

Freedom and Flexibility Matter

An Applied Research Brief

The Pathways to Encore Purpose Project is a collaboration between the Stanford Graduate School of Education's Center on Adolescence and Encore.org to deepen understanding of purpose in the encore years.

The research says...

Freedom is important to purposeful and non-purposeful people in different ways. In the interview analyses comparing purposeful and non-purposeful adults:

- Half of each group said that a significant source of their well-being was their appreciation of the freedom they were experiencing at this time in their lives.
- The non-purposeful interviewees mostly meant freedom from burdensome responsibilities like paid work and childrearing. The purposeful interviewees highlighted the ways they used their freedom for the benefit of all; they loved having the freedom to get more involved beyond the self.

“You still have lots of days that you’re able to give to other people and you have so much more freedom than you have any other time in your life. It’s a gift and I try to use that gift the best I can every day. “

Interview Respondent:

A 68-year-old woman who became the director of a food pantry where she had been volunteering

You can use these findings to:

- Remain aware that older adults are very conscious of time commitments when they make choices about their activities.
- Build questions about flexibility/time commitment into initial interviews, volunteer screening, and role descriptions.
- Offer opportunities that vary in duration and in how, where, and when a project gets done.
- For example, allow people to “job share” a volunteer commitment or work assignment; craft shorter-term, high-impact projects that might be needed each month or each quarter; allow for some work to be done remotely; or offer one-day or half-day opportunities such as clean-up or organizing projects that can lead to longer-term involvement over time.

The Pathways to Encore Purpose (PEP) project is a collaboration between the Stanford Graduate School of Education’s Center on Adolescence and Encore.org. The Stanford University research team conducted a nationally representative survey of nearly 1,200 adults, ages 50-90, followed by 102 in-depth interviews to determine what role “purpose” plays in their lives. The study’s authors define **purpose as a sustained commitment to goals that are meaningful to the self** and that also **contribute in some way to the common good**, to something larger than or beyond the self.

The research examined older adults’ life goals, prosocial values and behaviors, perspectives on the progression to later life, and prevalence of purpose in their post-midlife, or encore, years. This series of applied research briefs highlights each of the the six major findings from the Stanford University study, with a focus on what they might mean for practitioners. All six findings can be found at encore.org/research/purpose.