclusion Questions**

- What will you take away from the discussion?
- How has the discussion impacted your thoughts on this topic?

# Intentional Insights Starter Package: Rationality Group

Prepared by Gleb Tsipursky

[Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights](#)

## **Introduction: Rationality Group Starter Package**

“Rationality” is an educational and social group that provides reason-minded individuals with a community dedicated to supporting each other in our mutual efforts to improve our thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns and thus most effectively achieving our goals. The group holds educational and social events informed by rationality, a philosophy and practice that draws on recent research in psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and other disciplines to optimize our thinking and behavior. To get in touch with past and current organizers of the “Rationality” group in Columbus, OH, please email [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org), they would be happy to share about their experience. For additional ideas on how to get together and maintain rationality-themed group, see [this guide](#) to “How to Run a Successful Less Wrong Meetup Group.” Less Wrong is a website devoted to the study and practice of advanced rationality.

## **Rationality Educational Event**

### **Before the Event**

1. Educational events generally involve a presentation, followed by a discussion of the topic.
2. To plan for each event, the organizers solicit a speaker to give a 30-minute presentation about 2 months or so before the event on a specific rationality-related topic. For some ideas on topics, see the Potential Topics Sheet included as part of the starter package.
3. They ask for a biography from the speaker, and a brief description of the topic s/he will present on. They also provide the presenter with a Presenter Tip Sheet, included as part of this starter package, to inform the style of the presentation.
4. Then, the organizers promote the event through their social channels, especially through their connections to any community groups that gather reason-minded individuals. It is helpful for this event to be an official event of a specific community group to which the organizers belong (for example, the one in Columbus, OH, is part of the [Humanist Committee](#)

[of Central Ohio](#)). This benefits both the community group and the organizers, taking some logistical and promotion burdens off them.

5. Finally, before the event, the organizers print out a Rationality Introduction Sheet handout for the event participants and a Rationality Introduction Script to guide the event organizers, and arrange the space as needed (the Starter package includes organizer and participant handouts).

### **During the Event**

1. The event begins with 15 minutes of socializing, where participants get to know each other.

#### **2. Introduction (5-10 mins)**

2.1. Next comes an introduction of the Rationality group, any community group that it is a part of, a description of relevant resources, and then an introduction of the speaker for the event of the day (see the Rationality: Intro Script in the Starter Package for an example of how this works as part of Columbus Rationality).

2.2. Depending on timing and size of the group, it can be beneficial to have a rationality-themed icebreaker that helps people get to know each other.

#### **3. Presentation and Discussion (60-75 mins)**

3.1. Next, the presenter gives her/his presentation. Depending on the speaker's preference and the topic, the presentation is either:

3.1.1. Broken up into several chunks with questions in-between

3.1.2. Includes intermittent questions and discussion throughout the presentation

3.1.3. Includes group discussion or individual exercises

3.1.3.1. See the Tips Sheet for what we have found most effective

3.2. The organizers and/or the speaker moderate the discussion (see the Moderation statement in the Rationality: Intro Script)

3.3. See the blog posts and videos included as part of the Starter Package about how the presentation typically goes.

3.4. The structured part of the event ends with a wrap-up by the presenter, followed by concluding statements by the organizers and announcements of any relevant upcoming events.

3.5. Then the participants fill out a feedback form (the Rationality feedback form is included as part of the Starter Package).

4. Next, everyone has an opportunity to ask the speaker any follow-up questions, discuss the topic in more depth, and socialize with each other.



## **After the Event**

1. The organizers evaluate the feedback forms to learn about what the participants thought about their experience and what they suggested about opportunities for optimizing the event.
2. Then, the organizers make any changes to the structure and content of the event that they deem worthwhile to improve the experience of the participants at the next event.
3. Finally, they start planning for the next event.

## **Rationality Social Event**

### **Before the Event**

1. Social events generally involve informal discussions about rationality-themed topics, as well as playing rationality-themed games.
2. To plan for each event, the organizers decide on some rationality-themed discussion topics and play rationality-themed games, for example as described [here](#), [here](#), or [here](#).
3. Then, the organizers promote the event through their social channels, as described above, print out handouts, and arrange the space as needed.

### **During the Event**

1. The event begins with 15 minutes of socializing, where participants get to know each other.
2. Introduction (5-10 mins)
  - 2.1. Next comes an introduction of the Rationality group, any community group that it is a part of, a description of relevant resources, and then a description of the planned activities (see the Rationality: Intro Script in the Starter Package for an example of how this works as part of Columbus Rationality).
  - 2.2. Depending on timing and size of the group, it can be beneficial to have a rationality-themed icebreaker that helps people get to know each other.
3. Rationality Social Time (60-75 mins)
  - 3.1. Next, the organizers announce the variety of rationality-themed discussion topics and rationality-themed games they prepared in advance.
    - 3.1.1. Participants then separate based on what they want to do, either discussion or games.
    - 3.1.2. The games group votes on what they want to play, either all together or several subgroups, depending on the number of participants and their preferences.
    - 3.1.3. The discussion group votes on what they want to discuss, and whether they want to have

a discussion altogether or in several subgroups, depending on the number of participants and their preferences.

3.1.4. Participants can float between different discussion and game groups as well.

3.2. The Rationality Social Event ends with concluding statements by the organizers and announcements of any relevant upcoming events.

3.3. Then the participants fill out a feedback form.

4. Next, everyone has an opportunity to socialize with each other.

### **After the Event**

1. Same as above

## **Blog Post: Meaning, Purpose, and Agency: Communities and Rational Thinking**

*(Blog courtesy of [Intentional Insights](#))*

*Series: [Finding Meaning and Purpose](#)*

**Written by: Gleb Tsipursky**

*([Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights](#))*

Why don't they teach this in high school?!? Or even college, for that matter. That's the reaction that my wife and I had when we came to [Columbus Rationality](#) meetings. This subgroup of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#), an affiliate of the [American Humanist Association](#), hosts a wide variety of events devoted to advancing rational thinking strategies.

My wife and I aren't alone in our reactions – many attendees report similar experiences. After an [event on making decisions rationally](#), one participant reported in feedback sheets distributed afterwards that “this was a great presentation that will help me make more effective decisions”; another stated “discussing decision-making together with other members of this group really helped me realize some problems with my decisions and how I can make better decisions in the future”; a third stated “I will think more deeply and thoroughly, and make a clear plan, before committing to major life decisions.”

Another event, [on rational approaches to violence](#), illuminated the motivations behind using physical force, the approaches taken by different martial arts to violence, the application of objective risk analysis to physical force, and gaining situational awareness. The audience was highly impressed with what they learned, with one participant reporting that “I will be much more likely to think rationally about physical force,” and another stated that s/he “enjoyed reflecting on this challenging topic in a community with others.” Many of those who started coming as regular participants end up giving talks about various topics of interest to them, such as my wife on [making decisions effectively](#); myself on [setting and achieving goals](#); Caleb Pitkin, a Methodist Pastor, on being [rational and religious](#); and plenty of others. In fact, [Intentional Insights](#), the nonprofit devoted to promoting rational thinking and emotional

intelligence, emerged from our experience at Columbus Rationality.

Previous Intentional Insights [blog posts](#) highlighted the benefits of reflecting on values and morals together with others in your community and social circle. Such events provide the three crucial elements that combine to help people gain a sense of meaning and purpose in life – [reflecting on meaning and purpose](#), acquiring stronger [community and social bonds](#), and [helping others](#). A group that does all of the former, and in addition promotes rational thinking, is a great [goal factoring](#) approach. Goal factoring is a method to help you understand the most effective ways to achieve your end goals (check out this very helpful [goal factoring template](#)). It was created at the Center for Applied Rationality, one of the many great resources listed on the [Intentional Insights resource page](#).

Now, do you think you might benefit from attending a group devoted to promoting rational thinking? Here are [some meetups](#) dedicated to this goal, mainly aimed at people who already have some advanced knowledge of cognitive neuroscience and psychology. Intentional Insights also helps provide resources for those who would like to start up groups for those in the early stages of engaging with research-based strategies on rational thinking and emotional intelligence. These groups work especially well when combined with local reason-minded groups, which have many affiliates around the country, [as illustrated by this post](#).

What if there are no “Rationality”-themed groups around you? How about taking the initiative to organize one in your community and thus [being an agent](#) in achieving your goals! To help you out, Intentional Insights offers a **free** “Rationality” group starter package. This package includes an introduction giving guidelines on how to organize and implement a “Rationality” group, several blog posts describing “Rationality” events, several videos of these events, an organizer’s guide, a participant handout, a presenter’s tip sheet, a feedback sheet, and potential topics for discussion. Get in touch with us at [info@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:info@intentionalinsights.org) for information on how to get one. We can also connect you with past and current organizers of “Columbus Rationality” who can give you tips on setting up such a group in your own locale. Look forward to hearing from you about your experience!

- Do you think you might benefit from engaging in more opportunities to engage in presentations, discussions, and trainings on how to think more rationally with others in your community and social circle?
- If so, what specific and concrete steps can you take to achieve this outcome?

Can you find a group in your locale that gets you what you want? If there is no such group, but you would like one to exist, what steps can you take to organize one?

## **Blog Post: Setting and Achieving Goals**

*(Blog courtesy of the [Humanist Community of Central Ohio](#))*

**Written by: Gleb Tsipursky**

(Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights)

How can we figure out, set, and achieve our goals?

A recent workshop at a HCCO sponsored Rationality meeting, led by Gleb Tsipursky, provided some effective strategies for doing so. This post provides a brief summary of the talk with some useful links for additional information. A video of the workshop is linked at the end of this post.

The first of three sections dealt with figuring out overarching goals and values. The workshop helped participants reflect on their personal understanding of an ideal life, connect this ideal to their different life areas, and then link these areas to their vision of how they want to live their values and be the people they want to be.

In the second section, workshop attendees worked backward from their broad vision of an ideal life and figured out the best paths to lead them there. They reflected on their current strengths, baggage, opportunities, and threats, and developed more specific and measurable goals for the next several months.

After helping participants set these concrete objectives for the next few months, the presentation turned to achieving goals. This involves a broad range of strategies, including planning, organization and time management; quantification, evaluation, and assessment; managing emotions relating to goals, emphasizing patience, positive reinforcement, flexibility, and forgiveness; changing unproductive ways of thinking and attitudes, especially using meditation and Cognitive Behavior Therapy techniques; letting go of unhelpful habits, and developing functional habits; finally, social and community support, especially from fellow rationally-inclined people dedicated to self-optimization.

The anonymous feedback sheets passed around after the presentation revealed that audience members gained much from the workshop. For example, one participant stated that s/he "feel[s] empowered to take changes" and another gained "more motivation to start actually setting goals."

Below are some additional resources for goal setting and achievement.

Overviews of goal setting and achievement from LessWrong:

[http://lesswrong.com/lw/iue/does\\_goal\\_setting\\_work/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/iue/does_goal_setting_work/)

[http://lesswrong.com/lw/iwn/goal\\_setting\\_and\\_goal\\_achievement/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/iwn/goal_setting_and_goal_achievement/)

Guide to self-tracking digital tools:

<http://quantifiedself.com/guide/>

Guide to contract digital tools:

<http://blog.beeminder.com/competitors/>

Two posts on creating productive habits:

<http://www.nirandfar.com/2012/01/your-new-years-resolution-is-bound-to.html>

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/productivity/18-tricks-to-make-new-habits-stick.html>

TED talk about some situations in which sharing your goals may be counterproductive

[http://www.ted.com/talks/derek\\_sivers\\_keep\\_your\\_goals\\_to\\_yourself.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/derek_sivers_keep_your_goals_to_yourself.html)

On Goal Factoring, taught by CFAR - Wall Street Journal article

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB1000142405270230345300457929051073374061>

Structured procrastination, LessWrong post

[http://lesswrong.com/lw/1fe/antiakrasia\\_technique\\_structured\\_procrastination/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/1fe/antiakrasia_technique_structured_procrastination/)

Social support and goal achievement:

[https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Motivation\\_and\\_emotion/Book/2011/Social\\_support\\_and\\_achievement](https://en.wikiversity.org/wiki/Motivation_and_emotion/Book/2011/Social_support_and_achievement)

<http://elearningtech.blogspot.com/2010/10/goals-accountability-and-social-support.html>

NY Times article on keeping New Year resolutions

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/05/opinion/sunday/how-to-keep-your-resolutions.html>

Articles on meditation:

[http://lesswrong.com/lw/iuh/meditation\\_trains\\_metacognition/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/iuh/meditation_trains_metacognition/)

<http://freethoughtblogs.com/greta/2013/04/24/on-starting-a-secular-meditation-practice/>

Articles on managing our emotions and instincts in helping achieve our goals:

<http://lifehacker.com/5928698/how-our-brains-stop-us-from-achieving-our-goals-and-how-to-fight-back>

<http://lifehacker.com/top-10-ways-to-trick-your-brain-into-doing-what-you-want-1502990312>

## **Videos of Rationality Events**

### **Rationality: Setting and Achieving Goals**

What is the most rational way to set and achieve your goals? In this workshop, we will explore this question through a three-pronged approach. First, we will discuss how to match your overarching values to your long-term goals. Next, we will figure out what are the best strategies to help you connect these long-term goals to the actions that you take in your everyday life. Finally, we will consider how you can best assess and improve your goal achievement, both by self-monitoring and reassessing, and by creating structures of support and accountability.

### **Rationality: Making Decisions Rationally**

What are the most effective and rational ways of making decisions? What do we need to watch out for and what methods can we use? Come learn about research-based strategies for avoiding biased thinking patterns and making the most effective decisions to reach your goals.

### **Rationality: Rational Violence**

How much have you thought about violence? This presentation will discuss varied applications of rational and scientific thought to physical force. This includes categorizing the motivations behind violence, the approaches taken by different martial arts, applying objective risk analysis to physical force, and gaining situational awareness.



## **Rationality: Presenter Tip Sheet**

Thank you for your interest in being a presenter/workshop leader for HCCO's Columbus Rationality! We are excited to have you as part of our community and to learn from you. Our goal is to promote clearer thinking and effective action in the service of a meaningful life. Here are some of the things we've learned along the way that may be useful to you as you join us in this mission.

### **What goes over well:**

- Equal time lecturing and discussing. Generally keeping it interactive in some form. A good guideline is no more than 30 minutes of lecture, which itself should be broken up into several sections.
- Visuals/handouts to explain new terms or new ways of defining terms. Keep these simple and provide a brief outline.
- Humor and general enthusiasm.
- Research and stats if you have them (these may not always apply to every topic)
- Practical application!

### **What to steer away from:**

- Long lecturing without time for questions or interactive activities. Lectures are best if not longer than 15 minutes without breaks.
- Theoretical discussion without any practical application (practical application could be as simple as discussion time, or one scenario that illustrates the application).

### **Preparation tip:**

Be ready to be questioned about any statistics or studies that you cite. It is better to make fewer points, and use fewer facts to back them up, than to use more points and facts but not be prepared to defend or thoroughly explain your statements. On factual questions from the attendees, it is *ALWAYS* OK to say "I don't know, but I can research that and get back to you," or, "I don't know, but here's where you can look that up."

**Articles and blog posts that may help you to incorporate biases and methods of rationality into your presentation, especially on Less Wrong:**

[http://lesswrong.com/lw/q/lists\\_of\\_cognitive\\_biases\\_common\\_misconceptions/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/q/lists_of_cognitive_biases_common_misconceptions/)

### **Effective public speaking tools for engaging participants:**

- Be engaging! Smile, make eye contact, use humor, and use stories. Personal examples and stories create a connection. If you have personal experience with the topic, it's good to display fallibility by citing a time when you have not thought or acted in the most rational way.
- If you use visuals, such as a PowerPoint, keep your slide content minimal and fill in the gaps rather than reading off of your slide.
- Walk around the room, use body language to punctuate your points.
- If you ask questions, pause for ample time for the audience to think of a response. Count to 10 if this is hard to do.

### **General management of group discussion and questions:**

This tends to be a group eager to learn and to challenge ideas. You will have questions, some of which will express disagreement with your conclusion. Therefore, it is helpful to consider how you would like to moderate discussion. If you have a tried and true format, let us know. Otherwise, we recommend a format where one of our organizers moderates and takes names of those wishing to speak and calling on them in order. A designated Q&A time can be helpful, as well as setting expectations up front on whether you will take questions throughout or only at the end. Suggest a time limit or something such as one question and one presenter response, then allow others to give their input.

## **Participants Handout: Rationality: An Introduction**

### **What is Columbus Rationality?**

Columbus Rationality, part of HCCO, is a group of secular people dedicated to figuring out how to improve our thinking, as a means of most effectively achieving our goals and enacting our values. Come join us!

### **What is “Rationality”?**

Rationality is a philosophy and practice that aims to improve our thinking and behavior. There are two subtypes of rationality, Epistemic and Instrumental. Epistemic Rationality is tailoring your beliefs to the available evidence to make your beliefs as accurate as possible. Instrumental Rationality is doing that which will most effectively accomplish your goals and values. Columbus Rationality spends a lot of time on this area of Rationality.

### **Guidelines for Mutual Respect**

In Columbus Rationality, we aim to optimize the experience for everyone present through a general attitude of mutual respect in our discussions, and we ask for your help in achieving this goal. The presenter will take questions (either as asked or at the end depending on that particular person). If you have a question or comment, please raise your hand. The host/moderator (the one who introduces the presenter) will keep a list of people who wish to speak. Please be respectful of those talking and wait until the moderator calls on you to contribute. To ensure we can get through everyone please limit your question or comment to a minute to allow the presenter to respond, unless we are in a broader group discussion at the end of a presentation, in which a longer comment is appropriate. All are welcome to assist each other in keeping an eye on the time, staying on track, and showing mutual respect for other participants. If there is not time for follow-up comments, please jot a note down on the notepads provided and we can return to it at the end of the presentation.

### **Common Resources:**

**Intentional Insights** ([www.intentionalinsights.org](http://www.intentionalinsights.org)): This nonprofit, based in Columbus and run by members of Columbus Rationality, promotes rationality by providing easy-to-use and engaging strategies that empower people to reach their goals via rational thinking and emotional intelligence

**Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality** ([www.hpmor.com](http://www.hpmor.com)): A fan-fic of surprisingly high quality with a rationality-inspired Harry Potter.

**List of cognitive biases** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_cognitive\\_biases](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cognitive_biases))

**Less Wrong** ([www.lesswrong.com](http://www.lesswrong.com)): A community blog dedicated to rationality. Home to the Sequences, series of useful posts on a variety of rationality related topics.

**Center for Applied Rationality** (<http://rationality.org>): A center dedicated to helping apply Rationality to everyday life, with many resources available on its website.

**Clearer Thinking** (<http://www.clearerthinking.org/>): A useful website with mini-courses for learning about Rationality.

### **Common Reasoning/Planning Errors:**

Due to our wiring, human minds make systematic and predictable errors, called cognitive biases, in their thinking patterns. Fortunately, our thinking and behavior can be improved if we are actively aware and seek to minimize the impact of the systematic and predictable errors in human thinking. Some examples of these biases include:

Attribution bias – excessively attributing others' behavior to their personality as opposed to their situation, and vice versa for oneself. Also, over-attributing the behavior of others to emotional as opposed to rational thinking.

Attentional bias – the tendency to pay attention to emotionally dominant stimuli in one's environment

Availability heuristic – the tendency to overestimate the likelihood of events with greater "availability" in memory

Backfire effect – when people react to disconfirming evidence by strengthening their beliefs

Cached thinking – relying on existing (cached) thought patterns; not reconsidering them in face of new evidence

Confirmation bias – the tendency to interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions

Consistency bias – incorrectly remembering one's past attitudes as resembling present ones

Failing at other minds – the assumption that other people think just like you

Framing effect – drawing different conclusions from the same information, depending on how it is presented

Hyperbolic discounting – the tendency for people to prefer short-term benefits over long-term but larger gains

Illusion-of-truth effect – people are more likely to identify as true statements those they have previously heard

In-group bias – when people give preferential treatment to those perceived to be members of their own groups

Just-world hypothesis – the tendency for people to want to believe that the world is fundamentally just

Outcome bias – judging a decision by its outcome instead of on the quality of the decision when it was made

Planning fallacy – the tendency to underestimate task-completion times

Reactance – doing the opposite of what someone wants you to do to resist a perceived attempt to constrain you

Restraint bias – the tendency to overestimate one's ability to show restraint in the face of temptation

Social desirability bias – the tendency to over-report socially desirable characteristics or behaviors

## **Organizers Handout: Rationality: Introduction Script**

### **Agenda**

Greetings and welcome

Introduction of Rationality and HCCO

Donations and Membership

Introduction of program for the day

Closing

### **Greetings and welcome**

Good evening and welcome to Columbus Rationality. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. [Columbus Rationality, part of HCCO, is a group of secular people dedicated to figuring out how to improve our thinking, as a means of most effectively achieving our goals and enacting our values. Rationality is a philosophy and practice that aims to improve our thinking and behavior. There are two subtypes of rationality, Epistemic and Instrumental. Epistemic Rationality is tailoring your beliefs to the available evidence to make your beliefs as accurate as possible. Instrumental Rationality is doing that which will most effectively accomplish your goals and values. Columbus Rationality spends a lot of time on this area of Rationality.]

### **Introduction of Rationality and HCCO**

Rationality is proud to be a subgroup of the Humanist Community of Central Ohio. HCCO includes atheists, agnostics, and other freethinkers whose search for what's true, good, and fair has taken them beyond faith, authority, and tradition. We aim to bring more facts, fairness, and love to life beyond faith. Our activities provide opportunities to think about questions of life and society, to socialize with other Humanists, and to take action to make life better here and now. The best way to find out about HCCO is at [hcco.org](http://hcco.org); also, you can view our events schedule at [meetup.com](http://meetup.com). Or you can talk to [mention any board members or active volunteers present].

[Icebreakers/Introductions if desired]

## **Donations and Membership**

The Humanist Community is here to make a difference in your life and in Central Ohio. We want to give you a part in making a difference by becoming a member, monthly donor, or contributor. Anything that you can share helps us continue to offer Rationality and other worthwhile events, in part through the rental of this space, and all contributions are needed and appreciated.

## **PASS AROUND HAT**

## **Moderation Statement**

In Columbus Rationality, we aim to optimize the experience for everyone present through a general attitude of mutual respect in our discussions, and we ask for your help in achieving this goal. The presenter will take questions (either as asked or at the end depending on that particular person). If you have a question or comment, please raise your hand. The host/moderator (the one who introduces the presenter) will keep a list of people who wish to speak. Please be respectful of those talking and wait until the moderator calls on you to contribute. To ensure we can get through everyone please limit your question or comment to a minute to allow the presenter to respond, unless we are in a broader group discussion at the end of a presentation, in which a longer comment is appropriate. All are welcome to assist each other in keeping an eye on the time, staying on track, and showing mutual respect for other participants. If there is not time for follow-up comments, please jot a note down on the notepads provided and we can return to it at the end of the presentation.

## **Introduction of Speaker and Workshop**

[Yay speaker, super-duper expert]

[Yay workshop topic, make you more rational and awesome]

[Yay audience]

## **Closing**

Closing after program: pass around feedback sheet, draw attention again to next Rationality event and reminder to check out Columbus Rationality Facebook Page and HCCO meetup/website/Facebook page.



## **Rationality Educational Event: Feedback Form**

Workshop \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete the following evaluation for the educational seminar you attended. Your feedback will help us evaluate the effectiveness of this program and allow us to make improvements. Your feedback is important for planning future programming and services we offer. Thank you.

How far did you travel here today? \_\_\_\_\_

How much did you expect to enjoy the meeting? 1-10, 10 being highest: \_\_\_\_\_

**4 = Strongly Agree 3 = Agree 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree**

Circle your response for the questions below:

- |   |       |   |   |   |
|---|-------|---|---|---|
| 1. The content was useful to me.                                      | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. The level of the workshop was appropriate.                         | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. The format was enjoyable.  | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. The speaker had a good understanding of the topics.                | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. I would like to see more on this topic.                            | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. The workshop was worth my time.                                    | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. I would like more events like this.                                | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. The length and pace of the meeting were appropriate.               | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. I would recommend this workshop to a friend.                       | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. How much did you actually enjoy today's meeting, on a 1-10 scale? | _____ |   |   |   |

What would you like the presenter to know regarding what was most useful or changes that should be made?

What would you like the organizers to know about changes to enhance/improve this program?

What additional topics would you like to hear about or discuss at Columbus Rationality?

Is there any other feedback that you would like the organizers to consider that would help us optimize this event?

## **Rationality Social Event: Feedback Form**

Workshop \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete the following evaluation for the social event you attended. Your feedback will help us evaluate the effectiveness of this program and allow us to make improvements. Your feedback is important for planning future programming and services we offer. Thank you.

How far did you travel here today? \_\_\_\_\_

How much did you expect to enjoy the meeting? 1-10, 10 being highest: \_\_\_\_\_

**4 = Strongly Agree 3 = Agree 2 = Disagree 1 = Strongly Disagree**

Circle your response for the questions below:

- |   |       |   |   |   |
|---|-------|---|---|---|
| 1. I learned something valuable tonight                               | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. The discussions (if any) were interesting.                         | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. The games (if any) were interesting                                | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. The format was enjoyable.  | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. I enjoyed the socializing.   | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. The event was worth my time.                                       | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. I would like more events like this.                                | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. The length and pace of the meeting were appropriate.               | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. I would recommend this event to a friend.                          | 4     | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 10. How much did you actually enjoy today's meeting, on a 1-10 scale? | _____ |   |   |   |

What would you like the organizers to know about changes to enhance/improve this program?

What additional topics would you like to hear about or discuss at Columbus Rationality?

What additional activities would you like to do at Columbus Rationality?

Is there any other feedback that you would like the organizers to consider that would help us optimize this event?

## **Potential Topics Sheet**

You are welcome to draw on Intentional Insights content for topics for presentation and discussion.

### **Videos**

Here are some videos you can watch and discuss afterwards:

#### 1) [Find Your Purpose Using Science](#)

This workshop offers research-based methods for finding purpose and meaning in life from a reason-based perspective.. The workshop is presented by Gleb Tsipursky, [Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights](#).

#### 2) [Evaluate Reality Using Science](#)

This presentation provides pragmatic and easy-to-use strategies on how to use rational thinking to assess reality rationally. The workshop is presented by Gleb Tsipursky, [Co-Founder, President, and Chief Insights Officer at Intentional Insights](#).

#### 3) [Intentional Decision Making: Making Decisions to Reach Your Goals](#)

This presentation provides pragmatic and easy-to-use strategies on how to use rational thinking to make effective decisions. The workshop is presented by Agnes Vishnevkin, [Co-Founder, Vice-President, and Chief Empowerment Officer at Intentional Insights](#).

### **Blog Posts**

Check out the [Intentional Insights website](#) for blog posts you can read and discuss afterwards.

### **Other Resources**

The Intentional Insights website has a [Resources](#) page that lists other venues dedicated to spreading rationality, where you can find many topics to prompt discussions.