

Meaningful Photos

Photograph what makes your life feel meaningful — then write about why.

15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate



1 Why you should try it

Research suggests that finding greater meaning in life helps people cope with stress and improves their overall health and well-being — it's what makes life feel worth living. But finding meaning in life can sometimes feel like an elusive task. In our day-to-day lives, it can be easy to lose sight of the big picture — we tend to focus more on the mundane than the deeply meaningful.

Yet research suggests that there are potential sources of meaning all around us, from the moments of connection we share with others, to the beauty of nature, to the work that we do and the things we create. This exercise helps you bring these meaningful things into focus — literally. By having you photograph, then write about, things that are meaningful to you, it encourages you to pay closer attention to the varied sources of meaning in your life, large and small, and reflect on why they are important to you.

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 15-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 15 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. At least 4 sessions in your 2-week window. Your **final** session is different: lay out all your photos, look at each one, and write the caption question for the full set. **Rule for this practice:** you must submit the photos along with your journal entries in your Weekly Drop.

10'

5'

10 MIN Shoot

Take photographs of things that make your life feel meaningful or full of purpose — people, places, objects, pets. If the thing isn't nearby, photograph a souvenir, a reminder, a screen, or another photo. Aim for **2–3 photos per session**, so you reach the study's 9–12 by the end of your window. Yes, this is the one time in the project your phone is required.

5 MIN Caption each one

For each photo taken today, write a response to the question: *"What does this photo represent, and why is it meaningful?"* One honest paragraph each.

3 Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand

- Top of the entry: **date and time**. Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.
- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.
- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt:** What did you point the camera at without hesitating? What did you consider and skip — and why?

- **Prompt:** Looking at the set: what themes emerged that you wouldn't have named beforehand?

4 Evidence that it works

Steger, M. F., Shim, Y., Barenz, J., & Shin, J. Y. (2014)

College students were instructed to take 9–12 photographs of things that they felt made their life meaningful; one week later, they viewed and wrote about each photograph. They completed a battery of questionnaires before and after this exercise. Afterward, they reported feeling like they had more meaning in their lives, greater life satisfaction, and more positive emotion than they had beforehand.

5 Why it works

Taking time to recognize and appreciate sources of meaning through photography can help make them more tangible and serve as a reminder of what matters most to you. This greater sense of meaning can, in turn, inspire us to pursue important personal goals and give us a sense of strength and purpose when coping with stressful life events. The use of photography might also benefit people who are more visual than verbal.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Steger, M. F., Shim, Y., Barenz, J., & Shin, J. Y. (2014). Through the windows of the soul: A pilot study using photography to enhance meaning in life. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 3(1), 27–30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2013.11.002>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/meaningful_pictures. Practice sources: Michael Steger, Ph.D., Colorado State University. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.