

# WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



## Finding meaning in meaning with Emily Esfahani Smith

**Jen Fisher (Jen):** Hey, this is Jen. Before we get started with today's show, I have a quick ask of you. I want to hear from you. If the show has helped you in any way, please take a couple of minutes to rate and review the show, let us know what you think, let us know what has helped you, let us know what you want more of, what you want less of, but just take a couple of minutes to do that, it would mean a ton to me and it will help us get better and better in the future. I really do want to hear from you.

Have you ever been asked the question, what do you want out of life? And did you answer with, "I just want to be happy." Happiness is something we are all striving for and why shouldn't we be? It is the ultimate positive emotion. But is our pursuit of happiness misguided? Is it something we will always chase, but never truly achieve? Is there something else out there that can provide us with greater fulfillment? The answer may lie in finding and cultivating meaning.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, Chief Well-Being Office for Deloitte and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

I'm here with Emily Esfahani Smith, a writer and speaker who draws on psychology, philosophy, and literature to help us all better understand the human experience. Why we are the way we are and how we can flourish with grace and meaning in a world that is also suffering.

**Emily Esfahani Smith (Emily):** So, I was in graduate school back in 2012, studying positive psychology, which is the science of human well-being and what I learned there really surprised me in terms of some of the research around what well-being consists of, what a good life constitutes. And one of the things that came up is that people who pursue happiness and chase it the way that our culture encourages us to do, can actually end up feeling unhappy and when I learned that, it really surprised me. But then as I looked around in our culture, I saw that there were so many messages and signals that we get all the time about how we should be happy and how happiness is to be all end of life and that if we pursue happiness, there are all these ways our lives will be better. So there is this real push in our culture and the media to kind of pursue happiness and yet the research was telling a different story and there was this whole new body of research, it was new at that time, that

was growing up around meaning and how meaning is this other path to well-being. And this is actually an idea that is thousands of years old going back to ancient philosophy that to lead a good life, there is kind of these two paths; one is the path of happiness and positive emotions and pleasure; the other is the path of meaning or virtue or kind of living your potential. These pursuits that are hard and don't necessarily make us happy as we are pursuing them but give us this deeper sense of well-being along the way. So, the research on meaning showed that not only is it a deeper form of well-being, while happiness comes and goes, meaning is something that lasts. But also that when you look across the last few decades, one of the most surprising features is that there all these kind of objective ways that life is getting better and yet at the same time, more people are depressed. They are lonely, anxious, suicide rates are increasing, they have been increasing in the United States and recently reached a 30 year high actually. So, when we started to look at all of that, what they find is that what predicts this rising tide of misery isn't a lack of happiness in people's lives, but lack of meaning. And so they have just made me realize, meaning is what we should be focusing on even though our culture is pushing us so much towards happiness.

**Jen:** So, what actually creates meaning in someone's life.

**Emily:** So, that was my next question and I was curious, is it something that everyone has to find on their own? They have to find their own meaning of life or are there certain things that we each can kind of lean onto make our lives more meaningful? And so doing the research and to interview people that I did, I started seeing these patterns and specifically there are these four themes that came up again and again as pathways or pillars of a meaningful life and these four things where people mentioned in one way or another as they told me about what makes their lives meaningful.

The first one is belonging, so having a sense of belonging or being in relationships or part of communities where you are valued for who you are intrinsically and where you value others for who they are. The second is purpose and that's about having some kind of principle or long-term goal that orients your life and moves you into the future and it can be big or small like being a good person as a purpose, raising children as a purpose. The third is transcendence or these moments of awe and wonder where you are kind of lifted above the hustle and bustle of daily life and feel connected to something much bigger. And the fourth is storytelling and what I mean by storytelling is the story that you tell yourself about yourself, about how you became the person that you are today.

**Jen:** Well, I would love to dig into purpose a little bit, but I am going to actually start with storytelling because I would love to learn a little bit more about your story, because I think that your story is part of the reason why you chose this path and why you started to look at meaning and purpose and happiness in the first place, am I right?

**Emily:** Yeah, that is exactly why and I guess I should have mentioned that earlier when you were asking me about happiness and meaning, but I think part of why those ideas that I was encountering in grad school about the difference between happiness and meaning resonated so strongly with me is because they did bring to mind experiences that reach back to my childhood where I grew up living in a Sufi meeting house. Some of those who might know, Sufism is a spiritual practice, a spiritual path that is associated with Islam, the whirling dervishes where Sufi's, the poet Rumi was a Sufi and so it's this kind of mystical path and living in the meeting house was a lot like what I imagined living in a Buddhist

sangha would be like. So twice a week, we had these spiritual seekers, these dervishes come to our home where on one floor of our home there was this big room that there were no seats or anything, there were just cushions on the floor. And people would sit on the ground and they would meditate for several hours and Sufism is one of the places where it really flowered historically. It was in Iran and that is where my family is from, so there were a lot of kind of Persians there and a lot of people who had really gone through a kind of difficult life of events. So in Iran after the Islamic revolution, Sufis became persecuted. They became one of the groups that were persecuted because in many places in the Middle East where there is kind of a more radical version of Islam lived out, Sufism is considered heretical. So in certain places even you could be put to death for being a Sufi. So we had a lot of Sufis who were refugees from the middle east, others were westerners, Americans, and Canadians who had just kind of been beaten up by life in different ways and yet they all found comfort in this spiritual practice that brought them peace. But that also demanded a lot of them.

So part of Sufism is of course meditating, which anyone who has done that knows it's really hard to kind of do this work just to turn down the volume of ego, the small self to connect to something bigger. Loving kindness is the central part of Sufism the way it is with most religions and spiritual practices, service, things like that. And so all of it was in the service of leading a meaningful life and the way that they found meaning in life was by doing these practices and rituals that brought them closer to that higher thing where there was meditating or prayer or fasting or service or what not. So, I grew up with people who had meaning very much at the center of their life story, at the center of their own lives.

Eventually though, we moved out of the Sufi meeting house, left Montreal, and came to the United States where I led basically a much more normal kind of life. I was going to middle school and high school and all of a sudden the things that mattered were getting good grades and being successful and then of course this whole pressure to be happy and to kind of show a happy face to the world. And in the midst of that, I really began to wonder what is it that makes our lives meaningful in a society that is more secular and I think for a lot of people there that is the question, you know, maybe you grew up with some kind of spiritual or religious practice in childhood, but then you leave home and you are kind of on your own and you have to figure these things out for yourself. You now, what is my purpose, what does give my life meaning, and it's really important to figure these things out? Because the psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, the holocaust survivor said that human beings have a need for meaning that's as strong and important and vital to our psychological and emotional health as food, water, and shelter are to our physical health. And that without meaning we suffer and all these ways that I mentioned earlier. We get depressed, some people commit suicide, there is more anxiety, and more feelings of disconnection, so it seemed to me in those years as I was kind of moving through high school and college and then after that this question of meaning is really the central question of our lives today. When so many of the traditional sources of meaning have fallen away, how can we find meaning? That is what led me to study in positive psychology in graduate school and then now I am actually about to begin, in just a couple of weeks, a doctoral program in psychology too.

**Jen:** I talk a lot about purpose and I get a lot of questions about purpose. Probably not dissimilar to questions around meaning. But how do I discover my purpose? Is it something that is inherently there that I should just know? Is it something big, is it something small, does it change over time or over my life? If I am not able to live my purpose or bring my purpose to work with me, how else can I give to my purpose or bring my purpose through in the work that I do? So can you talk a little bit more about that?

**Emily:** Absolutely. So, psychologists define purpose as a goal or a principle that organizes your life, that involves making a contribution to the world and that is valued or meaningful to you in some ways. So it's meaningful to you, meaningful to the world and it kind of helps you makes sense of all of the things that you are doing. So, it endows the ordinary events of day-to-day life with meaning and there is this kind of sense in our culture, a myth I would say, that you have to kind of find your Purpose in order to have Purpose in your life and that Purpose is something that you find that you have to cling on as quest and search and search and search, turn over enough rocks. And eventually, there it is. There is a purpose, once you find, you are set for the rest of your life and that is not what I found when I looked at the research. And what I interviewed people about their own lives about what gives them purpose, what I found was actually purpose is more of a mindset or an attitude that you bring to life. You live with purpose, you don't find your purpose. And some people are really good at kind of seeing the big picture of their own life or of their work and connecting what they do to that big picture. So, for example, I mentioned earlier like for some people being a good person is a purpose or creating a sense of home for your family or being a parent and so just to take the example of being a parent, there is so much drudgery involved. Whether it's changing diapers or disciplining your children or running them from this practice to that event and back again and if you just kind of see it as drudgery, that is going to be what it feels like, but people who actually see parenting as a purpose or even one of their callings in life, all of those things that feel like tedious activities or drudgery, those things become infused with meaning because they are in the service of this greater purpose of raising a child to kind of be a good human being and make their way out into the world and it's the same with work. Some people kind of get caught up in the day-to-day tasks that don't seem very significant or they are kind of overwhelmed with how much work they have to do that's so stressful, but when you kind of step back and take the larger perspective of the bigger thing that your work is doing and all work, I would argue, does feel some kind of need that's why it exists. When you connect what you are doing to that larger thing, the work becomes more meaningful to you and you kind of become more connected to the purpose in your work.

**Jen:** You talked a little bit about this especially in your own experience moving to the United States, but why is our society so focused on happiness? And then I guess can you also, can you have happiness in meaning or is it one or the other? Talk a little bit about that.

**Emily:** Yeah, definitely. So, I will start with the last question and definitely you can have both. So, I remember I looked at one dataset that a researcher shared with me and she was examining whether people have both meaning and happiness or just one or just the other and what she found is that, very roughly speaking, about a quarter of the people she surveyed had both happiness and meaning in their lives. A quarter had happiness, but less meaning. A quarter had meaning, but either no or less happiness. And then a quarter were really low on both meaning and happiness. So, you can definitely have both and I think it is important to remember to, I am not saying that happiness is terrible that we shouldn't care about happiness. Obviously it's a wonderful kind of experience to be happy and meaning can bring happiness and a lot of the things that are meaningful to us do give joy as well, whether it's accomplishing a goal or being in nature as a portal to transcendence, going on a walk, being with your kids; there are a lot of places where meaning and happiness overlap in our lives. But I think where we get things wrong, to go back to your earlier questions, is when we make happiness the end goal itself. So when happiness becomes like the singular pursuit, then what the soul wants, Victor Frankl said, is meaning. And when you kind of feed it happiness instead, it's kind of like feeding yourself snickers bars when you are really hungry for like a well-balanced meal. It's just, it doesn't go deep enough when you pursue happiness alone, it kind of leads people into pursuing this kind of superficial cheap simple

happiness that feels good in the moment, but then goes away. Whereas if you pursue meaning, if that is the end goal, then you get the meaning that your kind of inner life is yearning for, but then this deeper kind of happiness comes as well. So, you are not just kind of crashing from the momentary high. And I think the reason why our culture is so focused on happiness, this isn't anything new, this has kind of been part of the story of western culture for hundreds of years, but it really intensified in the last couple of hundred, kind of from the 1800s onward when at that point, there was this kind of philosophical revolution and how people understood happiness before happiness was understood very much in terms of meaning. There was kind of these two things that went together, happiness and meaning. A couple of hundred years ago happiness become much more defined in terms of maximizing positive emotions, minimizing negative emotions, and I think the reason why this caught on is because it's easier to actually do that day-to-day. You can do things that kind of maximize your positive emotions and minimize your negative ones to kind of make yourself happy, kind of give you a spritz, one spritz after another to carry you through the day. Happiness itself is just a word that people kind of latch onto, people know immediately, they have a sense that is what they want in life, they see the big yellow smiley face. It's just, it's easier to kind of comprehend, it's easier to program into your life. And meaning is a more abstract concept and requires more work. You are kind of constantly working towards the things that are meaningful to you, towards building a meaningful life.

**Jen:** So, because I often hear that happiness is fleeting or happiness happens in moments, it's not kind of a constant state that you are in, would you say that that's true?

**Emily:** I think that's true. I mean, I think that's what the research bears out that it's like all emotions. It comes and goes and that is true of sadness and that is true of joy and feelings of peacefulness as well. I certainly think some people kind of go through life with a stable set line of happiness that's higher than other people. So maybe they feel more content through their life than other people do. But, like when we think about happiness, which many psychologists and philosophers defined as a positive mental and emotional state of feeling good, state of positive emotions, that is something that is by definition, fleeting.

**Jen:** You have mentioned Victor Frankl a couple of times and I am a big fan of his and you have talked about the importance of having meaning in order to help protect our emotional and mental well-being. So how does this impact us in the way we deal with crisis, and perhaps certainly relevant in Victor Frankl's life and probably more relevant for all of us given what we are going through right now with the global pandemic. Although I hate to kind of compare those two things or I am not comparing them at all quite frankly, because totally different, but really how does having meaning help us deal with crisis?

**Emily:** No, it's such a great question and when I mentioned in grad school that I kind of became fascinated by this topic of meaning, it really was from encountering the work of Victor Frankl and just to kind of briefly go into his story a little bit. So, he of course was a holocaust survivor, he was a Jewish psychiatrist, living in Vienna when the Nazis came to power and I think in 1941 and 1942, he and his family were taken to a concentration camp and he survived of course. But his family including his wife and his parents all died, and in the camp, Frankl kind of worked as an unofficial counselor to many of the inmates there. It was a continuation of his work before he was interned at the camps where he was working as a psychologist and a psychiatrist and often times with suicidal patients. So, in the camps again, he is surrounded by people in crisis and what he says is that some of these people

gave up on life basically. They have lost their freedom, they have lost all their possessions and home, some of them had to watch their children or family members walk into the gas chambers and these people very understandably decided that they gave up hope. They decided there was nothing left to live for and these people who lost meaning, Frankl said there is something about them that just kind of gave up on life altogether, but there was other people who took a different attitude, who continued to believe their lives were meaningful even in this horrendous nightmarish situation and those people Frankl said were ultimately more resilient to suffering and even more and I am quoting him here "apt to survive", which is to say that everyone is going through the same experience and some people die of starvation and sickness and other people don't. And so one of the things that set those who lived apart from those who died, he said, was the fact that they held onto meaning and this idea is kind of controversial to some people, but it is blown out and in the imperial research that's been done in recent years, so many years after Frankl's experiences that show that people who have a sense of meaning in life do experience a greater longevity and more resilience. And all these ways Frankl was talking about and he tells a story of a couple of suicidal inmates whom he counseled in the camps and both of them of course given up on the idea that their lives were worth living and for both of them Frankl said, changing their minds about that was a matter of getting them to see that there was still something expected of them in the future. So, reconnecting them to a sense of purpose was what was critical, and for one of them, he was a scientist and it was a series of books that he had been working on before he was imprisoned and the prospect of continuing that work restored in him, the sense of purpose and a will to live. And for the other who was a parent and whose son was living elsewhere in Europe in refuge with another family, it was a prospect of reuniting with his son. So, once these men saw that their lives still had purpose, they had hoped they developed, which Frankl calls an attitude of tragic optimism and what he defines that as is his ability to continue to believe life is meaningful and that there is hope despite all the suffering and loss and grief in life.

**Jen:** So, in your own words, kind of translate that into what we are going through today with this global pandemic and all of the uncertainty and life as we knew it, likely forever changed and how do we continue to move forward in a hopeful and meaningful way?

**Emily:** Yeah, that certainly is the question for millions of people today and I think the takeaway from Frankl's story is that meaning can give us an anchor in times of crisis and when things feel so uncertain. We can't control a great deal of what's happening around us, but we can control how we respond to it, how we make sense of it, and what we do as a response to it. So, Frankl said that even in the concentration camp, there were people who went around and shared their last scrap of bread with other inmates in the camp and that there weren't many of them, but the fact that there were any of them was proof of the last of all human freedom, which is the freedom to choose your own way of interpreting what's going on in your life. And I think about that all the time today, which is that we can look at what's happening and decide everything is so uncertain, everything is hopeless, I don't know what's going to happen or you can look at like and say, a lot of those things are true that things are uncertain. I don't know what is going to happen in a year or two years or whatever, but I still have control over what I do, how I see the world, there is still hope.

People are out there doing good in the world still even though there is a lot of uncertainty and then opportunities I think to turn in and learn about ourselves and about the world from this crisis and I think that is always a form of redemption that is available to us as we are going through crisis is tuning into how we could possibly be growing as a result of what's happening and learning both about ourselves, about the people we love, and about the

world that we are living in. So, finding tragic optimism is really just about finding that light that can sustain you and light the way through all this darkness and I think remembering that these experiences are crucibles through which we can grow and become wiser and deeper and maybe have more clarity on where our path lies afterwards, that is a form of redemption, a form of hope that we can hold onto.

**Jen:** Can you talk to me a little bit about awe and transcendence, I think I remember you saying something about looking up at the night sky and using that to find a moment of awe and that has been something that has been really powerful for me actually over the past several months.

**Emily:** Actually, I just want to add something, there is this kind of narrative in our culture that when people go through crisis or experience adversity or trauma that those experiences can really break them and we hear so much about posttraumatic stress disorder. But it turns out that actually far more people, in fact the majority of people who go through these kind of crucible experiences of adversity experience what's called posttraumatic growth. So, most of us will grow through the adversities that we experience including this adversity and there are several ways in which researchers find that people grow including deepening our relationships, having more clarity on our life purpose, having more appreciation for life, deepening our spiritual path. So, even though things are really hard, there are these opportunities to find meaning through the growth that we are, many of us will potentially experience. So, I just wanted to say that, when it comes to awe and transcendence, these are really powerful experiences of meaning and they are meaningful for two reasons.

One, the experience themselves are meaningful. They kind of lock us into the present moment and in that experience of feeling awe beneath the night sky, looking up at the stars for example or being in the woods or encountering beauty of some kind, whether it's a work of art or piece of music, giving birth, so many ways that we can experience this, so many religious ways as well, meditation, prayer, liturgy, when we have these experiences, we kind of come into the present moment and our anxieties and worries, all of these aspects of what philosophers and religious leaders call the small self, melt away as we come into contact with something much bigger than ourselves, whether it's God or families or nature or universal consciousness. There is this connection to something almost cosmic and that what happens then is there is this kind of shift that happens within us. We feel tiny in the midst of the grandness of whatever we are connecting to and this is where the awe comes from. It's awe-inspiring to kind of recognize our own tininess in this great majestic world and even though we feel so small and as scary as that can be, it also is reassuring because we have realized that we are one part of something much bigger.

So this great mixture that's out there, we are a part of it and that is reassuring and so that is why these experiences are intrinsically meaningful, but then they also after we have them, they can reorder peoples values in ways that make their lives more meaningful as well. So, for example, I talk about this study and I write about in my book of undergraduates at the University of California at Berkley who were told to go out and look up at these 200 feet tall eucalyptus trees on campus, there was this kind of beautiful grove of eucalyptus trees on campus if you visit, it's really worth seeing and so the undergrads were told to look up at those trees just for a minute and in that minute, they experience awe. They had a transcendence experience, and afterwards when they were put in the situation where they could help somebody, they not only were more likely to help that

person than people in the control group, but they actually spent more time helping that person too. So, these experiences kind of take us out of our small self with our selfish kind of concerns and self-oriented thinking and they get us focused on something outside of ourselves and they shift our values in that way so that we can live in more meaningful ways.

**Jen:** So, I think I have one final question for you and it's a tactical question, are there things that our listeners can do or things that you recommend to help people really build day-to-day habits or day-to-day things we can do to build meaning into our lives or to create meaning in our lives?

**Emily:** Definitely. So, I think we were just talking about awe and transcendence and I think that we can make time in our days for experiences of awe and transcendence and it doesn't have to be a whole lot of time. Like, in that study, the students looked up at those trees just for a minute. So, if you have 5 minutes where you can listen to a piece of music that just takes your breath away or meditate or be outside in your yard or in the woods without your phone where you are really just focusing on the world outside of your own head, these moments will come into stillness. If you can make time for those every day and just a few minutes, it can really be powerful, really be centering, and of course if you have more than a few minutes that's even better, but starting with just a few minutes is really kind of powerful and effective as well.

So, I would say try to make a habit of transcendence and awe in some way in your life. The other thing I will say is, I will give an example for each one, so that's transcendence. For Purpose, try to connect whatever it is you are doing to the bigger picture, so I talked about parenting and the tediousness that can kind of come with the parenting role, connecting into the bigger picture of raising children, but you know, in your work as well. I remember one of the people I interviewed who was part of a bigger study on meaning at work. She was a hospital cleaner and she said to me, my job isn't cleaning bed pants and mopping the floor, it's healing sick people. So, she took what she did and she connected it to the bigger picture. So that's kind of a mindset shift for belonging. One of the things with belonging that's really interesting is that you can experience this pillar of meaning in any of your relationships, including relationships with strangers and colleagues. It's not just a feature of our closest relationships to loved ones and friends. But you can experience it with any one just by tuning into one another by, when you are with someone whether it's the clerk at the grocery store or colleague at work, really listening to them, making eye contact, being engaged with them and not distracted by your phone or whatever else has been distracting you, for that moment of connection. Researchers have called this many different things. They call it attunement, they call it a micro connection. I have seen researches even describe this as a moment of love when two people kind of come onto the same wavelength even just for a minute or turning towards each other and what happens is there is this kind of really vital connection where they both leave that encounter feeling seen by the other, feeling heard by the other, feeling truly valued. So, we all have the power to kind of choose that in these small moments day-to-day. Finally, with storytelling, I want to kind of give an example that's relevant to this moment of history right now, which is we are all going through this pandemic and the incredible amount of loss that's it's born in our lives, whether it's loss of life of loved ones or loss of routine, loss of jobs, whatever, as we kind of move through this time in our lives, I would encourage people to think about themselves in 10-20 years down the line reflecting back on this experience and think about what is the story that 10-20 years down the line you want to tell about this time in your life as you move through this kind of global crisis? Is it a story of, I used this as an opportunity to grow, to learn new



things, to connect with people in new ways or is it a story of I spent my free time binge watching Netflix? You want to make sure that the story you are telling yourself in 10 or 20 years is one that you will be at peace with and feel good about and so if you are living a life right now, that is not kind of producing a story that way, I would encourage you to think really hard about what story you want to live and to change your behaviors to come into accordance with that story.

**Jen:** I think my story is going to be a combination of both because I have done a bit of each, if I am completely honest.

**Emily:** I think that's okay there. You just have to be 24x7 meaning making all the time for happiness.

**Jen:** I love it. Well, thank you so much Emily. There was so much richness in here and so much to digest and take away that I know I will be thinking about and implementing for days and months to come. So, thank you again for being on the show.

**Emily:** Thanks Jen. It's great to be with you.

I am so grateful Emily could be here with us today to share her insights on the power of meaning. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword *WorkWell* to hear more and if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter @jenfish23. We are always open to your recommendations and feedback and of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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