



An Interview with Victor J. Strecher

Professor of Health Behavior & Health Education, University of Michigan

Interview by
Aaron Jarden
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1. What got you interested in wellbeing research?

I was getting frustrated with my focus on health related behaviors for their own sake. It seemed like we were studying plants but not the soil they grew in. For example, when trying to help a person quit smoking we'd find that certain strategies helped, but underlying that always seemed to be a 'why?'. Why did you finally decide to quit after twenty years of smoking? The 'why?' questions relate more to a person's wellbeing. Many behaviors that we've studied for so long, often if you follow a root cause analysis, seemed to go back to a loss of wellbeing, loneliness, isolation, alienation, anomie. I think those are the roots of many of our poor health behaviors. So I wanted to begin studying wellbeing to try to figure out the root causes of many of the health related behaviors that are so important to the public's health.

2. What do you take "wellbeing" to mean?

I suppose I'm a bit biased because I do a lot of research related to a purpose in life, so my definition would be having a strong purpose and being aligned with that purpose by having vitality and self-control.

3. Why is wellbeing research important?

We need to study the root causes of many of the problems we face in our society – problems often ignored by our medical model – the real causes of our inflated healthcare budget, our opioid crisis, our increasing rates of suicide and depression – the things that are hardest to study may also be the most important.

4. What is the most important application of wellbeing research to our lives?

Wellbeing research that's focused on identifying why some people are crushed by difficult life events – illness, loss of a loved one, return from battle, an earthquake or sunami – while others end up growing. Now, that really fascinates me, and I think it's super-relevant to our society.

5. You're a world expert on purpose, what are some of the most important wellbeing related findings from your research on purpose?

One of the most fascinating things researchers, including our own team, are finding is that people with a strong self-transcending purpose in their lives – a purpose bigger than themselves – do much better. They live longer, are healthier, less likely to develop serious diseases, and more likely to change their health related behaviors. They become less defensive to change.



In our own work we're finding that we're able to improve people's purpose in their lives. When we see improvements in people's purpose, we also see reductions in depression and we see improvements in energy, self-control and willpower. We've found that energy and willpower are important for purpose, but also that purpose is important for energy and willpower. I could go on and on, there are many positive health benefits... Actually, that can concern some scientists because very often you want to have greater specificity. You'd like to think, 'okay, this factor (x) should cause some outcome (y)'. But how can this factor such as purpose in life contribute to so many different beneficial effects? And that's one really important question that we still face in our research. Why does purpose work?

6. What are you working on right now?

I'm trying to build a purpose pill, metaphorically speaking. Using a digital platform for smartphones and the web, I'm trying to help people develop greater purpose in their lives, think about their alignment with their purpose, and then consider how energy and willpower influence that alignment. Then finally, the platform examines how S.P.A.C.E. can influence their energy and willpower. And by S.P.A.C.E. I'm referring to sleep, presence (which is essentially mindfulness), activity, creativity, and eating. The platform is called JOOL – it's designed to help people become more aware of their purpose, their alignment with their purpose, and the factors that influence their energy and their willpower every day.

7. What do you think the next big thing in wellbeing research will be? Either or both in purpose or wellbeing more broadly?

I think as we start looking at what we might call 'precision wellbeing models', we'll start looking at personalized models of what makes a person tick, and what gives them more purpose in their life. What gives them a bigger life. But very exciting to me as well is thinking about this at an organizational level. What would give a workplace more purpose, and what helps the employees of that workplace connect with their purpose and develop more energy and self-control within that workplace. Then there are purposeful cities. What contributes to a more purposeful city? I think these different levels of analysis are going to be really exciting to study in the future using precision models – not treating individuals, workplaces, or cities as average, using the same algorithm or model. Understanding that every person, workplace, or city may have their own specific algorithms of what makes them tick will be important.

8. What do you think are the main benefits of interdisciplinary approach to purpose? So we have public health people getting interested in purpose, psychologists, philosophers have always has been interesting in purpose. So what do you think are the main benefits of an interdisciplinary research approach to purpose?

Well, first it's hard for me to imagine single disciplines solving this problem. In fact rather than interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary, I try to think in terms of a trans-disciplinary approach where we're not just gathering different disciplines together and saying, 'well let's work with each other.' Rather we think about a problem that we have, and we all kind of take off our disciplinary cloaks, and begin to working together on that problem. We start solving it, not as specific independent disciplines that might just be talking with each other, but rather trying to transcend our disciplines. And yes, as you say, we need philosophers, we need behavioral scientists, we need public health scientists, and medical scientists. With what I do we need software engineers, data scientists, and artists to help us as well.

9. One of the questions that people quite often have is about the difference between purpose in life and meaning in life.

I do believe that the two are different. We can talk about macro-level meaning, like is there meaning in the universe? Many people don't believe there's meaning in the universe. As astrophysicists are discovering that there are over 100 billion galaxies in our universe, and that each galaxy probably has over 100 billion suns, it makes us feel kind of small. The amount of time since the Big Bang -- more than 13 billion years -- and the length of our own lives makes us feel small and rather insignificant and possibly meaningless. Albert Camus wrote about this during World War II in the *Myth Of Sisyphus*. Basically, 'why don't we all just kill ourselves?' because the world is pretty meaningless. Sisyphus had to roll a boulder up a mountain every single day only to have it roll back down, but the very end of his book he essentially says, 'Sisyphus had a purpose in his life. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' So while there might not be meaning in the universe, you can still have a purpose in your life, you can still have a purpose and direction in life, and whether this purpose is meaningful in a big universal way, who really knows? At this brief point in history, if we can bring greater joy, and less suffering to people, I do believe we can get meaning. But I do think that meaning is different than having a purpose. A purpose to me is a goal set to the things we deeply value.

About Victor J. Strecher

Dr. Strecher has been a Professor in the University of Michigan School of Public Health since 1995, and is currently Director for Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship. He founded the Center for Health Communications Research, HealthMedia Inc., and more recently JOOL Health.

Author

AARON JARDEN

Wellbeing and Resilience Centre, South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute.

Flinders University

Aaron.Jarden@sahmri.com

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