

Spiritual fitness – why are we here and where are we going?

One of my favourite questions to ask successful people is: “What would you study now?” The founder of a very profitable asset manager (CA and Harvard MBA), phenomenal COO (lawyer and Cambridge post-graduate) and my grandfather (Professor in Accounting) all had the same answer: “Philosophy.”



Why would these super-smart, commercially orientated people come to the same conclusion? I suspect it's because they see the complexity of the world, the inherent shades of “grey” and the need to orientate thoughtfully towards the big questions in life.

[Nearly two and a half millennia ago](#), Aristotle triggered a revolution in happiness. At the time, Greek philosophers were trying hard to define precisely what this state of being was. Some contended that it sprang from hedonism, the pursuit of sensual pleasure. Others argued from the perspective of tragedy, believing happiness to be a goal, a final destination that made the drudgery of life worthwhile. These ideas still swirl around us in our decadent Instagram posts and our obsessions with all things craft, from beers, gins to our coffees. But Aristotle proposed a third option, eudaimonic happiness, that viewed happiness not merely as a feeling, or a golden promise, but a practice. It's living in a way that realises our purpose, imbues us with fulfilment and spiritual growth. Now, thousands of years later, evidence that Aristotle may have been onto something has been detected in the most surprising of places, the human genome.

Steve Cole, a professor of medicine at the University of California, and Barbara Fredrickson, a noted Professor in positive psychologist from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, made an astonishing discovery. Fredrickson's team profiled a group of participants, using questionnaires to determine their happiness style (hedonic or eudaimonic), then drew a small sample of their blood. Cole analysed the samples to see what patterns, if any, emerged.

Fredrickson believed that hedonism would prove more favourable than eudaimonia, that discrete feelings of happiness would register on the genome more powerfully than abstract notions of meaning and purpose. Cole, meanwhile, was sceptical about the possibility of linking happiness and biology at all. When they analysed the data, they saw that Fredrickson's prediction appeared to be wrong. "This whole hedonic well-being stuff, just how happy are you?—didn't really correlate with gene expression at all," Cole said. Then he checked the correlation with eudaimonic happiness. "When we looked at that, things actually looked quite impressive," he said. The study indicated that people high in eudaimonic happiness were more likely to show the opposite gene profile of those suffering from social isolation: inflammation was down, while antiviral response was up. Since that first test, in 2013, there have been three successful replications of the study, including one of a hundred and eight people, and another of a hundred and twenty-two. According to Cole, the kind of effect sizes that are being found indicate that lacking eudaemonia can be as damaging as smoking or obesity! They also suggest that, although people high in eudaimonic happiness often experience plenty of the hedonic stuff, too, the associated health benefits tend to surface only in those who lead what Aristotle called a good life (pursuit of virtue and excellence, to unleash the best within us.) Unlike hedonic happiness, eudaimonia is not an emotion but a state of being, or even, especially for Aristotle, a state of doing.

And for me, eudaimonia captures the essence of spiritual fitness. It's not about a specific religion, which is a very personal choice and of course can be a wellspring of resilience, but how you orientate yourself to the world, by establishing your own personal identity and living with meaning. A meaningful life incorporates a: sense of Purpose; underlying value system – Code; goals that one strives towards; and a life that is coherent through making sense of the past and the present. In addressing these [TRIFECTA](#) components (Purpose, Code and Goals) we will not always be hedonically happy (there will be failure and struggle along the way), but what it does provide in the longer-term is a sense of fulfilment which is less fleeting whilst being richer. [Imperative](#), in 2019 ran a Workforce Purpose Index survey of the U.S. workforce (n=1038 full-time working adult respondents), and found that:

- Fulfilment is a strong predictor of employee net promoter scores (eNPS). It is also linked to higher performance and intention to remain in the organisation long-term.
- More than twice as many people report wanting fulfilling work (64%) than engaging work (28%).

Fulfilment in the context of the survey was a state of being in which our psychological needs are met, and we are driven primarily by intrinsic motivation.

[Spirituality](#) appears to be largely beneficial for well-being. Prof Koenig (Psychiatry Faculty at Duke University) and his colleagues (2012) reviewed 102 studies in 200, 81 of which found

positive associations, and subsequently have found an additional 224 studies, 175 of which found positive associations between spirituality and wellbeing.

[Dr. Robert Butler](#) led an NIH-funded study that investigated the correlation between having a sense of purpose and longevity. His 11-year study followed high functioning people between ages of 65 and 92 and found that individuals who expressed a clear goal in life, something that made a difference, lived longer and were sharper than those who did not. But is this something that only benefits people later in life?

A 14-year [longitudinal study](#) of 6000 people, found that a single standard deviation increase in purpose decreased the risk of dying over the next decade by 15 percent, a finding that held regardless of the age at which people identified their purpose. Similarly, the [Rush Memory and Aging project](#), which began in 1997, found that when comparing patients who say they have a sense of purpose with those who say they don't, the former are: 2.5 times more likely to be free of dementia; 22% less likely to exhibit risk factors for stroke; 52% less likely to have experienced a stroke.

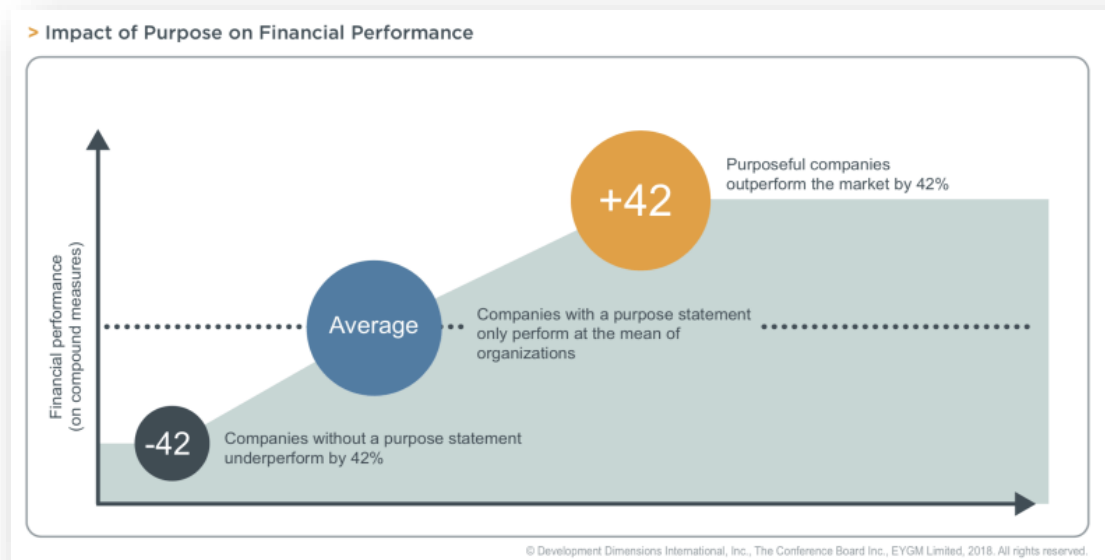
Even before the pandemic, we were in the midst of a [mental health crisis](#). Worldwide, over [264 million people](#) were struggling with depression, and in the U.S.A. alone, nearly [50 million adults](#) had experienced some form of mental illness in the previous year. Between 1988-2008, the usage rate of anti-depressants had increased by 400%!! "[Deaths of despair](#)" and [suicide rates](#) have been skyrocketing. The pandemic has only amplified this crisis. A [study](#) in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that "depression symptoms in the U.S. were more than 3-fold higher during COVID-19 compared with before the COVID-19 pandemic." A Gallup [2014 study](#) by Shigehiro Oishi and Ed Diener, on 140 000 people across 132 countries may provide some insights regarding the suicide surge over the last decades. They asked people if they were satisfied with their lives and whether they had an important purpose or meaning. People in wealthier countries reported being happier than poorer country residents. But what was surprising was that poorer countries often had higher levels of meaning, and wealthier nations had significantly higher suicide rates. Countries with the lowest rates of meaning, had the highest suicide rates. Could it be that lack of meaning (eudemonic happiness) is a more salient factor than hedonic happiness in arresting this downward spiral?

Higher levels of spirituality are associated with a more optimistic life orientation, more adaptive coping responses, higher perceived social support, lower levels of anxiety and ultimately higher resilience, [among recovering individuals](#). [In one study](#) of purpose and adversity, people with a greater sense of purpose showed better emotional recovery following a negative experience. Highly purposeful people, the authors argued, are more inclined to use positive coping methods following a negative experience and were less inclined to ruminate. Although

purpose can foreshadow resilience to adversity, it is also possible that adversity creates purpose in life. In a [study](#) of adolescent purpose development, many described finding their purpose in response to negative events, such as pursuing a medical research career after a beloved aunt died of cancer or mentoring younger teens in a community youth group after getting caught up in drugs and violence.

But does Purpose translate into benefits within the workplace? Research from a variety of institutions says it does, in 5 significant ways:

- 1) Financial performance: The [Global Leadership Forecast 2018 report](#) (see image below) illustrates the impact of Purpose on financial performance. But just having a Purpose statement is not sufficient. Instead, the company must be a Purposeful company. To clarify, this is a company where [leadership actively practices and supports the Purpose](#).



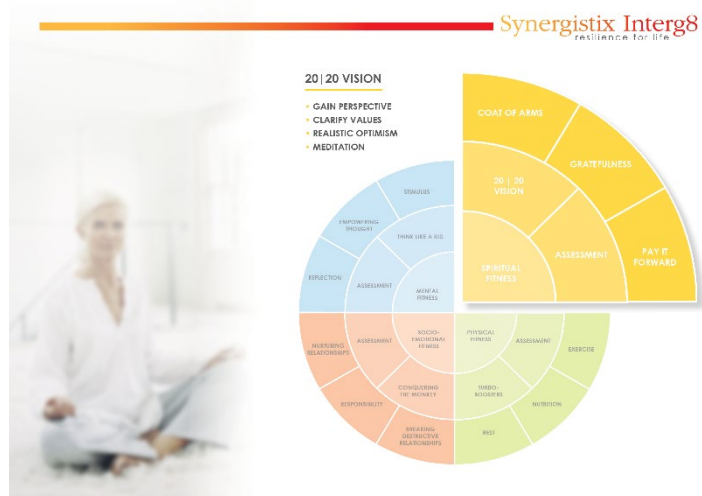
- 2) Productivity: People who find their individual purpose congruent with their jobs tend to get more meaning from their roles, making them more productive and more likely to outperform their peers. [mckinsey](#) research found a positive correlation between the purposefulness of employees and their company's EBITDA margin.
- 3) Resilience and wellbeing: During times of crisis, individual purpose can be a guidepost that helps people face up to uncertainties and [navigate them better](#), and thus mitigate the damaging effects of long-term stress. Indeed, [mckinsey research](#) conducted during the COVID pandemic finds that when comparing people who say

they are “living their purpose” at work with those who say they aren't, the former report levels of well-being that are five times higher than the latter.

- 4) Happy and engaged workers: CNBC and SurveyMonkey conduct a [quarterly poll](#) on 8000 professionals and the results of their November 2019 survey revealed that “Feeling Work Is Meaningful” is the most important factor in determining workplace happiness. Thirty-five percent of respondents noted it is the most important factor. In contrast, 21% said “Being Paid Well” is the most important factor. [mckinsey research](#) conducted during the COVID pandemic found that when comparing people who say they are “living their purpose” at work with those who say they aren't, those in the former group are four times more likely to report [higher engagement levels](#).
- 5) Company ambassadors: In [Imperative's 2016 Workforce Purpose Index](#) they noted that satisfied purpose-oriented employees were 47% more likely to promote their employer externally, without incentives.

So, what is spiritual fitness?

Defn: It is the interplay between how you gain and maintain perspective (20-20 vision paradigm) and those micro-behaviours that support this through identity/purpose clarification (Coat of arms aka TRIFECTA), appreciation of others/experiences (Gratitude) and making a positive contribution (Pay it Forward). Spiritual fitness shapes both the meaning and value we attach to our life and the events therein. Spirituality can encompass both secular and religious perspectives.



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In today's increasingly dynamic, turbulent world we need to create our own internal GPS system to navigate the bewildering array of complex choices. Spirituality affects our physical, psychological, and interpersonal states and vice versa. All of these will contribute to our [overall quality of life](#). In nurturing our Spiritual Fitness, we move beyond lives of quiet desperation, indecision and depression.

The micro-behaviours that underpin Spiritual Fitness are:

- 1) Developing your coat of arms (aka [TRIFECTA](#)) - determining your Purpose, Code and Goals for your authentic and unique life.
- 2) Gratefulness – reflecting on what we have and expressing gratitude graciously.
- 3) Pay it forward: identifying how and where to contribute unconditionally to society, linking our passions to needs in society.

Mindset: “20/20 vision” allows you to view wisely take action based on a realistic perspective, not overridden by fear. The manifestations of stress: hostility, depression and anxiety all undermine perspective, and the path back is via 20-20 vision practices. As the saying goes, “Hindsight is 20-20 vision.” But what if you could create foresight? You can't live your life looking backwards, but you are the sum of your decisions over time. By being more present through leveraging mindfulness and maximising the future by clearly articulating your TRIFECTA, foresight becomes attainable.

So why do we struggle to maintain 20-20 vision? There are many reasons, but a combination of time pressure, multi-tasking, decision fatigue and applying inappropriate lenses (cognitive biases can often distort our perspective.) The first three create a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle. Let's look at some of the research...

[Time pressure:](#) Students who were on their way to give a talk about the parable of the Good Samaritan were no more likely to give help than students who were going to give an unrelated talk. Hurrying, though, did affect helplessness. Students who were in a hurry were much less helpful toward people in need, compared to students who were not in any rush to get to the other building. When people were too concerned about being late to their meeting, they either didn't notice or failed to give aid to someone who could have been dealing with a serious emergency. Solution: know what is important ([Purpose, Code and Goals](#)) and constantly reflect and act on your highest priorities, saying NO to distractions.

[Multi-tasking:](#) Research conducted at Stanford University studied how participants performed on memory tests. Participants were split into “heavy vs. light media multitaskers” based on their responses to the mean number of media consumed while consuming other media. High media multitaskers were found to be less likely to filter irrelevant information, showing a bias for exploratory instead of exploitative information processing. They were less selective in allowing information into their working memory and thus, were more affected by distractors and performed worse on task-switching tests. Solution: uni-task.

Decision-fatigue: Are judicial rulings based solely on laws and facts? We like to believe that judges apply legal reasons to the facts of a case in a rational and deliberative manner. Researchers recorded the judges' two daily food breaks, which resulted in segmenting the deliberations of the day into three distinct "decision sessions." They found that the percentage of favourable rulings drops gradually from approx. 65% to nearly zero within each decision session and returns abruptly to approx. 65% after a break. Their findings suggest that judicial rulings can be swayed by extraneous variables that should have no bearing on legal decisions. Solutions: be aware of your circadian rhythms and chronotypes and schedule your work accordingly.

Inappropriate lenses: cognitive biases cause us to be irrational in the way we search for, evaluate, interpret, judge, use, and remember information, as well as in the way we make decisions. Cognitive biases affect every area of our life, from how we form our memories, to how we shape our beliefs, and to how we form relationships with other people. In doing so, they can lead to both relatively minor issues, such as forgetting a small detail from a past event, as well as to major ones, such as choosing to avoid an important medical treatment that could save our life. Solutions: De-biasing techniques, Socratic questions, and 20-20 vision....the latter two will be discussed here.

How we can build 20-20 vision

There are hundreds of ways to build perspective, I have chosen a range that you can dip into depending on your preferences (internally vs externally sources) and time constraints (lower time vs longer time commitments). Ideally you would like to use each of the different quadrants.

External sources	Exercise (high intensity) Tai Chi	Nature, forest bathing , travel, mentors/coaching, community outreach
Internal sources	Mindfulness, journaling, meditation, gratitude	TRIFECTA , reading, Socratic questions
	Lower time commitment (typically less than 30 mins)	Higher time commitment (typically more than 30 mins)

NB: we struggle the most with the internal-higher time commitment quadrant because of hyperbolic discounting. We need to ensure daily we build our 20-20 vision, whilst making deposits when warranted in the higher time commitment quadrants as well. I have spoken

about mindfulness in a previous [LinkedIn article](#). I will briefly allude to two powerful, high time commitment tools here 1) Trifecta and 2) Socratic questions.

1) [Trifecta](#)

[Writing](#) about your Purpose and values (Personal Code) unlocks a myriad of benefits into resilience. In the short term it makes people feel more powerful and proactive. It also makes one more loving, connected and empathetic. It increases pain tolerance, self-control and reduces unhelpful rumination after a stressful event. In the long-term it has been shown to boost GPA's, reduce doctors visits, improve mental health and help with everything from weight loss to quitting smoking, reducing binge drinking. People whom write about their values for 10 mins, benefits months and years later!

Writing my purpose statement at 24 was transformative and has guided me over the last 23 years. I rewrote it 2 years ago and one of my commitments from this exercise has been to start writing a book and develop an online resilience programme so I can share my insights in the public domain, at scale. The sense of clarity, energy and creativity it has unleashed in my life has been remarkable..no winding down the clock to retirement.

2) Socratic questioning

Socratic questioning is a form of disciplined perspective making that you can use to explore and understand complex issues, uncover deeper insights by revealing assumptions, identify gaps in our knowledge and understand consequences. Here are some of the questions you can apply:

Objective	Example of good questions
Clarifying your thinking and explaining the origins of your ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the core underlying question? • Why do we think this is important? • What exactly do we think?
Challenging assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we know this is true? • What if we thought the opposite? • What are we missing?
Looking for evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you give us an example? • What is stopping us currently? • How can we back this up?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the credible sources?
Considering alternative perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What might other depts/groups think? • What other options could we consider? • How do we know we are correct?
Examining consequences and implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What you think might happen if we did X? • What if we are wrong? • What are the consequences if we are?
Reflecting on our original decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did we think that? (Were there any cognitive biases at play?) • Were we correct? • What conclusions can we draw from the reasoning process?

In closing, I leave you with words of wisdom from Andy Andrews: "In desperate times, much more than anything else, folks need perspective. For perspective brings calm. Calm leads to clear thinking. Clear thinking yields new ideas. And ideas produce the bloom..of an answer. Keep your head and your heart clear. Perspective can just as easily be lost as it can be found."

