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RESEARCH PAPER

Do Coping Strategies Explain the Relationship Between Purpose in Life and Life Satisfaction?

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Abstract
Purpose in life is positively associated with several markers of subjective well-being, but potential mechanisms of this effect are not well understood. We examined how the use of different coping strategies was associated with the relationship between purpose in life and overall life satisfaction. We examined associations between purpose in life, life satisfaction, and coping strategies in Waves 2 and 3 of the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, encompassing 3,754 adults assessed over a nine-year period. Results indicated that greater endorsement of purpose in life prospectively predicted significantly more problem-focused coping and less emotion-focused coping. In turn, this pattern of coping strategy use predicted greater life satisfaction. These findings indicate that coping strategies may be a pathway for purpose in life to influence life satisfaction, such that individuals who endorse higher purpose in life are more likely than individuals lower in purpose to employ adaptive strategies in response to stress.

Keywords Purpose · Life satisfaction · Coping · Well-being · MIDUS

1 Introduction

If we have our own why of life, we shall get along with almost any how.

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Friedrich Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889).

In this aphorism, Nietzsche intimates the value of having a purpose for living, insofar as it protects one from the obstacles posed by one's unique circumstances. From a psychological perspective, purpose in life has been defined in several ways, including as a self-organizing, central life aim (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Kashdan et al., 2024) and as a sense of direction in life (Ryff, 1989). Purpose provides a framework within which a person may orient their time, energy, and other resources to attain important goals or aims (i.e., self-organizing) and is a major component of an individual's construction of their identity (i.e., central). Indeed, some theorists have proposed that the "will to meaning"—or the drive to discover and pursue meaning and purpose in life—is the primary motivational force that explains human behavior (Frankl, 1985). Thus, purpose in life is not merely a single goal but rather a framework from which terminal goals or aspirations may be derived (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Purpose may arise within multiple life domains, including family, social relationships, occupations, educational attainment, and leisurely activities (Cross & Markus, 1991).

1.1 The Relationship between Purpose in Life and Well-being

Purpose in life is considered one of several components of psychological well-being, a state of flourishing characterized by factors such as environmental mastery, personal growth, and autonomy (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). As a facet of psychological well-being, purpose in life has demonstrated significant associations with subjective well-being — characterized by self-reported evaluations of one's life, including life satisfaction and affect. Specifically, purpose in life is positively associated with greater positive affect, lower negative affect (Hill et al., 2018; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), and increased life satisfaction (Kafka & Kozma, 2002). Beyond well-being outcomes, purpose in life has also been linked to concurrent and prospective income (Hill et al., 2016) and educational attainment (Sutu et al., 2024).

Notably, purpose in life is positively associated with life satisfaction (Kafka & Kozma, 2002). Life satisfaction reflects a cognitive evaluation of one's life across multiple domains (Diener, 1985). Life satisfaction has demonstrated associations with several meaningful outcomes including better physical health and mental health (Siahpush et al., 2008; Ferguson et al., 2015). One cross-sectional study found that, across three age groups (i.e., adolescents, emergent adults, and early to middle-aged adults), purpose in life was positively associated with life satisfaction (Cotton Bronk et al., 2009). Other studies have found that purpose in life prospectively predicts life satisfaction (Joshanloo, 2024), with one study finding that changes in purpose in life were positively correlated with change in life satisfaction in older adults (Gudmundsdottir et al., 2024). Taken together, there is substantial evidence suggesting that purpose in life is implicated in one's satisfaction with life.

Despite strong empirical support linking purpose with well-being, there is limited research examining mechanisms that explain this relationship. As illustrated in Frankl's (1985) powerful description of the protective role of meaning and purpose among Nazi concentration camp prisoners, having an overarching sense of coherence and goal orientation can buttress against the negative effects of stressful life events. Based on this observation, one might hypothesize that higher purpose improves well-being through its influence on the construction and pursuit of personally important goals (Lewis, 2020). Purpose imposes

structure and form to goals, which helps individuals focus their attention on things that are in line with their purpose (e.g., familial relationships or career aspirations) and filter out unhelpful or irrelevant stimuli. Indeed, people high in purpose have been shown to display higher degrees of executive functioning (Boyle et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2017; Van Tongeren et al., 2018), which may help them to engage in purpose-aligned behaviors and avoid behaviors that contradict their purpose.

1.2 Purpose in Life and Coping Strategies

When an individual with high purpose in life faces a stressor (especially one that challenges their purpose), they may be adept at coping with the stressor such that it does not disrupt pursuit of their purpose. Adaptive coping strategies that facilitate purpose-driven behavior include approaches like problem-solving and adaptively reframing an unhelpful emotional response (Kashdan & Goodman, 2023). As an example, consider an individual whose purpose in life is derived from their sense of responsibility for the care of their family. This person was recently fired from their job and lost the income they relied on to support their family. Because their purpose centers around their duty for the caretaking of their family, they may opt to "solve" the problem by applying and interviewing for jobs in order to obtain the financial resources necessary to support their family. An individual without such a strong sense of purpose may have less motivation to immediately apply for jobs and/or may get stuck ruminating on the emotional consequences of their unemployment. Indeed, individuals high in purpose are more likely to reappraise their stressors, whereas those low in purpose are more likely to avoid them (Hill et al., 2025). One study found that purpose in life attenuated the relationship between appraised effort and the perception of environmental challenges, such that individuals higher in purpose were less likely to perceive physically demanding tasks as more difficult, suggesting that purpose may shape cognitive appraisals of stressors more broadly (Burrow et al., 2016). Additionally, purpose in life has demonstrated prospective associations with greater use of problem-solving strategies and reduced experiential avoidance in a sample of college students, suggesting that purposeful individuals may favor approach-oriented regulatory strategies over avoidance (Lohani et al., 2023). To the extent that purpose shapes how individuals respond to stressors, it may also function as a protective factor against psychological distress. Indeed, a higher level of purpose in life is associated with lower anxiety and depression (Boreham & Schutte, 2023), loneliness (Sutin et al., 2022), suicidal ideation (Edwards & Holden, 2001), and suicidal behavior (Heisel & Flett, 2004). In sum, having a strong sense of purpose is associated with adaptive responses to stressors, insofar as it is associated with self-regulating behaviors and adaptive cognitive appraisals.

1.3 Coping Strategies and Well-being

When faced with stressors, people higher in purpose may use problem-focused coping (PFC; e.g., reappraisal, planning) rather than emotion-focused coping (EFC; e.g., venting, rumination). While no one coping strategy is universally adaptive (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017), EFC is often less effective than PFC, and more frequent use of EFC strategies is associated with elevations in depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Penley et al., 2002; Völlink et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2007). EFC can prevent individuals

from engaging with more adaptive forms of coping by encouraging them to fixate on their emotional experiences, often leading to an exacerbation of distress and an avoidance of problem-solving (Felton et al., 1984). On the other hand, PFC is often adaptive because it incorporates approach-oriented responses that promote problem-solving and efforts to manage the impacts of the stressor (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Accordingly, the use of PFC strategies is positively associated with physical and psychological health outcomes (Ben-Zur, 2005; Nikolaev et al., 2023; Penley et al., 2002). Taken together, an individual's coping strategies (e.g., EFC vs. PFC)[1] play an important role in their physical and psychological well-being.

Given that individuals with a strong sense of purpose in life are likely to make decisions and orient their attention toward things that bring them closer in alignment with their purpose, so too might they employ more adaptive coping strategies in the face of distress. Indeed, individuals low in purpose in life tend to use EFC more often than those high in purpose in life (Stevens et al., 1987), whereas higher purpose in life is associated with more approach-oriented forms of coping (Malin et al., 2019; Miao & Gan, 2019; Smith & Zautra, 2000). Another study examining the role of coping strategies in high-school students found that more frequent use of PFC accounted for the relationship between meaning in life and school adjustment (Cho et al., 2014). Specifically, purpose in life may promote the use of PFC, contextualizing the stressor by providing an acceptable and desirable end point (e.g., resuming purpose-oriented activities) and discouraging the use of EFC strategies, which may serve to delay the pursuit of purpose by promoting rumination and increasing levels of psychological distress (Felton et al., 1984; Penley et al., 2002; Völlink et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2007). Given associations between PFC and positive physical and psychological outcomes, more frequent use of PFC may culminate in more adaptive responses to stressors. Successfully resolving stressors or reframing one's emotional response may directly contribute to greater life satisfaction over time. Indeed, prior cross-sectional work has indicated that PFC was positively associated with life satisfaction, whereas EFC was negatively associated with life satisfaction (Reyes et al., 2021).

1.4 Present Study

Although purpose in life is associated with both adaptive coping styles (Malin et al., 2019; Miao & Gan, 2019; Smith & Zautra, 2000) and markers of well-being such as life satisfaction (Kafka & Kozma, 2002; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), to our knowledge no study has examined the potential role of coping in the association between purpose in life and life satisfaction. This is surprising given previous research showing that coping styles account for the associations between purpose in life and other markers of physical health and cognitive functioning (Miller et al., 2025; Smith & Zautra, 2000). The Transactional Model of

[1] Importantly, some scholars have suggested that a binary conceptualization of coping strategies may be overly simplistic (e.g., Carver et al., 1989; Skinner et al., 2003), and a range of coping types have been empirically derived (e.g., Baumstarck et al., 2017; Guadalupe & DeShong, 2025; Kurth et al., 2025; Zuckerman & Gagne, 2003). Despite the empirical complications within the coping literature, these additional factors (e.g., denial and disengagement, instrumental action) have been argued by some to conceptually correspond to the broader PFC and EFC framework (Kurth et al., 2025). Accordingly, recent studies continue to subsume these potential subfactors into the PFC/EFC model to aid in parsimony, with the potential loss of psychometric rigor (e.g., Nikolaev et al., 2023; Schoenmakers et al., 2015). Thus, while the PFC/EFC model may not reflect a universal typology of coping, it remains a widely applied framework with demonstrated associations with psychological outcomes.

Stress and Coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provides a theoretical basis for this proposed pathway. Namely, the model posits that in response to an external stressor, the individual first makes an appraisal of the threat posed by the stressor (primary appraisal), followed by an appraisal regarding the individual's ability to respond to the stressor (secondary appraisal). This in turn drives the selection of coping strategies. Individuals with greater purpose in life, characterized by a sense of directedness and intentionality toward meaningful goals (Ryff, 1989), may perceive stressors as controllable, framing them as surmountable obstacles as opposed to overwhelming threats. As a result, they may be inclined to utilize PFC strategies which can help them to respond adaptively to the stressor, as opposed to EFC which would involve processes such as rumination and avoidance. Because of the use of adaptive coping strategies, they may be more satisfied with their lives. Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the role of coping styles (EFC vs. PFC) in the relationship between purpose in life and life satisfaction using a large longitudinal sample. We used data from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study to examine relationships between purpose in life, coping styles, and life satisfaction across time. We hypothesized that these coping strategies would be associated with this relationship, such that high purpose in life will be associated with more frequent use of PFC and less frequent use of EFC, corresponding to greater life satisfaction.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

Data used in the present study were derived from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study (Brim et al., 2019). MIDUS is a national longitudinal study initially conducted by the MacArthur Midlife Research Network that assesses changes in constructs pertaining to health and well-being across the life span. Because of its large sample size ($N = 7{,}108$), representativeness of the U.S. population, and strong longitudinal measurement of relevant constructs, the MIDUS presents an ideal dataset for examining associations among purpose in life, coping, and life satisfaction with strong ecological validity and statistical power. Participants included English-speaking American adults (between 24 and 74 years of age) that were recruited using Random Digit Dialing. Data collection occurred in three waves: MIDUS-1 in 1995, MIDUS-2 in 2004–2005, and MIDUS-3 in 2013–2014, with the initial cohort recruited in MIDUS-1 being contacted in order to complete another round of data collection. Each wave consisted of an initial phone interview followed by two self-administered questionnaires. Extensive documentation of the MIDUS study survey methodology (including descriptions of informed consent procedures) can be found elsewhere (Brim et al., 2019; Radler, 2014; Ryff et al., 2019).

The MIDUS-1 sample consisted of 7,108 participants ($M_{age} = 46.40$, $SD = 13.00$). A total of 4,963 participants completed follow-up at MIDUS-2 ($M_{age} = 55.40$, $SD = 12.45$), and 3,294 completed follow-up at MIDUS-3 ($M_{age} = 63.60$, $SD = 11.35$). Adjusted for mortality, the retention rate between waves 2 and 3 was 77% (Ryff et al., 2019). Data collection for the MIDUS studies was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Madison IRB (Protocols 2016 − 1051 and 2022 − 1609). The present study used data from waves 2 and 3 only because coping styles were not assessed in wave 1. Importantly, MIDUS-2 and 3 were separated by

approximately nine years, allowing for the examination of prospective associations. Of the 7,108 respondents initially included in the MIDUS-1, 3,354 respondents who either died before completion of MIDUS-3 (mortality being a source of nonrandom missingness) or who did not participate in MIDUS-2 or 3 were not included in our analyses, resulting in a final sample size of 3,754 for the present study.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Purpose in Life

Purpose in life was assessed using the 7-item Purpose in Life subscale of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWB; Ryff, 1989). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly agree, 7 = Strongly disagree): (1) "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them," (2) "I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future," (3) "I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life," (4) "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life," (5) "I don't have a good sense of what it is I'm trying to accomplish in life," (6) "My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me," (7) "I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality." Responses were rescored such that total scores for the subscale indicated a greater sense of purpose in life. Internal consistency for this measure was acceptable in MIDUS-2 ($\alpha = 0.70$) and MIDUS-3 ($\alpha = 0.72$).

2.2.2 Coping Style

Coping style was assessed using six subscales from the COPE Inventory (Carver et al., 1989). A problem-focused coping (PFC) variable was calculated by summing the 12 items comprising the "Positive Reinterpretation and Growth," "Active Coping," and "Planning" subscales. An emotion-focused coping (EFC) variable was calculated by summing the 12 items comprising the "Focus on and venting of emotion," "Denial," and "Behavioral disengagement" subscales. Respondents were asked to report how often they engaged in each of the behaviors/activities described by each statement using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = A lot, 4 = Not at all). Responses were rescored such that total scores for the subscale indicated higher levels of the specific coping type. In MIDUS-2, Cronbach's alpha for the subscales used to calculate the both coping variables ranged from 0.76 to 0.83, indicating acceptable-good internal consistency. In MIDUS-3, Cronbach's alpha for the subscales used to calculate both coping variables ranged from 0.74 to 0.82, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency.

2.2.3 Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was assessed using a six-item measure comprised of items asking respondents to rate aspects of their life including work, health, relationships with spouse/partner, relationships with children, finances, and their life overall (Prenda & Lachman, 2001). For example, respondents completed an item that read "Using a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means 'the worst possible health' and 10 means 'the best possible health' how would you rate your health these days?" in order to capture a respondent's satisfaction with their

personal health. The scores regarding relationships with spouse/partner and children were averaged to create a single item capturing satisfaction with relationships. The final life satisfaction variable was computed by calculating the mean of all items, scored such that higher scores reflect greater life satisfaction. Internal consistency was acceptable for this measure in MIDUS-2 ($\alpha = 0.65$) and MIDUS-3 ($\alpha = 0.71$).

2.2.4 Covariates

Age, sex, race, educational attainment, and income were included based on their previously established associations with purpose in life, coping styles, or life satisfaction (Barger et al., 2009; Boes and Winkelmann 2010; Howerton & Gundy, 2009; Ilies et al., 2019 Reker et al., 1987). Respondents reported their age in all three waves, but age in the third wave was standardized and used in the present study. Sex was reported in MIDUS-1 and was coded as female (1) or male (0). Race was reported at the first wave and treated as time-invariant, coded as either (1) White or (0) non-White. Educational attainment was reported in all three waves, but education in the third wave was used in the present analyses because some respondents attained higher education between waves. Education was captured by a survey item asking respondents to report their highest level of education, ranging from (1) no school/some grade school to (12) Ph.D., Ed.D., MD, DDS, LLB, LLD, JD or other professional degree. To reduce model complexity, education was treated as a continuous numerical variable, with higher values indicating higher educational attainment. Individual income was reported in MIDUS-3 and standardized for use in analyses. Income was measured with a survey item asking participants to report their pre-tax income from the last calendar year.

2.3 Statistical Analyses

All analyses were conducted in *R* version 4.5.1 using the *lavaan* package (R Core Team, 2025; Rosseel, 2012). First, all variables used in analyses were assessed for violations of normality by assessing skewness or kurtosis values outside the range of -2 to 2. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesis that coping style is associated with the relationship between purpose in life and life satisfaction. In line with MacKinnon et al. (2002), we constructed two path models examining the effect of purpose in life (assessed in MIDUS-2) on MIDUS-3 coping styles (either EFC or PFC; Path A), and the effect of MIDUS-3 coping styles on life satisfaction at MIDUS-3 (Path B) independent of the effect of purpose in life at MIDUS-2 (Path C'). The indirect effect of purpose in life on life satisfaction was calculated by multiplying Paths A and B. Age, sex, race, educational attainment, and income were included as covariates in the models. We also adjusted for EFC, PFC, and life satisfaction at MIDUS-2. In order to evaluate the significance of these associations, bootstrapped confidence intervals around the indirect effect of purpose in life on life satisfaction were created by resampling the data 5000 times. Lastly, we constructed a path model examining the effect of purpose in life on both EFC and PFC, and the effect of both of these coping styles on life satisfaction. Full information maximum likelihood was implemented in order to handle data missingness, as prior research has demonstrated that FIML generates unbiased estimates compared to other missing data methods (Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Model fit was evaluated using the root-mean-square error of approxima-

tion (RMSEA) and its 90% confidence intervals, the comparative fit index (CFI), and the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) (Bentler, 1990).

3 Results

Bivariate correlations between relevant study variables can be found in Table 1. Of note, greater purpose in life at MIDUS-2 was associated with less frequent EFC and more frequent PFC at MIDUS-3. Additionally, EFC was associated with lower life satisfaction, whereas PFC was associated with greater life satisfaction. Lastly, greater purpose in life at MIDUS-2 was associated with greater life satisfaction at MIDUS-3.

Among this study's analytic sample, 93.9% had non-missing data for purpose in life in MIDUS-2, 75.6% had non-missing data for both PFC and EFC at MIDUS-3, and 76.6% had non-missing data for life satisfaction in MIDUS-3. Participants were mostly female (56.0%), middle-aged (M_{age} = 63.7 years; SD = 11.26), and White (89.1%). An inspection of missingness patterns indicated that respondents who were younger, non-White, and had lower levels of education attainment were more likely to be missing data on study variables in MIDUS-3. Psychological variables in MIDUS-2 did not predict missingness in MIDUS-3. The mean of the purpose in life measure at MIDUS-2 in the present study's subsample was 38.83 (SD = 6.81). Means for the emotion- and problem-focused variables at MIDUS-3 were 21.61 (SD = 5.64) and 37.73 (SD = 6.08), respectively. The mean of the life satisfaction measure at MIDUS-3 was 7.57 (SD = 7.8).

To examine whether purpose in life and life satisfaction are associated through EFC, we tested a model with frequency of EFC at MIDUS-3 as the an intermediary variable. This model controlled for EFC and life satisfaction at MIDUS-2, as well as relevant sociodemographic variables. This model demonstrated good fit (CFI = 1.00, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.03, 90% CI [0.02, 0.05)]). Covariate effects are depicted in Table 2. As depicted in Fig. 1, we found that purpose in life had a significant indirect effect on life satisfaction through EFC after examining bootstrapped confidence intervals. Importantly, the direct effect of purpose in life on life satisfaction remained significant in this model, indicating a partial indirect association. The model explained approximately 43.2% of the variance in life satisfaction at MIDUS-3.

We ran a similar model to examine whether the association between purpose in life and life satisfaction was partially accounted for by PFC. This model included PFC and life satisfaction at MIDUS-2 as covariates, along with the same sociodemographic covariates described previously. This model demonstrated good fit (CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.043, 90% CI [0.03, 0.06)]). Covariate effects are depicted in Table 2. Examination of bootstrapped confidence intervals indicated that purpose in life had a significant indirect effect on life satisfaction through PFC (Fig. 1). Importantly, the direct effect of purpose in life on life satisfaction remained significant in this model, indicating a partial indirect association. This model explained approximately 43.0% of the variance in life satisfaction at MIDUS-3.

Next, we ran another model with both EFC and PFC at MIDUS-3 to see if these findings would replicate when both coping styles are included in the same model. This model included all covariates mentioned previously. This model demonstrated good fit (CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.03, 90% CI [0.03, 0.04)]). Covariate effects are depicted in Table 2. After including both EFC and PFC, the bootstrapped confidence interval for the indirect

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations of variables

	Timepoint	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Problem-focused coping	T2	37.97 (6.01)		−0.24***	0.28***	0.47***	0.62***	−0.22***	0.21***	0.24***
2. Emotion-focused coping	T2	22.31 (5.54)	−0.24***		−0.24 ***	−0.39***	−0.21***	0.59***	−0.19***	−0.29***
3. Life satisfaction	T2	7.54 (1.24)	0.28***	−0.24***		0.44***	0.21***	−0.19***	0.62***	0.15***
4. Purpose in life	T2	38.83 (6.81)	0.47***	−0.39***	0.44***		0.39***	−0.33***	0.37***	0.49***
5. Problem-focused coping	T3	37.73 (6.08)	0.62***	−0.21***	0.21***	0.39***		−0.19***	0.24***	0.29***
6. Emotion-focused coping	T3	21.61 (5.64)	−0.22***	0.59***	−0.19***	−0.33***	−0.19***		−0.24***	−0.33***
7. Life satisfaction	T3	7.57 (1.33)	0.21***	−0.19***	0.62***	0.37***	0.24***	−0.24***		0.25***
8. Purpose in life	T3	16.07 (3.42)	0.24***	−0.29***	0.15***	0.49***	0.29***	−0.33***	0.25***	

M (SD) = mean (standard deviation); T2 = MIDUS-2; T3 = MIDUS-3

Table 2 Covariate effects in MIDUS-2 and MIDUS-3 indirect effects analyses

Mediator	Covariate	EFC	PFC	LS (MIDUS-3)
EFC	Age	0.064***		0.058***
	Sex	0.053***		0.034*
	Race[a]	-0.028		-0.017
	Education	-0.052**		0.026
	Income	-0.037*		0.101***
	EFC (MIDUS-2)	0.516***		-0.094***
	LS (MIDUS-2)			0.540***
PFC	Age		-0.022	0.049**
	Sex		0.041*	0.014
	Race[a]		0.021	-0.009
	Education		0.034*	0.033*
	Income		0.058***	0.099***
	PFC (MIDUS-2)		0.566***	0.076***
	LS (MIDUS-2)			0.543***
EFC & PFC	Age	0.065***	-0.022	0.057***
	Sex	0.054***	0.041*	0.029
	Race[a]	-0.026	0.021	-0.014
	Education	-0.053**	0.034*	0.023
	Income	-0.035	0.057***	0.097***
	EFC (MIDUS-2)	0.515***		-0.089***
	PFC (MIDUS-2)		0.566***	0.070***
	LS (MIDUS-2)			0.538***

All effects presented are standardized. EFC = emotion-focused coping; PFC =problem-focus coping; PIL = purpose in life; LS = satisfaction; b = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized regression coefficient; 95% CI = bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. (a) Non-White race was treated as referent. Age and income were standardized

*$p < 0.05$

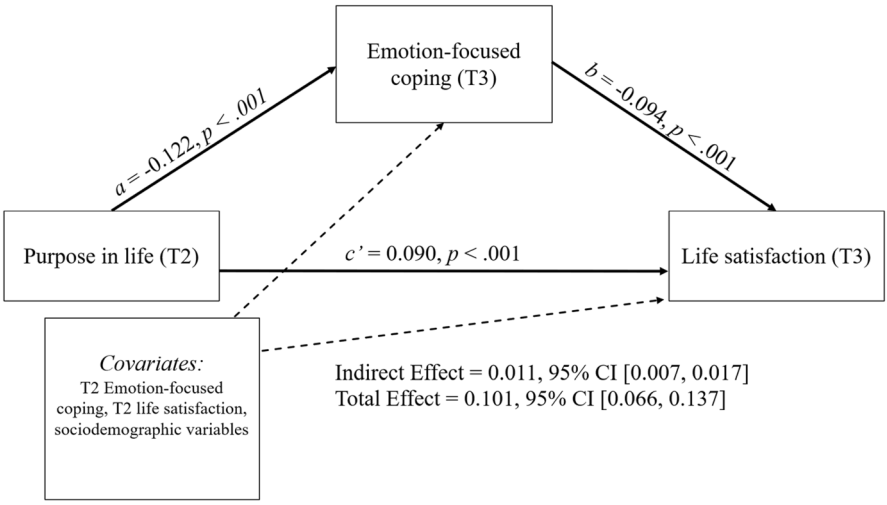
**$p < .01$

***$p < .001$

effect did not include 0, indicating that purpose in life had a significant indirect effect on life satisfaction through both PFC and EFC (Fig. 2). As was the case with the single-indirect association models, the direct effect of purpose in life on life satisfaction remained significant, indicating a partial indirect association. This model explained approximately 43.5% of the variance in life satisfaction at MIDUS-3.

Lastly, we ran a series of models that examined whether these findings were robust to a more granular operationalization of coping[2]. Following Kurth and colleague's (2025) identification of a four-factor structure of the COPE Inventory in the MIDUS II and III samples, four separate mediation models were estimated with instrumental action (comprised of planning and active coping subscales), denial/disengagement (comprised of denial and behavioral disengagement subscales), positive reappraisal (comprised of the positive reinterpretation and growth subscale), and venting (comprised of the focusing on and venting of emotion subscale) included as mediators. Model fit was acceptable across all four models (CFIs > 0.99, TLIs > 0.95, RMSEAs < 0.05). Purpose in life predicted all four coping styles (*ps* < 0.001). Specifically, it positively predicted instrumental action ($a = 0.112$, 95% CI [0.075, 0.149]) and positive reappraisal ($a = 0.088$, 95% CI [0.052, 0.124]). Purpose in life negatively predicted denial/disengagement (a = -0.145, 95% CI [-0.183, -0.108]) and venting (a = -0.055, 95% CI [-0.103, -0.033]). Significant indirect effects were observed through instrumental action ($ab = 0.008$, 95% CI [0.004, 0.013]), denial/disengagement ($ab = 0.014$, 95% CI [0.008, 0.021], venting ($ab = 0.004$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.007], and positive reappraisal ($ab = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.009]). These findings are broadly consistent with the primary analyses, suggesting that purpose in life is associated with greater approach-oriented cop-

[2] These supplementary analyses were recommended by a reviewer.



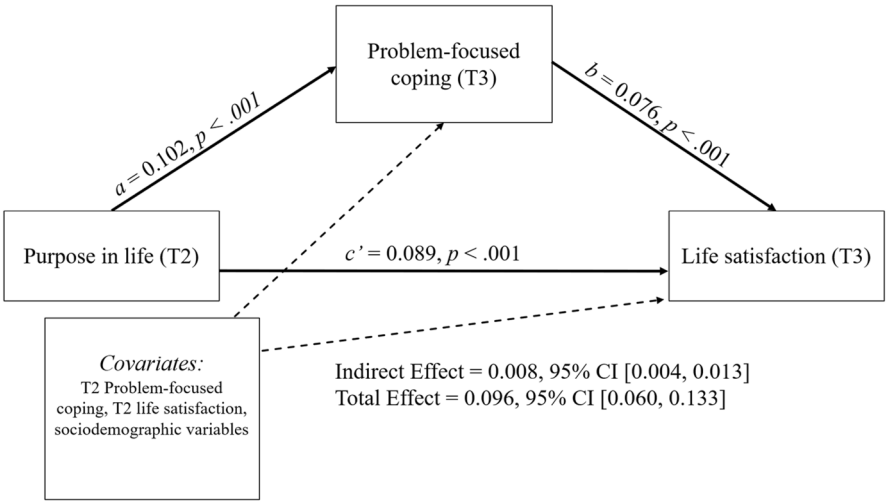


Fig. 1 Structural equation modeling of life satisfaction using MIDUS-2 and MIDUS-3 data. The adjusted direct effects of purpose in life on life satisfaction are presented. All depicted effects and confidence intervals are standardized. T2 = MIDUS-2; T3 = MIDUS-3

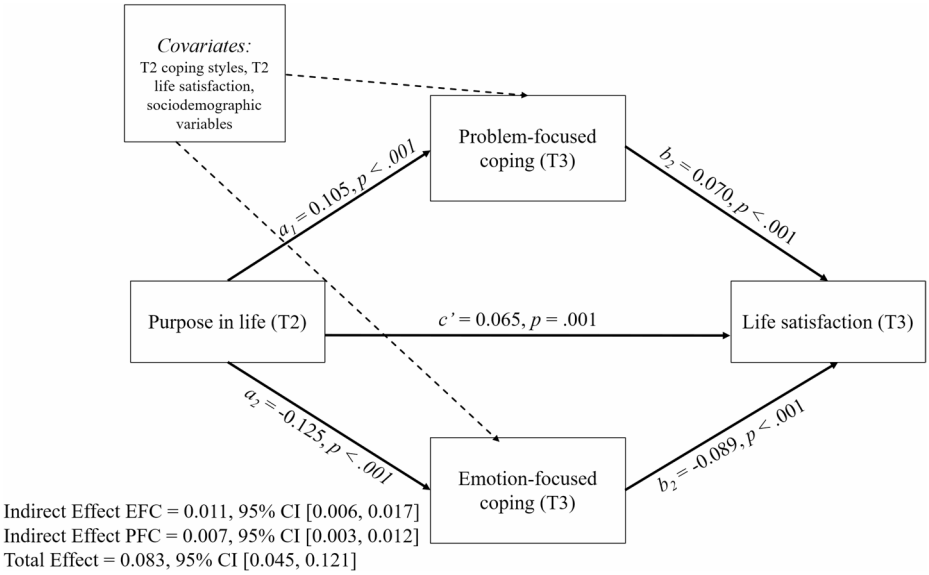


Fig. 2 Structural equation modeling of dual indirect effects analysis of life satisfaction using MIDUS-2 and MIDUS-3 data. The adjusted direct effects of purpose in life on life satisfaction are presented. All depicted effects and confidence intervals are standardized

ing strategies (i.e., strategies akin to PFC) and less avoidant or ruminative coping strategies (i.e., strategies akin to EFC), which ultimately contributed to higher life satisfaction.

4 Discussion

The present study sought to explore a possible indirect associational pathway linking purpose and life satisfaction. Specifically, we examined whether these two factors were indirectly associated via coping styles (i.e., EFC and PFC). Consistent with previous work, higher purpose prospectively predicted greater PFC and less EFC (Miller et al., 2025). We also found that PFC was positively associated with life satisfaction, whereas EFC was negatively associated with life satisfaction. In line with our hypotheses, these coping strategies partially accounted for the association between purpose in life and life satisfaction. Taken together, these findings provide preliminary evidence for a potential mechanism by which purpose in life enhances life satisfaction.

The associations between purpose in life and coping styles found in this study align with previous work illustrating how purpose in life influences our response to stressors (Malin et al., 2019; Miao & Gan, 2018; Smith & Zautra, 2000; Stevens et al., 1987). Purpose in life is a self-organizing, motivational system through which we enact behaviors and establish goals that correspond to our purpose. Consequently, individuals with purpose in life may utilize more adaptive forms of coping when confronted with a stressor compared to individuals without such a purpose in life. Specifically, greater use of PFC and less EFC may have resulted in more effective problem-solving and goal-oriented behavior as opposed to ruminative behavior (Felton et al., 1984; Penley et al., 2002; Völlink et al., 2013; Wang et

al., 2007) The present findings also correspond with other work demonstrating associations between purpose in life and components (e.g., life satisfaction) of subjective well-being (Ben-Zur, 2005; Nikolaev et al., 2023; Penley et al., 2002). Thus, through its self-organizing capacity, purpose in life may enhance life satisfaction by motivating individuals to pursue adaptive coping strategies when confronted with a stressor, allowing them to continue pursuing their purpose.

4.1 Meaning-Focused Coping

The present study examined coping through the lens of the PFC/EFC framework, which has been widely applied in the well-being literature. An additional perspective that could not be addressed using the MIDUS dataset is the relevance of meaning-focused coping in accounting for the association between purpose in life and life satisfaction. Meaning-focused coping involves drawing on one's values, beliefs, and sense of purpose in response to stress, especially stressors that are uncontrollable, and has been associated with psychological well-being (Folkman, 1997; Park & Folkman, 1997). Given that purpose in life is highly related to meaning in life, it is possible that individuals high in purpose may preferentially use meaning-focused coping strategies in order to respond to uncontrollable stressors. Future research should examine whether meaning-focused coping links purpose in life to life satisfaction and related outcomes.

4.2 Purpose in Life and Resilience

Purpose in life may also improve an individual's ability to tolerate and overcome adversity, stress, or trauma (i.e., psychological resilience). Indeed, previous research has indicated that purpose in life is positively associated with resilience (Hartanto et al., 2020; Nygren et al., 2005; Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024). Findings from the present study suggest that coping styles may play a role in this relationship. Specifically, purpose motivates one to use generally effective coping strategies when faced with stressful life events, increasing the likelihood of overcoming the stressor. Consequently, an improved ability to respond to stressors adaptively may cultivate higher levels of resilience against future stressful events (Armeli et al., 2001; Kashdan et al., 2010). This might also suggest that there is a role for purpose in life in protecting one from the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Indeed, previous research has shown that purpose in life is associated with lower PTSD symptom levels and higher levels of positive emotion among individuals with the disorder (Feder et al., 2013). Accordingly, an interesting and valuable line of future research might examine whether coping strategies play an explanatory role in the relationship between purpose in life and psychological resilience, particularly in the aftermath of traumatic events.

4.3 Implications for Clinical Care

Findings of the present study have implications for clinical care. Mental healthcare is increasingly adopting treatment approaches that move beyond distress and symptom reduction to also promote subjective well-being (see Goodman, 2025). This progress is important given research showing that components of well-being have demonstrated sizeable effects

on key clinical outcomes. In particular, low life satisfaction is a potential risk factor for the development and/or maintenance of mental health distress, including suicidality (Jovanović et al., 2020; Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2001). Our study findings suggest that cultivating purpose may help individuals seeking treatment for mental illness to respond more adaptively to stressors. Indeed, treatments aimed at helping patients develop a sense of purpose or meaning to ameliorate symptoms have demonstrated moderate effects on psychological distress (Park et al., 2019; Shaygan et al., 2023). Therapeutic modalities with an explicit emphasis on purpose cultivation, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes et al., 2006) and Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy (Breitbart et al., 2010) may aid clients in generating a sense of purpose by clarifying one's values and generating behaviors, plans, and processes that are in alignment with these values. In alignment with the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), a greater degree of perceived purpose in life may enable one to not only engage in more frequent meaningful and purpose-aligned experiences and relationships, but also to help mitigate the negative effects of distressing events by promoting the use of adaptive coping strategies. Given inverse associations between purpose in life and psychological distress (Jovanović et al., 2020; Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2001), reductions in distress occurring as a consequence of adaptive and purpose-aligned coping may function as a mechanistic pathway through which purpose in life contributes to life satisfaction. Thus, leveraging purpose in life to promote the use of adaptive and purpose-aligned coping strategies may improve outcomes beyond mere symptom amelioration.

4.4 Developmental Implications

While examining associations between purpose in life, coping styles, and life satisfaction through a developmental lens is not the primary aim of the present study, the MIDUS sample affords a unique opportunity to examine these associations in midlife and older adults. Prior work in this area has suggested that purpose either remains stable from midlife to older age (Ko et al., 2016) or slightly declines (Willroth et al., 2021) during this period. Clarifying a purpose in life may be especially relevant for individuals in midlife and beyond, as they may shift their focus away from self-interest (e.g., personal achievement) toward generative investments in future generations (Erikson, 1963). Moreover, as individuals face age-related health issues or existential concerns over which they may have limited control, a well-developed purpose in life may help them to cope with these stressors in an adaptive way. Accordingly, despite the material, physical, or psychological difficulties that may arise as one proceeds through these developmental stages, a person high in purpose may nonetheless report greater life satisfaction due to their ability to respond to stress adaptively. Future research should examine whether these associations replicate across other developmental periods, including adolescence and young adulthood, for whom purpose may be more malleable and stressors may differ in nature.

4.5 Limitations

These findings should be considered in the context of several study limitations. First, we are unable to draw conclusions regarding directionality between study variables due to our examination of only two waves of the MIDUS study. Temporal precedence assumptions

for a standard mediational analysis were violated in that coping strategies and life satisfaction were assessed concurrently in MIDUS-3. Additionally, the coping variables were not assessed in MIDUS-1, precluding a properly temporally ordered three-wave design. Future research should examine these associations using experimental methods to aid in the ability to determine potential causal relationships. It should be noted, however, that the nine-year interval between MIDUS-2 and 3 allowed for prospective associations to be detected between purpose in life and coping styles and life satisfaction – a relative strength of the study. Second, findings of the present study were based on small effect sizes, which should be interpreted cautiously. Third, the measure of life satisfaction used in the MIDUS has not been empirically validated, despite sharing some conceptual overlap with the widely used Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). Fourth, the MIDUS study aims to study psychosocial constructs in the context of midlife, and so the present study's analytic sample consisted largely of older adults. Additionally, these samples include predominantly White and highly educated participants. Study attrition was predicted by several demographic factors, which may limit generalizability to more diverse populations. Future research should investigate these relationships using samples with greater age and ethnoracial diversity. Additionally, given that coping styles only partially accounted for the relationship between purpose in life and life satisfaction, future research might examine other factors that might account for the leftover variance in this relationship. For example, it is possible that purpose in life contributes to satisfaction through its impact on psychological distress (e.g., mental disorders; Boreham & Schutte, 2023). Future research might examine this and other variables in order to shed more light on the relationship between purpose in life and life satisfaction.

5 Conclusion

The present study is the first, to our knowledge, to examine a potential indirect association between purpose in life and life satisfaction through coping styles. The capacity to respond to stressors, regulate emotions, and assimilate new information is a crucial aspect of enhancing psychological well-being. Additionally, having a defined purpose in life provides people with a motivational system through which to organize their behaviors and goals, such that they remain focused on their purpose even when faced with challenges. As a result, people who are high in purpose may be more satisfied with their lives because they are more likely to respond adaptively to stressors. Thus, this study lays the foundation for future work examining potential pathways through which purpose in life may be associated with subjective well-being. Such efforts may not only improve our understanding of well-being, but they may also directly inform the care of people seeking help for mental illness.

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Data Availability The data used in this study were derived from the publicly available Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) longitudinal study. Documentation and deidentified data for the MIDUS study can be found at (https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/ICPSR/series/203) .

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate Not applicable.

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