



An Interview with Victor J. Strecher

Professor of Health Behavior & Health Education, University of Michigan

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

I think what got me into wellbeing research was a frustration with just a pure focus on health related behaviors for their own sake. When we would try to help a person quit smoking we would find that certain strategies helped. But underlying that always seemed to be a 'why?'. Why are you quitting smoking? Why did you decide not to quit smoking? Those underlying 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 low wellbeing. A loss of wellbeing or loneliness or isolation or depression, and alienation, an anime. I think those are the roots of many of our poor healthy behaviors. So I wanted to begin studying wellbeing to try to figure out some of the root causes of many of the health related behaviors that are so important to us.

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?

I believe it's very important because we need to start studying the root causes of many of the problems that we face in our society. Also our healthcare budget, and in specific issues such as aging or in adolescent development, or what happens after traumatic events, or issues such as depression or loneliness or isolation. I think it's imperative that we begin studying those root causes and that's where wellbeing research can be important.

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

Wellbeing research that's focused on identifying why some people who go through difficult events suffer, and others who go through difficult events and end up growing, that is really fascinating. I think it's very relevant to our society now. I see a very important relevance to wellbeing research, particularly for people who have gone through difficult life events, because we do see some people exhibiting post-traumatic growth and others post-traumatic stress. I think it's a really important area to study. So that's one that may be the most relevant in my mind.

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



One of the things that we're finding is that people with a strong purpose in life, over time do much better in their lives. They become less defensive to making behavioral changes, so they're able to see life more clearly. They may see reality more clearly and they begin thinking, "wow, I'm a family person and I smoke cigarettes, how can I do both at the same time?" How can I set a good example for my family?" Then they think, 'I need to change'. I think that is really relevant for people.

The main is that that 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. Energy and willpower are important for purpose, but also purpose is important for energy and willpower. Other people have been finding that people with a strong purpose are less likely to develop diabetes, they're better able to manage their diabetes, they live longer, they're less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease. 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. What you would like to think, 'okay, whatever this factor is 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. I'm trying to help people through a digital platform develop greater purpose in their lives, and then think about their alignment without purpose in their life, and then consider how energy and willpower help them with that alignment. Then finally how what I call SPACE can influence their energy and willpower. And by SPACE I'm referring to sleep, presence (which is essentially mindfulness), activity, creativity, and eating. We have built this platform called Jool, and Jool is designed to help people become more aware of their purpose, to become more aware of their alignment daily with their purpose, and to become more aware of what makes them tick. Also of what factors are influencing their energy and their self-control every day, which gives them greater alignment with their purpose.

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 I call 'precision wellbeing models', we'll start looking at, of course individual models of purpose, in helping people understand what makes them tick, what gives them more purpose in their life, what gives them a bigger life. But what's very exciting to me as well is thinking about this at an organizational level. So what would give a worksite, a workplace more purpose, and what helps that workplace connect with their purpose and develop more energy and more self-control within that workplace. And then even purposeful cities. What contributes to a more purposeful city? I think these different levels of analysis are going to be really exciting to start studying in the future because I think one thing we're realizing is that we continue to take an averages approach, where we treat everybody with the same algorithm. We may tailor something differently for one person than another, but we still use the same algorithm. Understanding that everybody may have their own specific algorithms of what makes them tick is important, but then looking at that as an organization, looking at that as a city, might be very exciting down the road.

8. What do you think are the main benefits of interdisciplinary approach to purpose? So we have public health people getting interested 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 we begin to work together on that problem. We start solving it, not as specific independent disciplines that might be working a bit together and talking with each other, but all basically solving the problem in a self-transcending way. So they're transcending their own disciplines, that's essential in this field. 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 and data scientists to help us as well. But many other groups too, artists, I believe are very important to this endeavour, and in many other disciplines 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. And for one thing meaning can be macro level meaning, like is there meaning in the universe? Many people do not believe there is meaning in the universe, and some people do believe there's meaning in the universe. Now as astrophysics starts 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, roughly a little bit more than 13 billion years, and the extent of our own lives makes us feel small and rather insignificant and possibly meaningless. But even as Albert Camus talked about, when he wrote the *Myth Of Sisyphus*, one of his first sentences was basically, 'why don't we all just kill ourselves?' because the world is pretty meaningless. And then he moves into Sisyphus saying 'what a horrible curse he had given to him that he has to roll up boulder up a mountain every single day only to have it roll back down'. At the very end of his book he says, 'Sisyphus had a purpose in his life. One must imagine this is 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 that is really meaningful in a big universal away, who really knows? Down to our specific level at this point in our lives, at this point in history, if we can bring greater joy, less suffering to people, I do believe that that gives us meaning. But I do think that that's different than having a purpose, a purpose to me is a goal around things that 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.

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