

Sense of Purpose, Emotion Regulation, and Personal Growth Initiative in Middle Adulthood: A Mediation Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Middle adulthood is an important stage of development where people tend to evaluate life goals, values, and personal direction. An increasing body of research has identified sense of purpose as a psychological resource central to well-being and adaptive functioning. Personal growth initiative (PGI) is a reflection of proactive and intentional engagement in self-improvement. While these constructs are theoretically related, the processes by which purpose may foster growth are relatively underdeveloped. The current study examined the mediating role of emotion regulation in the relationship between sense of purpose and PGI in middle-aged adults (N = 310, age range 40-60 years). A cross-sectional design was employed using standardised self-report measures. Results indicated that sense of purpose did not significantly predict PGI directly or indirectly through emotion regulation, as hypothesized. Purpose in life was a significant positive predictor of emotion regulation (B = 0.33, p < .001). This means that there is a meaningful association between purpose in life and the capacity to regulate emotions. The indirect effect of sense of purpose on PGI through emotion regulation was negligible and non-significant (B = 0.01, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.04]). These results challenge the assumption that purpose directly leads to PGI in midlife and suggest the need for research to identify additional psychological and contextual factors that enable PGI in midlife.

Keywords: *Sense of Purpose, Personal Growth Initiative, Emotion Regulation, Self-Regulatory Processes, Adult Development*

Middle adulthood, commonly defined as the years from about age 40 to 60, is often marked by transitions, responsibilities, and reflections on one's life path. At this stage, people usually deal with issues of identity continuity, generativity, and the pursuit of meaningful goals (Lachman, 2015). One construct that has emerged as critical during this period is sense of purpose broadly defined as a stable and overarching life aim that organizes behavior and provides direction (Ryff, 2014).

Higher levels of purpose have been associated with higher levels of well-being, resilience, and health outcomes across adulthood (Hill & Turiano, 2014). Purpose is a buffer for positive adaptation in middle-aged adults who frequently face challenges such as career stagnation, health concerns, and shifting family roles (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). Research has also found that people with a strong sense of purpose report greater life satisfaction, cognitive

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health, and proactive engagement in personal and social roles (Bronk, 2014; Schaefer et al., 2013).

Concurrently, personal growth initiative (PGI) has been identified as a crucial measure of adaptive functioning. According to Robitschek (1998), PGI consists of cognitive, behavioral, and affective elements with a focus on introspection, goal-setting, and adaptability. Resilience, academic success, and psychological well-being have all been positively correlated with PGI (Weigold et al., 2013; Sharma & Rani, 2014). In adulthood, PGI represents the ability to accept lifelong learning and personal growth in spite of internal or external limitations. According to Robitschek and Keyes (2009), middle-aged adults with higher PGI are more likely to maintain a sense of vitality across life domains, adopt adaptive coping strategies, and participate in ongoing self-renewal.

According to recent studies, PGI and sense of purpose are positively correlated. While PGI represents the behavioral enactment of that motivation through deliberate self-improvement, purpose offers motivational guidance. According to Hill et al. (2016), young adults who have a clear sense of purpose are more likely to take part in activities that foster growth, like taking on challenges and learning new skills. In a similar vein, Ye et al. (2021) found that people who had a greater sense of purpose in life were more driven to develop themselves, especially when they had emotional support. This implies that while PGI captures the active and deliberate processes through which people pursue these goals, purpose may serve as a motivational basis that sustains long-term growth.

Maintaining motivation and overcoming challenges require emotion regulation, which is the ability to control, alter, and react to emotional experiences (Gross, 2015). While maladaptive strategies like suppression or rumination frequently predict worse psychological outcomes, adaptive strategies like cognitive reappraisal are linked to increased well-being, resilience, and social functioning (Aldao et al., 2010). According to research by Kashdan and Goodman (2023), there is a reciprocal relationship between emotion regulation and sense of purpose: people with strong purpose exhibit greater regulatory flexibility, while those who engage in reappraisal are more likely to experience heightened purpose. This emphasizes how meaning and emotion control are intertwined in maintaining personal growth.

The relationship between purpose and PGI is probably not direct; it may heavily rely on emotion regulation, even though they both independently predict well-being. Stress, role conflicts, and existential doubts are among the challenges that purpose-driven people frequently face. Such difficulties could jeopardize growth initiatives in the absence of effective regulation, resulting in stagnation or burnout. According to Schaefer et al. (2013), people who had a greater sense of purpose recovered emotionally from stressful situations more quickly. This suggests that regulation is one way that purpose promotes resilience. In a similar vein, Lin (2022) found that emotion regulation played a crucial role in converting positive affect into intentional action by mediating the relationship between gratitude and meaning in life. These results imply that emotion regulation may act as a crucial psychological link between personal development initiative and a sense of purpose in middle adulthood.

Despite this growing body of evidence, little research has looked at how these three constructs interact in middle adulthood, a time when purpose-driven growth is particularly important but also particularly difficult due to changing roles and priorities. There is a

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knowledge gap regarding how these mechanisms function in midlife because the majority of previous research has concentrated on adolescents and young adults (Bronk, 2014; Hill & Burrow, 2012). Furthermore, despite its theoretical importance, the mediating function of emotion regulation is still poorly understood. In order to close this gap, the current study investigates whether middle-aged adults' sense of purpose and PGI are mediated by emotion regulation. In particular, we predict that PGI will be significantly predicted by (H1) sense of purpose and that the relationship between sense of purpose and PGI will be mediated by (H2) emotion regulation.

The study advances our knowledge of whether and how emotional regulation processes translate goal-driven motivation into growth-oriented behavior. The results have implications for psychological interventions that support lifelong development, resilience, and well-being in adults navigating the challenges of middle age.

METHOD

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Personal growth initiative (PGI) is significantly predicted by a sense of purpose.
- **H2:** The connection between PGI and sense of purpose will be mediated by emotion regulation.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 310 middle-aged adults (male and female) ranging in age from 40 to 60 years. Participants were included if they fell within the specified age range and were willing to complete all measures. Data were collected using a standardized battery of self-report instruments administered individually.

Measures

- **Sense of Purpose.** Sense of purpose was assessed using the Purpose in Life subscale of Ryff's (1989) Psychological Well-Being Scales. The subscale comprises 7 items (e.g., "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life") rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate a stronger sense of purpose. Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was $\alpha = .82$.
- **Emotion Regulation.** Emotion regulation was measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003), a 10-item scale assessing cognitive reappraisal (6 items; e.g., "When I want to feel more positive emotion, I change the way I'm thinking about the situation") and expressive suppression (4 items). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). A composite score was computed, with higher scores reflecting greater adaptive emotion regulation. Internal consistency in the current sample was $\alpha = .79$.
- **Personal Growth Initiative.** PGI was assessed using the Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II (PGIS-II; Robitschek et al., 2012), a 16-item scale that measures four dimensions: change readiness, planfulness, resource utilization, and intentional behavior. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = definitely not true of me, 5 = absolutely true of me). A sample item is "I know how to discover new things that are beneficial to my development." Cronbach's alpha in this sample was $\alpha = .85$.

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Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, participants were contacted one-on-one and given written informed consent after institutional ethical clearance. Participation was private and entirely voluntary. The battery of questionnaires was self-administered, and a researcher was on hand to answer any questions. To maintain anonymity, completed questionnaires were gathered in sealed envelopes. IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) and PROCESS Macro Version 4.0 were used to analyze the data (Hayes, 2018).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for every study variable. The average score for Emotion Regulation was 47.23 (SD = 9.33), Sense of Purpose was 44.01 (SD = 6.89), and Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) was 42.10 (SD = 8.42). These results show that the sample (N = 310) has moderate to moderately high levels in all three constructs.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Variable	M	SD
Sense of Purpose	44.01	6.89
Emotion Regulation	47.23	9.33
Personal Growth Initiative (PGI)	42.10	8.42

Note. N = 310.

Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents Pearson correlations between the study variables. Emotion regulation and sense of purpose were found to be positively and significantly correlated ($r = .25, p < .01$), suggesting that people who have a stronger sense of purpose also tend to have better emotion regulation. Sense of Purpose, on the other hand, did not significantly correlate with PGI ($r = -.01, p > .05$), and Emotion Regulation did not correlate with PGI either ($r = .02, p > .05$). These results imply that although there is a significant relationship between purpose and emotion regulation, neither one is associated with personal growth initiative on its own in this sample.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
1. Sense of Purpose	1		
2. Emotion Regulation	.25**	1	
3. Personal Growth Initiative (PGI)	-.01	.02	1

Note. N = 310. ** $p < .01$.

Regression Analysis

A basic linear regression was used to investigate the overall impact of Sense of Purpose on PGI (path c) (Table 3). The model accounted for almost no variance in PGI ($R^2 = .000, F(1, 308) = 0.06, p = .803$), and the results showed that Sense of Purpose did not significantly predict PGI ($B = -0.02, SE = 0.07, t = -0.25, p = .803$).

The impact of Sense of Purpose on Emotion Regulation was investigated using a different regression (path a; Table 4). Emotion regulation was significantly predicted by sense of purpose ($B = 0.33, SE = 0.07, t = 4.46, p < .001$), accounting for about 6% of the variance

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($R^2 = .061$, $F(1, 308) = 19.91$, $p < .001$). This suggests that a stronger sense of purpose is linked to a better ability to control emotions.

A multiple regression was performed to evaluate path b (Emotion Regulation \rightarrow PGI) and the direct effect of Sense of Purpose on PGI controlling for Emotion Regulation (path c') (Table 5).

Table 3 Regression Analysis (Total Effect: Sense of Purpose \rightarrow PGI)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Sense of Purpose	-0.02	0.07	-0.25	.803

Note. $R^2 = .000$, $F(1, 308) = 0.06$, $p = .803$.

Table 4 Regression Analysis (Path a: Sense of Purpose \rightarrow Emotion Regulation)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Sense of Purpose	0.33	0.07	4.46	< .001

Note. $R^2 = .061$, $F(1, 308) = 19.91$, $p < .001$.

Table 5 Regression Analysis (Path b and c' Model)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Sense of Purpose (c')	-0.03	0.07	-0.36	.721
Emotion Regulation (b)	0.02	0.05	0.47	.640

Note. $R^2 = .001$, $F(2, 307) = 0.14$, $p = .869$.

Mediation Analysis

To determine whether Emotion Regulation mediates the relationship between Sense of Purpose and PGI, a formal mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) was carried out (Table 6). Sense of Purpose had a non-significant overall impact on PGI ($B = -0.02$, 95% CI $[-0.15, 0.12]$). After taking Emotion Regulation into consideration, the direct effect was likewise not significant ($B = -0.03$, 95% CI $[-0.17, 0.12]$). Since the confidence interval included zero, the indirect effect through emotion regulation was insignificant and non-significant ($B = 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.03, 0.04]$). These findings suggest that mediation is unsupported. A mediated pathway is ruled out because, although Sense of Purpose significantly predicts Emotion Regulation (path a), Emotion Regulation does not predict PGI (path b).

Table 6 Mediation Analysis (PROCESS Model 4)

Effect	B	95% CI
Total Effect (c)	-0.02	$[-0.15, 0.12]$
Direct Effect (c')	-0.03	$[-0.17, 0.12]$
Indirect Effect (a \times b)	0.01	$[-0.03, 0.04]$

Note. Indirect effect estimated via bootstrapping (5,000 samples). Confidence interval includes zero, indicating non-significance.

DISCUSSION

In this study, middle-aged adults' sense of purpose and personal growth initiative (PGI) were investigated in relation to the mediating function of emotion regulation. Two theories were investigated. The hypothesis that sense of purpose would significantly predict PGI ($B = -0.02$, $p = .803$) was not supported. Since the indirect effect was small and non-significant ($B = 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.03, 0.04]$), H_2 which suggested that emotion regulation

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would mediate the relationship between sense of purpose and PGI, was likewise not supported.

However, one noteworthy and theoretically significant finding did surface: emotion regulation was significantly predicted by sense of purpose ($B = 0.33, p < .001$), accounting for about 6% of its variance. According to research that links purpose to regulatory flexibility (Kashdan & Goodman, 2023) and quicker emotional recovery from negative stimuli (Schaefer et al., 2013), middle-aged adults who have a stronger sense of life purpose are better able to control their emotional experiences.

It is important to interpret the lack of a meaningful purpose-PGI relationship carefully. It's possible that other factors, like self-efficacy, occupational identity, or perceived autonomy, function as more proximal predictors of PGI in middle adulthood and that a sense of purpose alone is insufficient to motivate proactive growth behavior. The current study's cross-sectional design further restricts causal inference; longitudinal or experimental designs would be more appropriate to investigate whether purpose gradually influences growth-oriented behavior over time. Furthermore, the use of self-report measures may have resulted in common method bias, which could have obscured actual correlations between variables.

The non-significance of path b in the current study further erodes support for a mediated relationship, despite the fact that a significant indirect effect is the main requirement for mediation. Emotion regulation may have a different role in purposeful living, possibly improving subjective well-being or adaptive coping, without necessarily directing purpose into growth-directed behavior, according to the pattern of results, which includes a significant path a and a non-significant path b.

CONCLUSION

The current study looked at how emotion regulation functions as a mediator in the relationship between middle-aged adults' sense of purpose and personal growth initiative (PGI) ($N = 310$). The results showed that sense of purpose did not significantly predict PGI, either directly or indirectly through emotion regulation, in contrast to the proposed model. While emotion regulation did not predict PGI, sense of purpose was a significant predictor of emotion regulation ($B = 0.33, p < .001$), and the indirect effect was not significant ($B = 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.03, 0.04]$). According to these findings, purpose may improve a person's ability to control their emotions, but in this sample, it does not seem to translate into proactive personal development behaviors. The complexity of growth motivation in middle adulthood, where contextual and structural factors beyond purpose and regulation may play a more decisive role, may be reflected in the lack of a significant purpose-PGI relationship. These results emphasize how crucial it is to test theoretical models empirically and suggest avenues for further investigation into other ways that purpose might encourage adaptive outcomes.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

Even in the absence of a downstream effect on PGI, purpose-building interventions may produce significant benefits for emotional regulation capacity, according to the significant path from sense of purpose to emotion regulation ($B = 0.33, p < .001$). This finding is practically relevant for counseling and psychoeducational programs targeting well-being in middle-aged adults.

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The need to determine what does predict personal growth initiative in midlife is highlighted by the null finding on the purpose–PGI pathway. Future research should look at factors like social support, self-efficacy, identity clarity, and occupational engagement as possible mediators or predictors of PGI in this population. Future models should take into account purpose as a predictor of regulatory outcomes rather than growth outcomes directly, according to the current data.

To verify causal relationships and monitor the co-development of purpose, emotion regulation, and PGI throughout midlife, longitudinal designs are advised.

Given that the current sample was drawn from a single cultural context, future research should include a variety of age groups and cultural samples to enable broader generalization of findings. The subjective processes through which purpose and emotional regulation shape—or fail to shape—growth initiative in middle-aged adults could be better understood by conducting intervention or qualitative research.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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