

# do we need to just get on with it?

Obsessing over the meaning of life could be making you miserable, says Sarah Ranawake.

**A** year ago, I found myself in a rut. I've always been a shiny, happy overachiever, so the malaise I felt was disconcerting. While nothing was really wrong, there was a sense of blahness that I just couldn't shake. I was going through the motions rather than making the most out of life. And I didn't like it.

Hanging out with one of my closest friends, who had recently been re-diagnosed with cancer, crystallised the

situation for me. Instead of falling into a heap, my amazing friend used the shit-sandwich life gave her as a springboard to give her an enriched sense of purpose and focus. Marvelling at her awesome new approach to things, I found myself feeling both incredibly inspired and, to be honest, slightly guilty.

So I went looking to inject some deeper meaning into my life by way of the multibillion dollar self-help industry. I started iQing episodes of

*Oprah* and drank in her pearls of wisdom like I was Lindsay Lohan sans alcohol-monitoring bracelet. I read *Eat Pray Love* (Bloomsbury, \$24.99) even though I found Elizabeth Gilbert's writing style annoying. I even fantasised about selling my apartment - the one I'd spent years saving a deposit for - and using the money to fund a sabbatical. However, all this searching only left me confused. It turns out a life roadmap can't be found between the covers of a paperback.

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“all this searching for life’s meaning only left me confused.”

## self-help or self-destructive?

Psychologist Meredith Brown ([lifeworks.com.au](http://lifeworks.com.au)) has a few thoughts about why searching for a deeper purpose often presents more questions than answers.

“People have been philosophising about life for as long as humans have been capable of pondering the question of how happy they are,” explains Brown. “However, in today’s world of consumerism and technology, Gen Y is faced with the difficult task of sorting through mixed messages about what contentment is and where it comes from. In some ways, the self-help industry is fantastic, but it’s also part of that mass of information you have to get through to find your own meaning and happiness.”

Brown also notes that rather than enhancing your life, the quest for deeper meaning might have the opposite effect. You could end up feeling inadequate and frustrated because you haven’t had an epiphany about your true purpose.

“It can send the message that how happy you are is not happy enough,” says Brown. “The self-help industry also encourages self-reflection. If you’re navel gazing, you should ask yourself, ‘Does this fulfil me or is it making me ruminate?’. The latter is an unproductive process that continually feeds on itself.”

## i can’t get no satisfaction

Recent research into life satisfaction has found that people who are actively grappling with meaning are suffering from elevated levels of anxiety and stress.

Melanie, 30, used to be one of those people. “I went through a period in my mid-20s when I started questioning why I wasn’t happier and more fulfilled,” she recalls. “I was trapped in a cycle of searching and stuck in my own head, which made me miserable and anxious. Eventually, I realised I’m never going to understand the meaning of life and that I don’t need to. Now I’m way cooler just living my life because it’s there.”

Interestingly, the same study also found that 35 per cent of people surveyed were “existentially indifferent”. In other words, they weren’t bothered by big questions and couldn’t give a damn whether their lives had a deeper purpose. These peeps were significantly happier than those searching for more meaning but were still yet to find it.

## appreciating it all

So what’s the solution? “If you’re spending too much time in your own head and not getting anywhere, start talking to other people about what makes them happy,” suggests Brown. “Meaning can be derived from small everyday things. It doesn’t have to come at the end of this very dramatic journey.”

And as for me? Well, when I looked at it objectively, I realised the first step was to take better care of myself by exercising more and eating better. I also signed up to be a volunteer for a kids charity and found myself a rocking new job. However, if I hit a life speed hump in the future, I know the mantra I’ll be repeating - and it won’t have anything to do with enlightenment. It’ll be five simple words: just get on with it. □

## it’s all about giving and thanking

Brown reveals the two things that’ll give your life more satisfaction.

### ● contribute

“People who have an outward focus tend to be happier, so find a way of contributing. Whether it’s helping a friend or joining a volunteer organisation, having a sense of giving can provide your life with more meaning and value.”

### ● appreciate

“Purpose and satisfaction are often found in simple things that are very easy to take for granted. You can find joy and fulfilment in everyday moments, such as playing with your dog, catching up with family or listening to music.”