

INVESTIGATING PSYCHOLOGICAL RICHNESS

AMONG RESIDENTS OF LIFE PLAN COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

There are different views of what it means to live a good life. Broadly speaking, researchers have tended to focus on two aspects of psychological well-being that relate to leading a good life: happiness and meaning (Diener et al., 1999; Ryff, 1989). A resident of a Life Plan Community who prioritizes a **happy life** may value comfort, security, and enjoying the present moment, whereas a resident who prioritizes **meaning in life** may focus more on being of service to others, pursuing their purpose or calling, and contributing to something greater than themselves. More recently, researchers have identified a new aspect of having a good life—psychological richness (Oishi et al., 2019). People who lead a **psychologically rich life** engage in a variety of new and interesting experiences that have the potential to change how they see the world (Oishi et al., 2019; Oishi & Westgate, 2022). Experiences such as traveling to new places, reading books, and viewing art and film can be enriching and perspective changing.

Senior living and aging services providers can use psychological richness as an additional lens to evaluate the comprehensiveness of their programs and services. Residents who prefer a happy life might feel fulfilled by engaging in

programs that guarantee having a fun time, such as games and social programs, whereas residents who prefer psychological richness might express more interest in programs that push them out of their comfort zones and challenge their perspectives, such as trips and more diverse excursions.

In collaboration with the University of Chicago, Mather Institute conducted a survey to examine preferences related to psychological richness among residents of Life Plan Communities and the connection between psychological richness and wellness. The study objectives were to:

- Assess residents' preference for a happy, meaningful, or psychologically rich life.
- Examine the relationship between happiness, meaning in life, and psychological richness and aspects of successful aging (e.g., healthy lifestyle, adaptive coping, and engagement with life).
- Explore whether preferences for a psychologically rich life are related to differences in wellness behaviors or preferences.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

A total of 284 residents from four Life Plan Communities participated in this study. Each completed a paper or online survey that included measures of psychological richness, meaning in life, happiness, successful aging, and various wellness behaviors and preferences.

Participants were between the ages of 60 and 100 years old, with an average age of 83.4. Most respondents were white/Caucasian (98%) and did not identify as Latinx (98%). The majority were also either partnered/married (44%) or widowed (43%). Slightly

less than three-fourths of residents were female (72%). The majority had earned a master's degree or more (65%), had a household income greater than \$120,000 a year (59%), and were in very good health or better (57%).

Averages or percentages are presented throughout the report. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number, and thus total percentages may not always add up to 100%. Statistical comparisons controlled for gender, age, and level of education.



PSYCHOLOGICAL RICHNESS, MEANING IN LIFE, AND HAPPINESS

CHOOSING A WAY OF LIFE

Psychological richness, meaning in life, and happiness were briefly described at the beginning of the survey:

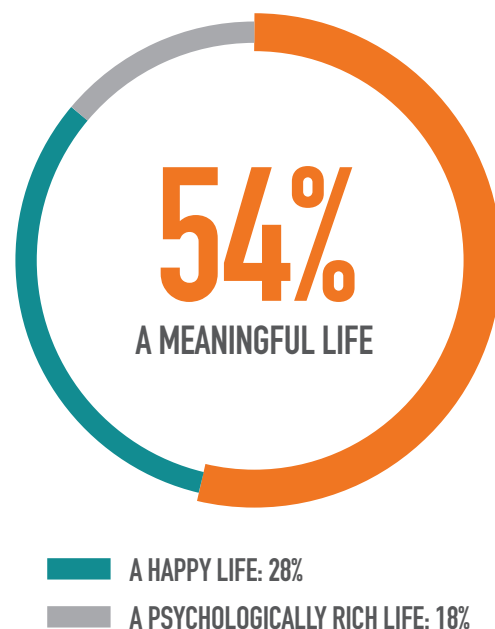
- **Psychological richness** is experienced when someone's life is filled with a variety of new, interesting, and engaging experiences.
- **Meaning in life** involves feeling like your life is significant and has purpose.
- **Happiness** is satisfaction associated with enjoyable experiences and comfort.

Respondents were asked if they could only choose one, would they prefer to live a happy life, a meaningful life, or a psychologically rich life? Consistent with previous research, most respondents preferred a meaningful life (54%) or a happy life (28%). However, a sizable number of respondents—18%, **almost one out of five**—chose a psychologically rich life (see Figure 1). These preferences didn't vary by gender or age.

Interestingly, over half of respondents selected a meaningful life in this study. Previous research conducted with a younger US sample found that 62% preferred a happy life, followed by a meaningful (25%)

and a psychologically rich one (13%) (Oishi et al., 2020). It's possible that this difference may be due to these two groups being at different developmental points in their lives. Consistent with this, Erikson's (1982) model of psychosocial development proposes that reflecting on whether one has lived a meaningful life is a priority in older adulthood.

Figure 1. If you had to choose only one way to live, which of the following ways would you choose?



RELATIONSHIP WITH SUCCESSFUL AGING

Levels of psychological richness, meaning, and happiness were examined in relation to three aspects of successful aging: leading a healthy lifestyle; adaptive coping; and engagement with life, which includes engaging in social interactions and productive activities (Reker, 2009).

Analyses revealed that psychological richness, meaning, and happiness each have an independent relationship with successful aging (see Table 1). In other words, findings suggest it may be beneficial to cultivate all three (i.e., psychological richness, meaning in life, and happiness) because each contributes something unique to successful aging. After accounting for levels of meaning and happiness, older adults with greater (vs. lower) psychological richness tended to lead healthier lifestyles, have better coping skills, and enjoy greater life engagement.

Table 1. Relationship with Successful Aging

	HEALTHY LIFESTYLE	ADAPTIVE COPING	ENGAGEMENT WITH LIFE
PSYCHOLOGICAL RICHNESS	▲	▲	▲
MEANING IN LIFE	▲	▲	▲
HAPPINESS		▲	▲

*An up arrow indicates that there’s a statistically significant, positive relationship between the pair of variables. As one increases (or decreases), the other also increases (or decreases).

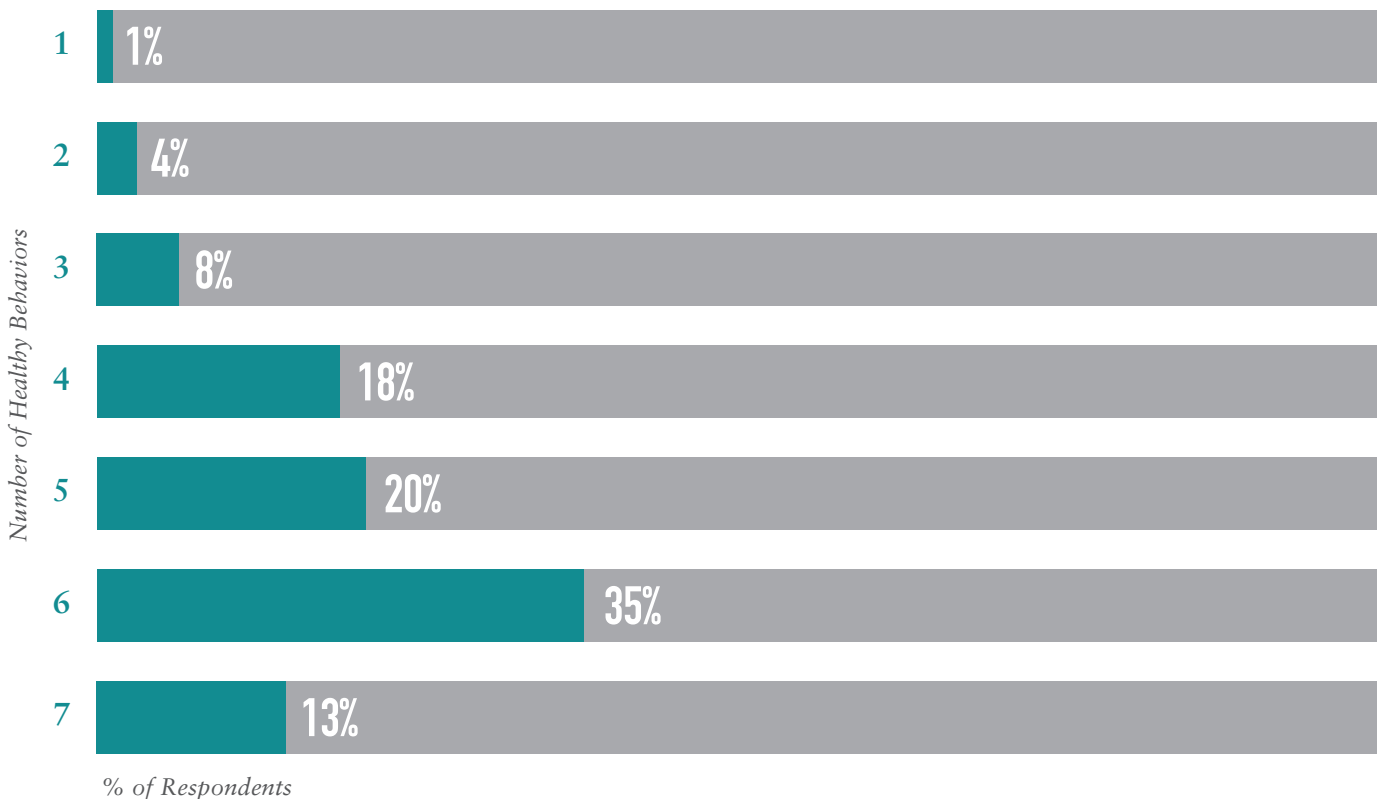
PSYCHOLOGICAL RICHNESS AND WELLNESS

Researchers explored the survey data to determine whether residents who prefer psychological richness (when asked to choose one way of life) differ from others in their wellness behaviors and preferences, controlling for gender, age, and level of education.

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

Respondents were asked whether they engage in health-related activities such as drinking enough water, managing weight, making healthy decisions, getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, meditating, and maintaining a healthy diet. The total number of healthy behaviors was calculated to reflect overall engagement in healthy practices. Approximately two-thirds of respondents reported engaging in five or more of those healthy behaviors (see Figure 2). Respondents who preferred psychological richness reported a similar number of healthy behaviors as others.

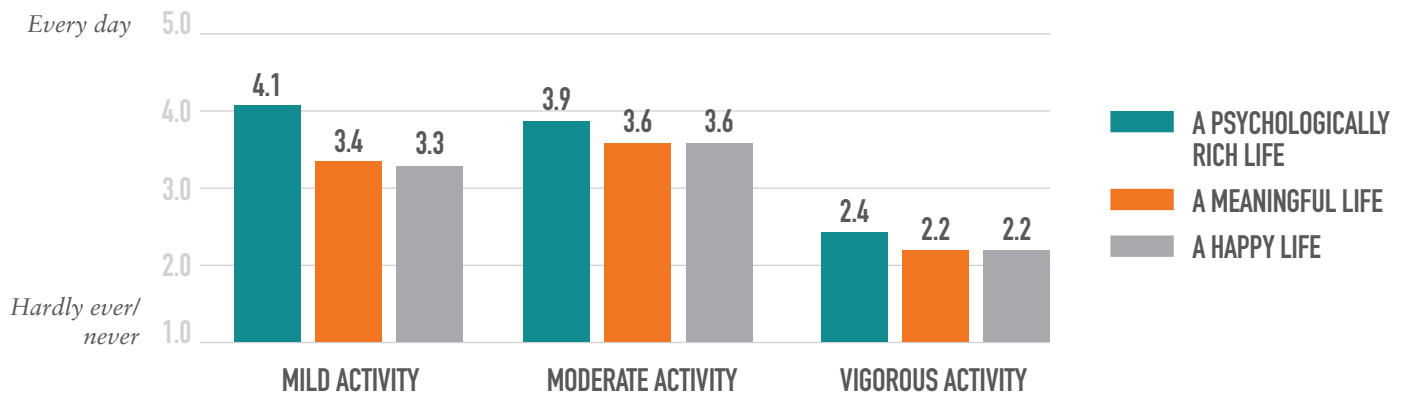
Figure 2. Engagement in Healthy Behaviors



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Respondents who preferred a psychologically rich life tended to participate in mild physical activities, such as gardening and cooking, more frequently (see Figure 3). There were no significant differences between groups on frequency of moderate (e.g., walking in parks, short bicycle rides) or vigorous physical activity (e.g., jogging, long power walks).

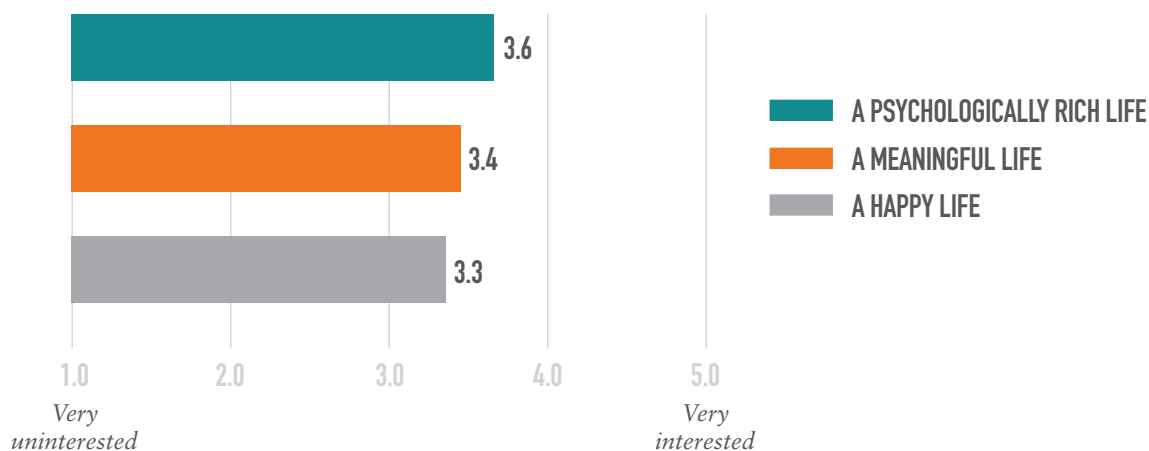
Figure 3. Differences in Physical Activity



INTEREST IN WELLNESS PROGRAMS

Residents reported their interest in participating in different types of wellness programs. Respondents who preferred a psychologically rich life had greater interest in wellness programs overall compared to those who preferred a happy life (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Average Interest in Wellness Programs



There were also a few statistically significant differences when examining interest in specific programs. On average, residents who preferred a psychologically rich life were more interested in art programs than people who preferred a happy life. They also expressed more interest in culinary programs than those who prefer happy or meaningful lives. Finally, respondents who chose a happy life

reported less interest in volunteering programs compared to people who prefer psychological richness or meaning in life. Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents in each group who were somewhat or very interested in each program.

Table 2. Percent of Residents Who Are Somewhat/Very Interested in Each Wellness Program

WELLNESS PROGRAM	PSYCHOLOGICALLY RICH LIFE	MEANINGFUL LIFE	HAPPY LIFE	ALL RESPONDENTS
Exercise programs	89%	83%	76%	81%
Meditation and mindfulness programs	40%	45%	41%	42%
Art programs	54%	43%	39%	44%
Culinary programs focusing on nutrition	67%	40%	38%	44%
Volunteering	60%	72%	49%	64%
Programs focusing on mental engagement through games	48%	49%	55%	51%
Outdoor programs focusing on nature	70%	70%	55%	65%
Social programs	49%	43%	44%	44%
Book or movie analysis	61%	59%	55%	58%

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The findings suggest that residents who prefer a psychologically rich life may be somewhat more physically active and interested in a variety of wellness programs. There were more differences between respondents who preferred a psychologically rich life compared to those who preferred a happy life. It's likely that the programs and resources that fulfill some residents' desire for challenging and novel experiences are different from ones that provide comfort and security.

Here are ideas for intentionally incorporating psychological richness into Life Plan Communities and other aging services organizations:

- **Review existing program offerings for psychological richness.** How often are new topics introduced? Are there diverse programs that cater to various interests and viewpoints, such as cultural events or scientific talks? How many programs challenge attendees and promote learning, like advanced workshops or intellectually stimulating seminars? Ensure the programs encourage curiosity and personal growth.

- **Gauge new residents' interest in programs.**

As new residents are welcomed into the community, learn about their specific interests and their desire to try novel types of experiences. Consider forming connections between residents with similar interests to encourage enriching conversations and greater participation.

- **Pair existing programs with opportunities for further exploration.** When time, space, and/or resources for new programs are limited, incorporate greater psychological richness into existing programs. Provide residents with suggestions for deepening or building upon the experience after the program ends. For instance, participants in an exercise program could be given a list of resources to read more about why certain activities are beneficial, or participants of an art program could receive information about local museums, community artworks, or art history.

APPENDIX

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS (N = 284)

Gender	Male	28.3%
	Female	71.7%
Marital Status	Partnered/married	44.3%
	Never married	4.6%
	Divorced	8.5%
	Widowed	42.6%
Race	White/Caucasian	98.2%
	Black/African American	<1%
	Asian/Pacific Islander	<1%
	More than one race	1.1%
Ethnicity	Latinx	1.8%
	Not Latinx	98.2%
Education	No degree	<1%
	High school	2.5%
	Associate degree or less	2.5%
	Bachelor's degree	29.0%
	Master's degree	39.2%
	Doctoral degree	26.1%
Income	Less than \$40,000	2.4%
	\$40,000 to less than \$80,000	13.8%
	\$80,000 to less than \$120,000	24.8%
	\$120,000 to less than \$160,000	21.5%
	\$160,000 or more	37.4%

MEASURES

CHOOSING A WAY OF LIFE: Participants completed a forced-choice question asking if they had to choose only one way to live, would they rather live a happy life, a meaningful life, or a psychologically rich life (Oishi & Westgate, 2022).

PSYCHOLOGICAL RICHNESS: The Psychologically Rich Life Questionnaire (Oishi et al., 2019).

MEANING IN LIFE: The Purpose in Life section of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989).

HAPPINESS: Participants reported the extent to which they are generally happy (1 = Not at all happy to 5 = Extremely happy).

SUCCESSFUL AGING: Three subscales from the Successful Aging Scale (Successful Aging Scale (SAS)). The three subscales were indicators for living a healthy lifestyle, adaptive coping, and engagement with life (Reker, 2009).

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS: Participants were given a list of healthy habits and asked to identify which of the habits they regularly practice.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: Participants were asked how frequently they engage in mild, moderate, and vigorous forms of physical activity (1 = Hardly ever or never to 5 = Every day).

WELLNESS PROGRAMS: Participants were asked the extent to which they are interested in nine wellness programs common among Life Plan Communities (1 = Very uninterested to 5 = Very interested).

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