



Meaning Making for High Achievers

BY MAGGIE KAPITAN

Creating meaning from our experiences is a fundamentally human trait: we are ever searching for understanding and significance in the chaos of life. We have a natural inclination to attach meaning to the good, the bad, and everything in between. It allows us to feel empowered and connected to a sense of purpose and direction.

When we miss our train and decide to make the most of the extended wait by calling a friend, or when we're placed on a new project we never expected to work on and decide to build new skills, we are engaging in meaning making. Far from being deterministic, meaning making fuels our autonomy to shape our own lives and identities. It occurs when we take what happens and ask ourselves, *What do I want this to mean for me? How do I want to respond to my experiences? How do I want this to impact my choices?*

Meaning Making and Well-Being

The construction of meaningfulness is a process of assigning purpose and depth to our lives over time and is integral to our overall well-being.¹

Meaningfulness allows us to look at the span of our lives so far, consider where we are presently, and integrate our understanding of these experiences into a future that's shaped by a sense of direction and values.²

This process is distinct from simply being happy in the moment: think of happiness as an emotion that comes and goes, whereas assigning meaning to our lives is an ongoing process. Sources of meaning vary greatly by person and culture and can be found in our relationships, sense of identity, pursuit of growth, and aspirations, to name a few.

Considerations for High Achievers

To earn the right to practice law in Colorado, you had to obtain an undergraduate degree, score well on the LSAT, get into law school, somehow survive law school, and pass the bar exam. Achieving this feat required not only intelligence, but also determination, persistence, and the drive to work toward this demanding goal.

Being intellectually gifted can bring you many beautiful things, but it also comes with

challenges. For example, research has found a potential association between intellectual giftedness and an increased risk of mood and anxiety disorders and certain physiological conditions, particularly those involving immune system responses and inflammation.³ This means it's especially important for lawyers to be attuned to their well-being.

Both achievement and intelligence are connected to how we think about, create meaning from, and understand the world around us. The way we engage in meaning making thus determines how well we can attune to our needs, wants, and well-being. On the surface, this may seem cut-and-dried: if you're good at thinking, you should be good at meaning making. However, this assumption relies on *how* you're engaging in the process.

Research has examined whether being intellectually gifted or a high achiever affects how one engages in meaning making and how that process relates to well-being. Findings suggest that high intelligence on its own was not enough to make an impact, but that achievement and meeting goals did.⁴ This suggests that being a skilled thinker doesn't directly influence living a meaningful life; rather, it's *how* that intelligence is channeled that contributes to a sense of meaningfulness.

For meaning making to contribute to well-being, it must connect us to a sense of purpose and help us fulfill our potential. Current psychological research uses the ancient philosophical term "eudaimonia" to capture the heart of this type of meaning making.⁵ This differs from a hedonic approach, which focuses on obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain.⁶ We can foster the eudaimonic approach to a meaningful life by being intentional about how we create understanding from experiences that are outside of our control, assessing our character growth, and engaging in activities that are connected to what gives us a sense of purpose.

The Shift Away From Why

Think of a situation that was outside of your control. Maybe it was a medical diagnosis, the loss of a loved one, or a layoff: What did you do to try to understand why? How long did you

keep asking yourself *why*, and how did it impact you? Did you notice yourself going back over the same questions again and again?

It's natural to want to understand why we experience situations that are beyond our control. We do this in an effort to regain control: *If I can just understand why this happened, maybe I can prevent myself from going through this pain or discomfort again.* This loop can almost convince us that if we just find the right answer, we'll feel better about what happened.

Attorneys are already naturals at this: knowing what questions to ask is a skill sharpened by the profession. Understanding why some events happen can certainly have value, to a point. But when we continually focus on the *why*, it can prevent us from processing our emotions and trap us in a cycle of rumination.

Meaning making doesn't require us to focus on why something happened. In fact, it's more beneficial to our overall well-being if we actively question what we want to make of our experiences, what meaning we want to attach to them, and how we want this to shape our choices moving forward. Of course, this doesn't mean we should turn everything that happens to us into a new action item; instead, it means we should allow ourselves to feel, be introspective, and reclaim what agency we can through the choices available to us.

Once we've shifted our thinking from *why* to *what*, we can begin reflecting on how we want to engage in meaning making regarding our sense of self and identity.

Fostering the Character Traits You Admire

A significant aspect of finding and creating meaning is having a sense of purpose. We must ask ourselves who we are, how our lives have shaped us, and if this matches who we want to continue to be. This self-reflection must be rooted in self-compassion: we cannot treat this as an examination of all the ways we're lacking and create a goal of some perfect, unattainable version of ourselves. It's far more productive to consider how we want to nourish the aspects of ourselves that we love and admire.

In the study examining intellectually gifted individuals and high achievers, self-compassion was a significant predictor of participants' ability

to engage in meaning making that improved their well-being.⁷ Wanting to grow as a person and working toward personally meaningful goals can contribute to self-compassion and meaningfulness in our lives, whereas focusing on our perceived inadequacies contributes to less meaningfulness and less self-compassion.⁸

Consider what this might look like in practice: You find out you didn't get a job you were really hoping for. Instead of thinking about what went wrong, you let yourself feel that disappointment and then get curious about what you want to see from yourself moving forward. You start asking yourself questions like, *How do I want to respond to disappointment? What does this feeling tell me about what I want for myself going forward? Where do I want to focus my time and energy now?*

Engage in What Feeds Your Sense of Purpose

Some people find a sense of purpose in their careers. They may choose a career path that allows them to help people who are going through a

difficult time. Others find meaning in learning new skills. They may periodically sign up for classes and workshops. Think about what gives you a sense of purpose. It could be creating, learning, helping, teaching, exploring, or some other endeavor. Then, be intentional about how you make time for it in your everyday life. This type of fulfillment is integral to your psychological well-being.⁹

Conclusion

A meaningful life is a life created. It happens when we actively choose how we want to be shaped by our experiences, how we create the type of person we want to be, and how that is reflected in our time and choices. Deciding to create truths for ourselves can foster empowerment and growth.

As intelligent, high-achieving attorneys, you already know how to think deeply, analyze complex problems, and work toward achieving your goals. The opportunity is to channel your exceptional thinking skills into creating a life that's meaningful to you. 

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NOTES

1. Baumeister et al., "Some Key Differences Between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life," 8(6) *J. of Positive Psych.* 505 (Aug. 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.830764>.
2. *Id.*
3. Karpinski et al., "High Intelligence: A Risk Factor for Psychological and Physiological Overexcitabilities," 66 *Intelligence* 8 (Jan./Feb. 2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2017.09.001>.
4. Schnell et al., "Brilliant: But What For? Meaning and Subjective Well-Being in the Lives of Intellectually Gifted and Academically High-Achieving Adults," 18 *J. Happiness Stud.* 1459 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9783-4>.
5. Steger et al., "Being Good by Doing Good: Daily Eudaimonic Activity and Well-Being," 42(1) *J. of Rsch. in Personality* 22 (Feb. 2008). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2007.03.004>.
6. *Id.*
7. Schnell, *supra* note 4.
8. Suh et al., "What Predicts Meaning in Life? The Role of Perfectionistic Personality and Self-Compassion," 35(2) *J. of Constructivist Psych.* 719 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2020.1865854>.
9. Steger, *supra* note 5.