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# What matters for our sense of purpose?

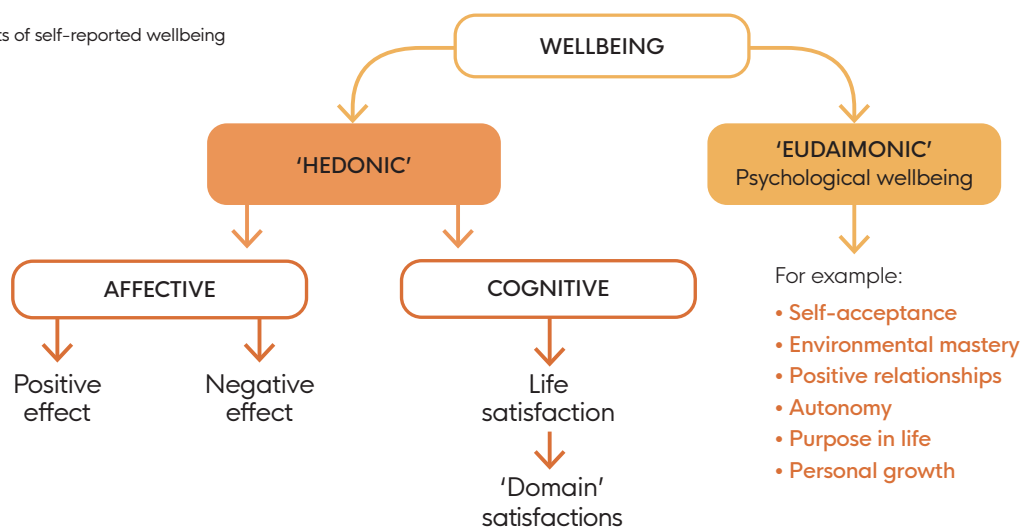
## Meaning and purpose as a core aspect of wellbeing

Wellbeing is defined by the Office for National Statistics as how we are doing, as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future.

Personal wellbeing is a particularly important dimension of overall wellbeing. It captures individual level factors, which can be measured through a series of [subjective questions](#) that ask how we feel about ourselves and our lives.

- "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?"
- "Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?"
- "Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?"
- **"Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?"**

Fig1. Components of self-reported wellbeing



Instead of focussing on how satisfied we are with our life — as the majority of research does — this analysis looks at how worthwhile people felt the things they do in life are.

Measuring life satisfaction gives a common catch-all indicator for self-reported wellbeing. Asking about sense of purpose — or sense of worthwhile — is an important eudaimonic aspect of wellbeing, that is independent from feelings and emotions of pleasure or pain.

This matters because wellbeing goes beyond the pleasant emotions and absence of ill-health; we want to perceive our lives as having value, with a sense of meaning and fulfilment.



## SUMMARY

Our analysis finds that it's what we do, and our associated health and ability to do it, that matters for our sense of purpose. This is different from our satisfaction with life overall which is more influenced by the conditions around us and what we have.

Having a job that is meaningful is clearly important for our sense of purpose, but so is what we do outside of work - with leisure satisfaction also associated with a sense of purpose.

Other things the evidence finds that we can do to support our sense of worthwhile:

- Spending leisure time outdoors
- Carrying out moderate to vigorous physical activity at least weekly
- Engagement in cultural activities and membership of organisations
- Social prescribed activities

A wellbeing approach that supports people's sense of purpose, would not only promote good and meaningful jobs, ensuring that the conditions in these jobs can also support other aspects of people's wellbeing, but also provide the access and means for people to engage in purposeful home and leisure activities, recognising the value and importance of this time.



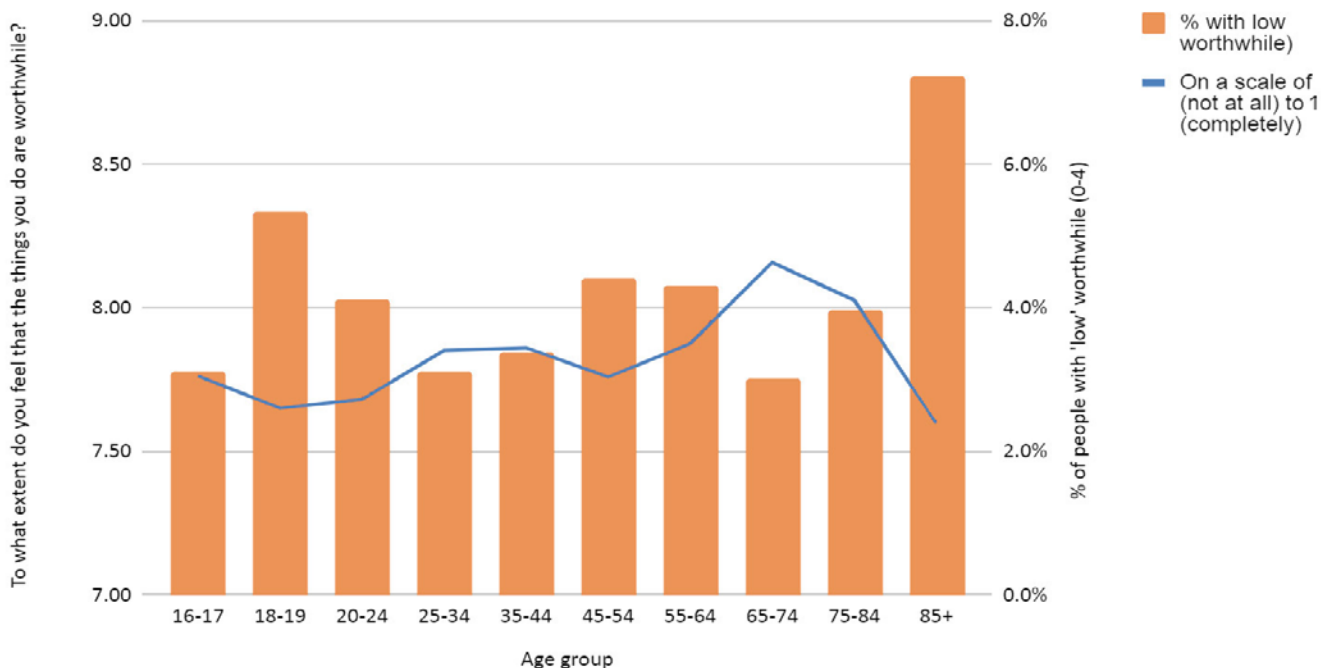
### How are we doing in the UK? Do we feel that the things we do in life are worthwhile?

[Descriptive statistics based on APS data 2019 - 2020]

In the UK, on average people have a high sense that the things that they do are worthwhile, answering 7.86 on a scale of 0 (not at all)-10 (completely). 3.8% of adults in the UK answered between 0 and 4, representing approximately 2 million people who have a low sense of worthwhile.

- Women have a higher sense of worthwhile than men.
- Married or cohabiting people have a higher sense than single people.
- On average, people in their late 60s and early 70s have the highest sense of worthwhile and the smallest proportion of people with low worthwhile, this is consistent with where we see satisfaction with life and happiness scores at their highest.
- Conversely, people over the age of 85 had the lowest sense of worthwhile, with more than 7% with low scores, but young people aged 18 - 24 also had lower levels of worthwhile than older adults.

Figure 2: To what extent do you feel that the things you do in life are worthwhile, by age group. Average on a scale of 0-10 and % of people scoring 4 or below for each age group.










## WHAT MATTERS FOR OUR SENSE OF PURPOSE?

The table below presents associations between variables based on existing published studies and new quantitative analysis. In most cases, we cannot infer causality from this analysis. Where relevant, the table compares the association between the variable and the worthwhile question, with the evaluative 'Life Satisfaction' (LS) question.

Table 1: Independent associations with feeling that 'the things you do in life are worthwhile', when controlling for other variables

| Theme/<br>determinant   | What the evidence says:<br>Higher worthwhile if   | Details  | How does this compare with 'Relationship<br>with Life Satisfaction'?   |
|---|---|--|--|
| Personal characteristics<br>   | Younger/older than 45-55.   | Analysis finds a U shaped relationship.  | Consistent, but weaker for worthwhile. Retirees have higher life satisfaction, but not worthwhile.                               |
|   | Female  | Females consistently higher than males.  | Consistent with life satisfaction, but females also have higher anxiety.   |
|   | White (ethnicity)   | Lower worthwhile for many non-white groups, particularly mixed ethnicity, Black/African/Caribbean/Black British and Pakistani.   | Mostly consistent. Except for Bangladeshi group, with higher life satisfaction, but not worthwhile.                              |
|   | Belonging to a religion   | Strong association.  | Consistent, but stronger for worthwhile  |
|   | Non-migrant   | Small association.   | While migrants have a marginally lower sense of worthwhile, they also have higher life sat. and lower anxiety than non-migrants. |
| Where we live<br>              | Living in a rural area  | Tentative evidence.  | Consistent.  |
|   | Not living in an area of deprivation.   |  | Consistent.  |
|   | High neighbourhood satisfaction and positive emotional response to the neighbourhood        |  | Consistent.  |
| Health<br>                   | In good health  | Reporting good health associated with higher worthwhile. Most important explanatory variable in quantitative analysis.   | Consistent but weaker for worthwhile.  |
|   | Without a disability  | particularly problematic for men, younger people, ethnic minorities, people without a partner, and people with lower SES.  | Consistent, but weaker for worthwhile.   |
|   | Without anxiety/depression  |  | Consistent, but weaker for worthwhile  |
|   | Higher fruit and veg consumption  |  | n/a  |
|   | Consuming some alcohol  | Compared with not drinking at all.   | Consistent.  |
|   | Without chronic pain, impaired basic activities, poor sleep quality, and cholesterol levels |  | n/a  |
| Money<br>                    | Higher income and expenditure   | Wealth in contrast was not important for worthwhile.   | Consistent but weaker for worthwhile   |
|   | Owning property   | Particularly low for those renting from social landlords.  | Consistent. Anxiety higher from those renting from private landlords.  |
| Family and relationships<br> | Married or cohabiting   | The number of adults in the household is also positively associated with sense of worthwhile. So is living with a partner and living with other family. Living alone was associated with a reduction in sense of worthwhile, and living in a care home is also negatively associated with sense of worthwhile. | Consistent but weaker for worthwhile.  |
|   | Having non-adult children in the home   | It is not clear if the number of children is important.  | Consistent, but stronger for worthwhile.   |
|   | Satisfaction with personal relationships  |  | Consistent   |
|   | Absence of loneliness, social isolation and perceived lack of social support                |  | Consistent   |



The work that we do, paid or unpaid, can help to provide purpose and meaning to our lives. Our analysis finds that people in employment have a stronger sense that the things that they do are worthwhile, compared with those that are unemployed, economically inactive or unable to work because they are sick or disabled.

**Being in work is more important for our sense of purpose than it is for our overall life satisfaction. It is the second most important factor, after how we feel about our health.**

It's not just our employment status that matters. The type of work we do and it's quality matters too. Working from home and feeling secure in our work, can also strengthen our sense of worthwhile and also our life satisfaction.

Our analysis also finds that self-employment, working in smaller organisations and working part-time, may be good for our sense of worthwhile, but does not have the same positive effect on life satisfaction.

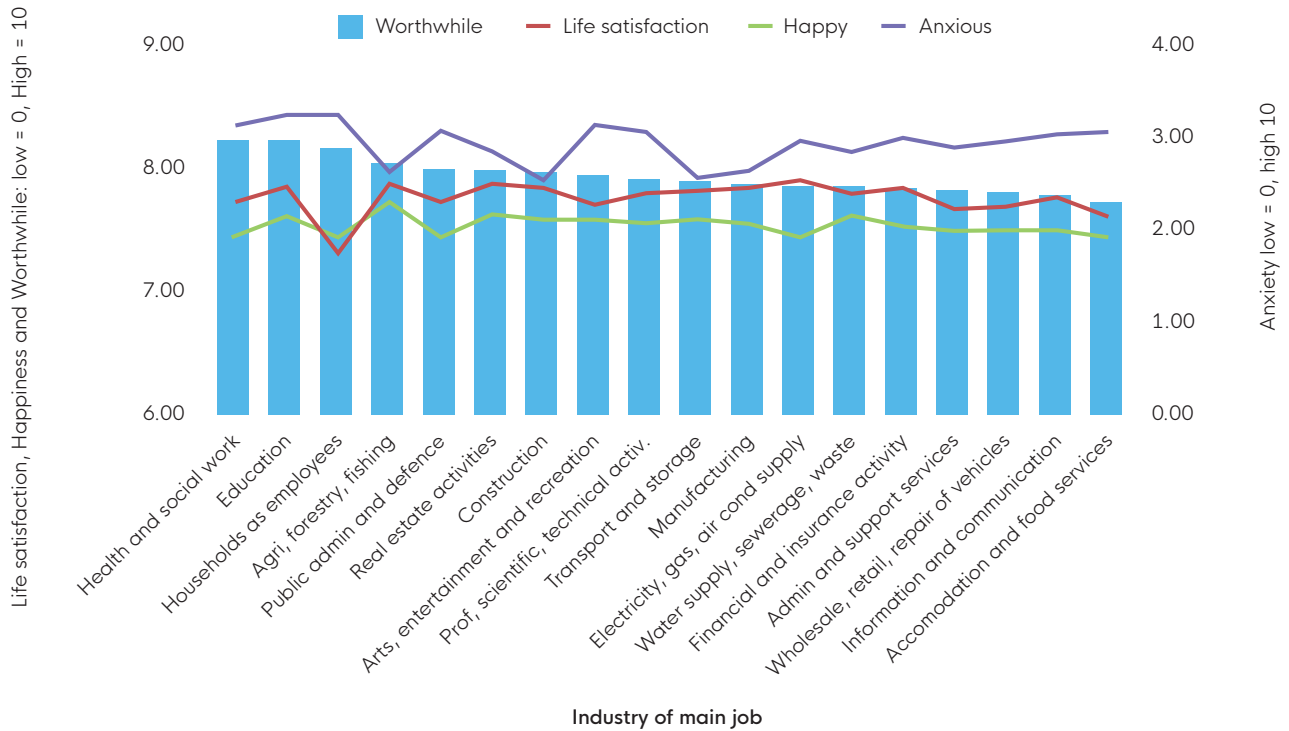
The amount of hours we work affects our wellbeing too. For life satisfaction, there is a U-shaped relationship, where those working either far fewer or far more hours than the average have lower life satisfaction. This pattern does not appear for worthwhile though. Working fewer hours can be positive or negative for people depending on their work and preferences as people defined as working part time have a higher sense of worthwhile; while people that answer that they are under-employed and wish to work more hours have a lower sense, although part-time workers also report higher anxiety.

### Work related factors that improve sense of worthwhile and associated relationship with life satisfaction:

| GOOD FOR WELLBEING  |  |
|---|--|
| More important for SENSE OF PURPOSE   | More important for LIFE SATISFACTION   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>In employment</b></li> <li>• <b>Job satisfaction</b></li> <li>• <b>Volunteering</b></li> <li>• <b>Working from home</b> (women)</li> <li>• <b>Managerial or professional role</b></li> <li>• <b>Being a student</b> (but also higher anxiety)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Job security</b></li> <li>• <b>Not underemployed</b></li> <li>• <b>Longer working at current employer</b></li> </ul> |
| Important for SENSE OF PURPOSE but not necessarily life satisfaction  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Self employment</b> - Not associated with Life Satisfaction</li> <li>• <b>Smaller organisation</b> (50 employees or less) - Not associated with Life Satisfaction</li> <li>• <b>Working part time</b> - Not associated with Life Satisfaction</li> <li>• <b>Working in the public or third sector</b> (rather than private) , particularly for men in the third sector - Working in the public sector not positively associated with Life Satisfaction and working in the third sector is negatively associated with life satisfaction</li> <li>• <b>Looking after the home</b> as main occupation - Higher sense of worthwhile, but lower life satisfaction</li> </ul> |  |

The industry that we work in explains the largest variance in the sense of worthwhile for those in employment. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to big changes in working practices, as well as what have been very publicly appreciated as key or critical jobs, people working in health and social work report the highest average levels of worthwhile, with people in accommodation and food services the lowest. Figure 2 plots the average levels of life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety for the different industries, which finds that for some of the industries where people feel the most purpose, there may be a trade-off between this sense of purpose and other aspects of our wellbeing. For example, people that list their own households as employers, have relatively high worthwhile while having above average anxiety and lower life satisfaction and happiness.

Figure 3: Worthwhile, Life Satisfaction, Happy and Anxious



## THE ROLE OF GARDENS

Outside of our main work, our analysis also finds for example that having access to a private garden was not associated with higher sense of worthwhile but it was significant for life satisfaction. However, using that garden - by sitting in and relaxing in it and/or gardening, were associated with sense of worthwhile but not significantly with life satisfaction. Beyond our own private gardens and looking at the outdoors more generally, further evidence finds it is only the use of green space which leads to increased wellbeing, and show that there is no, or only a negligible effect of existence.

### METHOD

#### Review of existing studies and new data analysis

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing commissioned the Centre for Thriving Places to bring together existing evidence and data on the determinants of a sense of purpose. This included:

1. A rapid review of existing literature that identified determinants of the worthwhile question. 27 studies were included. Most of the evidence was based on cross sectional data analysis and therefore provides evidence on associations between variables, rather than causality. Research into sense of worthwhile is just beginning, with over half of the studies published in 2019 and 2020 alone.
2. Inclusion of 8 evaluations identified by the Centre's [evaluation](#) review. These studies directly measured the impact of an intervention on the worthwhile measure for participants in the study.
3. New analysis on the 2019-2020 wave of data from the Annual Population Survey (data collected pre-Covid-19). As well as descriptive analysis, we also generated two regression models to understand the predictors of sense of purpose. One included the general population, but with a smaller number of variables. The second was limited to the working population but incorporated more detailed work-related variables allowing us to better understand how they are related to sense of purpose.

