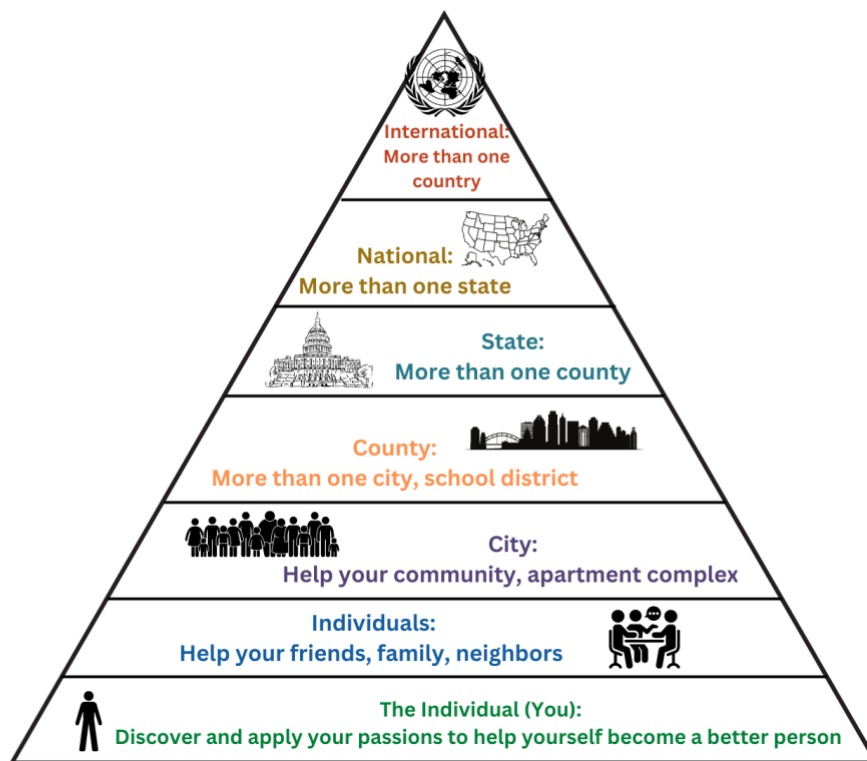


The Life Purpose Pyramid: An Innovative Path to Experiencing Meaning and Purpose

By Mykim Tran, PhD



The Life Purpose Pyramid was developed to guide individuals to discover and use their passion to help themselves and others, create meaning and purpose, and reach their full potential. The model provides an example for individuals who live in the United States. However, it can be tailored to fit any country as each has its own hierarchy levels. No matter what kind of passion the individual has, they can use the pyramid to help them create meaning and purpose and reach their full potential.

The Life Purpose Pyramid was inspired by Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid and self-actualization. The Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid can also be called the pyramid of human motivation (Winston, 2016). There are five levels of needs on the pyramid: (1) physiological, (2) safety, (3) belonging, (4) esteem, and (5) self-actualization. As individuals get higher up the pyramid, they will be more motivated to reach their full potential, becoming self-actualized. Self-

actualization is a process through which an individual is on a quest to learn, grow, and be creative, using their abilities to form an integrated personality, a whole “self.” It can also be viewed as a process and realize that the self and the environment are two pieces of a greater whole: the holistic self. The self-actualization needs are met when individuals develop and use their abilities to become their best selves (D’Souza & Gurin, 2016).

Even though many literatures talk about self-actualization, there are no clear models that help individuals reach self-actualization. As a result, the Life Purpose Pyramid was born. The model has seven levels, (1) The individual (You), (2) Individuals, (3) City, (4) County, (5) State, (6) National, and (7) International. Similar to the Hierarchy Needs Pyramid, the higher individuals are on the Life Purpose Pyramid, the more meaning and purpose they will experience.

Helping individuals create meaning and purpose is another motivational tool to help them reach their full potential. Meaning and purpose are cognitive and motivational components that stimulate consistency and help individuals overcome obstacles, accomplish goals, or successfully adapt to any environment (Thoits, 2012). The cognitive component helps a person question and understand their values, beliefs, and schemas and make sense of life, helping them create activities that give them meaning. The motivational component helps an individual strive to achieve their goals and desires (Hill et al., 2015). Meaning and purpose can help individuals evaluate and guide their own life and how they impact others and help them flourish. These can be achieved at all levels: individual, social collectives, societies, cultures, and humanity (Hill et al., 2015).

Level 1: The Individual, You

This level requires the individual to discover and use their passion to help themselves. First, the individual must take responsibility for discovering what their passion is. It will become their identity or life narrative, which is the most important aspect of who the individual is. For example, if you imagine yourself as a dartboard, your identity is at the center of the board, which are your deepest human desires (Hill et al., 2015). This means, that individual must trust their instincts and experiences and make their own decisions. The person must become aware of and

let go of other people's and society's expectations, stay focused on their development, and discover their passion (Naslund, 2015). The individual must be willing to risk unpopularity if others do not agree with them; this will help them develop a clear perception of who they are and what is important to them. Sometimes it might require the individual to think more about themselves to help them discover their passion. They must be on a lifelong learning process to increase their self-understanding and become a better version of themselves to discover their passion.

After discovering their passion, the individual applies it to improve their lives as much as possible. Meaning and purpose are about improving themselves because they are a part of their community, society, and the world. If they are not flourishing, their community, society, and the world cannot succeed (Hill et al., 2015).

When an individual applies their passion to life, it will help them better assist others. The individual will understand how their passion works and benefits them. Therefore, they will have stories to share with others and not just theories. Sharing personal stories will inspire others to believe in the individual and follow their example. The more the individual benefits from their passion, the more stories they will have to help support others.

As human beings, everyone can benefit from the same things, from the individual passion. However, the benefits will be slightly different for each person. One person might not experience 100% of the same benefits as another but should experience the same benefits at some level. For example, if your passion increases your self-confidence, it should also increase other people's confidence. Although with the different benefit levels, the individual's knowledge and skills to help others will be the same.

The individual must be clear about how their passion improves them and their life. For example, if your passion is nutrition, you should be clear about how applying nutrition improves your life. For instance, nutrition can increase your energy and focus, thus helping you to get more things done. You tend to have more energy to do what you want when you eat well. You can focus better and get better results. So list all the benefits you receive when you apply your passion.

If an individual runs out of motivation and lacks the inspiration to help others with their passion, they will need to apply it more or find different ways to improve their life. Therefore, they must be on a lifelong process of personal development to develop and grow their passion and themselves.

An indicator of when an individual is ready to share their passion with others is when they cannot wait to share their positive experiences. The individual starts to feel like they must share and help others achieve the same thing. The individual will also think they will deprive others of happiness if they do not share their positive experiences.

Level 2: Group of Individuals

At level 2, a person is ready to share their passion, knowledge, and skills to help their family, friends, neighbors, or a small group. The individual must be self-organized to develop a framework for behavior patterns that help them engage in activities congruent with their passion. Meaning and purpose grow as the individual uses their passion to help others (McKnight & Kashdam, 2009).

There are many ways a person can share their passion to help others. They can create products, services, programs, procedures, etc. Below are some common examples:

- Teach others by holding a workshop or class.
- Train others by holding training sessions and seminars.
- Write books, blogs, and articles to share with others.
- Create handouts, worksheets, videos, and audio to help others.
- Coach and mentor others.
- Develop programs and services.
- Create a process or procedure to help others work faster or more effectively.

At this level, an individual can create handouts to give to their family, friends, or neighbors, or coach them one-on-one. The individual can apply as many methods as they wish. They can use the same methods for all levels. However, they should apply a different method to serve others for each level. Creating meaning and purpose is about learning, discovering, using creativity, and successfully applying their passion and abilities to help themselves and others (Hill et al., 2015).

Level 3: City

The individual can serve more people by reaching their communities or working at the city level. For example, an individual could hold a workshop to help everyone in their apartment complex or conduct a small event for their community at a public library. The individual can share their passion to improve their community in countless ways and places. If the individual uses the same methods as in level 2, they should adjust them to serve others successfully. For example, if the individual chooses to use the coaching method to help a group of people, it should be slightly different compared to when they are coaching others one-on-one. The adjustment can be small or big, depending on how the individual wants to help others.

The individual should better understand their passion, knowledge, and skills as they help others and move up the Life Purpose Pyramid. If the individual is not experiencing growth, they are not learning, developing, and applying their passion correctly or enough. Remember, the pyramid aims to help individuals create meaning and purpose, which is a process that should also help them develop themselves.

Level 4: County

Working at the county level means an individual shares their passion with multiple cities. For example, this could include developing a program that a school district can use to support its students. A school district consists of more than one school in different communities. Or, the individual could write a book and distribute it to an organization with multiple locations in different cities. The individual could also help people in more than one zip code.

Level 5: State

At the state level, the individual works to help people in more than one county.

Level 6: National

The individual tries to help people in the United States at the national level.

Level 7: International

The individual works to help people in more than one country. At this level, they are making a social impact and constantly experiencing meaning and purpose. Serving people in other countries is difficult because of the different backgrounds and cultures. This requires the individual to maintain ongoing personal development and creativity to find ways to succeed.

My personal examples

The following is an example of how I use the pyramid to apply my passion for creating meaning and purpose. Once I began applying my passion to my life and receiving the benefits, I was ready to help and inspire others.

I created handouts at the individual level (level 2) and shared them with my family, friends, and anyone interested in learning more about my passion. I can also provide one-on-one mentoring or coaching.

At the city level (level 3), I used a new method of conducting workshops for my community. I will continue to share my handouts and coaching services at the workshops.

At the county level (level 4), my personal growth and creativity started increasing. I created online programs and wrote books, e-books, and articles for others to access. These materials allow individuals to access my services on demand. Some people cannot attend my workshops

for reasons such as time, lack of transportation, etc. I am only one person, so I cannot hold workshops at all hours and on all days. I do not have time to provide one-on-one support to everyone.

At the state and federal levels (levels 5 and 6), my goal is to develop a personal development program to be included in the educational system and become mandatory for students before graduating high school. To fulfill this goal, I can start at the city or county level, where I can first test the program at 1 or 2 schools within my city. Once those schools are successful, I can expand the program to more schools until it is included in the education system for all schools across the United States. This means I must train teachers to teach the program successfully. Once I can successfully train teachers to teach the course, I do not need to be everywhere to teach the course myself. However, that program will be my creation, so I can take ownership of it.

Last, at the world level (level 7), I can help different countries develop personal development programs to help their students succeed, depending on their backgrounds and cultures.

Other people can apply all the methods I shared by working for other companies or developing their own companies. For example, I can write articles for other companies and my company. I can develop my website and post my articles there. I can also teach for other organizations and the Wake-Up Foundation, a non-profit I founded. For example, in 2016, I taught a health psychology course at a university. In that case, I was working for a school. I can also teach about health by holding workshops.

Do not get discouraged

Individuals must not get discouraged if they are unsure how to help others at the upper levels when working to achieve their lower level(s). It is essential to learn how to stay focused on using their passion and improving themselves and their life. The paths they will take to help others will be revealed when they are ready. Sometimes finding ways to help others can be difficult when they cannot help themselves first. This is an example.

I am still working at the state level (level 5) and focusing on developing better ways to help multiple cities. Three years ago, I realized that developing a personal development program for the educational system was what I wanted to do. However, I started my career ten years ago. Also, I recently discovered that conducting more studies is the next step I need to develop the personal development program successfully.

Right now, I am unsure how to help different countries and work internationally. I need to continue learning, developing my passion, and growing to reach the top levels. I believe I will develop new ideas that will help me reach the top levels after I accomplish the bottom levels.

So whatever level a person is at on the Life Purpose Pyramid, they must stay focused on making that level as successful as possible. The steps the individual will need to take to achieve the next level will be revealed to them when they are ready.

Flexibility

The Life Purpose Pyramid aims to guide an individual's development and show a progression of creating meaning and purpose. It can also help individuals realize where they might lack the knowledge and skills to become successful in helping others. It is not meant for individuals to reach a destination because meaning and purpose cannot be attained simply by achieving a designated outcome (Thoits, 2012). Like self-actualization, the individual must be on a lifelong journey of learning new knowledge and skills and be creative in using their passion and abilities to help themselves and others to reach their full potential (Ivtzan et al., 2013).

Individuals can develop ideas to use at the upper levels before reaching them. For example, they might develop an idea for level 6 while working on level 3. Some individuals could even work on levels 3 and 6 simultaneously once they discover what they want to do. Spending the same amount of time at each level is unnecessary. An individual could take longer at the first level when working to figure out their passion and how to apply it. Once they understand their passion well, they might spend a short time in the second level because they can quickly help others

succeed. Or, individuals may quickly develop their creativity and innovate a successful idea. The individual might take longer to innovate at other levels so they would spend more time at those levels. Furthermore, individuals can travel between several levels up and down the Life Purpose Pyramid over their lifespan based on their life circumstances, individual choices, and mental health. For example, as an individual reach a higher level on the pyramid, they might have to return to the first level to learn and develop themselves to innovate new ideas and then return to the upper level.

It does not matter how much time a person spends at each level. As long as they are learning, developing, and putting effort into applying their passion and mastering each level, they create meaning and purpose for themselves. Remember, meaning and purpose are not destinations but motivational tools to help individuals progress toward reaching their full potential.

The benefits of applying the pyramid

The first benefit is personal growth. Moving up the pyramid requires individuals to learn new knowledge and skills to serve others successfully. The more a person learns, the stronger their personal growth. They will better understand themselves, such as their values and beliefs, which will guide them to make better decisions. They will be better equipped to handle life's problems and create new ideas to become successful. The individual's personal development also increases as they learn to overcome challenges. Each person will face uncertainties that require them to grow and believe in themselves to overcome the challenges. According to Abraham Maslow, personal growth can be a tool to help individuals develop their full potential and be at the highest level of human life (Ellis, 2013).

The second benefit is developing a strong purpose as individuals apply their passion to helping others. They will better understand how acting on their passions can make a difference in the world, which can translate into their life purposes. They have a clearer understanding of why they exist. These individuals will develop a sense of belonging, feel like they matter, and are worthy individuals with desirable characteristics. As a result, they will have more confidence which will help them build stronger social connections. They will attract others on their path who

support their journey. The more a person is connected with others, the higher their sense of belonging in the world (Kashdan & McKnight, 2013). Whenever an individual encounters an obstacle, their purpose will help them stay focused and motivate them to overcome it. They will develop an attitude and belief that they are a good person and that a bigger spiritual force is looking after and protecting them (Galek et al., 2015).

Skills to develop

Growing passion

Individuals should constantly find new ways to learn and grow their passion. As human beings, we will never be able to know our true passions because we are not perfect. This means people can always learn new things to help them understand and grow their passion. For example, if a person's passion is nutrition, they can take more courses or read more books about nutrition. The more each person learns about their passion, the more knowledge and methods they will have to help themselves and others.

Personal growth

Individuals need to learn new ways to become better and stronger to overcome challenges as new challenges manifest as they move up the pyramid. They must be ready to tackle those challenges and succeed. For example, individuals can learn how to develop and maintain a more positive attitude, see challenges as opportunities, learn problem-solving skills, and become more confident. They can also learn how to manage their emotions. For example, if they have doubt and fear, they can learn more about those emotions and how to manage them. When an individual discovers that they need to learn something to succeed, it is crucial to set time aside and learn so they can become successful.

It is also vital for individuals to take good care of themselves daily and do something to nourish their bodies, minds, and spirits. It takes a lot of energy and focus to help others succeed. For instance, when caring for the body, drink water, eat healthy food, exercise, and get enough rest.

If the individual cannot do all of them, they can pick one and try to do it daily. When caring for the mind, nourish it by reading, watching, or listening to something positive. They could watch a short video each day that will foster empowerment. To care for the spirit, help, and connect with others. Individuals will nourish their spirits if they work on developing their passion and helping themselves and others.

While individuals pursue personal development, it will help them believe that no matter what happens, they can overcome it. According to the Self-Determination Theory, humans can overcome anything (Proctor et al., 2015). It depends on whether they believe in themselves or not. The solution will always be out there that will help individuals overcome their challenges. Finding the solution depends on whether the person is willing to continue learning and growing.

Life success is not about what happens outside the individual; how the person feels within will push them forward when they encounter challenges. It is essential to be strong and not be afraid of failing. The courage and ability to overcome failures will also increase personal growth. Individuals must believe that even if they fail terribly, they will still be OK and can pick themselves back up. The ability to pick yourself back up is their inner strength. Whatever knowledge or skill a person lacks, they can learn. Individuals need to develop that state of mind to help them keep moving toward transformation, create meaning and purpose, and reach their full potential.

Contact Information

Dr. Mykim Tran is a humanistic psychologist. Her mission is to help individuals create a powerful legacy.

Website: www.mykimtran.com

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mykimtranphd/>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/mykimtranphd

References

- D'Souza, J., & Gurin, M. (2016). The universal significance of Maslow's concept of self-actualization. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 44*(2), 210–214. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000027>
- Ellis, A. (2013). The value of a human being. In M. E. Bernard (Ed.), *The strength of self-acceptance: Theory, practice, and research* (pp. 65–72). New York, NY: Springer.
- Galek, K., Flannelly, K., Ellison, C., Silton, N., & Jankowski, K. (2015). Religion, meaning and purpose, and mental health. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 7*(1), 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0037887>
- Hill, P., Burrow, A., & Summer, R. (2015). Life is pretty meaningful and/or purposeful?: On confluations, contexts, and consequences. *American Psychologist.*
- Ivtzan, I., Gardner, H., Bernard, I., Sekhon, M., & Hart, R. (2013). Well-being through self-fulfillment: Examining developmental aspects of self-actualization. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 41*(2), 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2012.71207>
- Kashdan, T. & McKnight, P. (2013). Commitment to a purpose in life: An antidote to the suffering by individuals with social anxiety disorder. *Emotion, 13*(6), 1150-1159. doi: 10.1037/a0033278
- McKnight, P. & Kashdam (2009). Purpose in life as a system that creates and sustains health and well-being: An integrative, testable theory. *Review of General Psychology, 13*(3), 242-251. doi: 10.1037/a0017152
- Naslund, M. (2015). *Counselor education: A personal growth & personal development experience* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from proquest.com. (UMI No. 3721187).
- Proctor, C., Tweed, R., & Morris, D. (2015). The Rogerian fully functioning person: A positive psychology perspective. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 56*(5), 503–529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167815605936>
- Thoits, P. (2012). Role-identity salience, purpose and meaning in life, and well-being among volunteers. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 75*(4), 360-384. doi: 10.1177/0190272512459662
- Winston, C. N. (2016). An existential-humanistic-positive theory of human motivation. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 44*(2), 142–163. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000028>