

The 9 Variables

of Life 2.0

A research-grounded self-assessment for leaders who have built something significant — and are ready to build a life that matches it.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read each variable. Score yourself honestly from 1–10.

Note where you scored 6 or below — those are your leverage points.

The variable with your lowest score is where your life is leaking fulfillment.

01

Purpose & Meaning

The orientation of your life toward something that transcends the immediate

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Purpose is not a career choice or a passion project. It is the degree to which your life feels directed — like it is going somewhere that matters, for reasons you believe in. Research from Ryff (1989) identifies purpose in life as one of the most robust predictors of both subjective well-being and long-term physical health. People with high purpose show lower inflammatory markers, better immune function, and longer telomeres — markers of cellular aging. The mechanism is neurological: purposeful engagement regulates the brain's default mode network, quieting the ruminative loops associated with depression and anxiety.

REFLECTION QUESTION

If your life were a book, would you be compelled by where the story is heading — or does the next chapter feel like more of the same?

1 – 4 • NEEDS ATTENTION

Drifting, going through motions, unclear what you're building toward

8 – 10 • THRIVING

Clear sense of direction, know why you're doing what you're doing, life feels intentional

MY SCORE

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02

Relationships

The quality of your close, warm, and reciprocal connections with others

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The Harvard Study of Adult Development — 87 years, the longest-running study of adult life ever conducted — has one central finding: the quality of your close relationships is the single strongest predictor of your health, happiness, and longevity. Not wealth. Not IQ. Not professional achievement. Relationships. Holt-Lunstad's meta-analysis of 3.4 million people found that social isolation increases mortality risk by 29% — equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The research on quality is unambiguous: it is depth, not frequency, that produces the effect.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Who in your life truly knows you — not your role or your achievements, but you? And when did you last let them in?

1 – 4 • NEEDS ATTENTION

Surface-level connections, feeling unseen, isolated even when surrounded by people

8 – 10 • THRIVING

Deep mutual relationships, feel genuinely known, have people you can be fully honest with

MY SCORE

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03

Identity & Autonomy

The degree to which your life is self-authored and aligned with who you actually are

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) identifies autonomy — acting from genuine volition rather than external pressure or internal obligation — as one of three universal psychological needs. When autonomy is thwarted, the body registers it as a physiological threat: cortisol rises, prefrontal flexibility drops, and the capacity for clear thinking and emotional regulation degrades. McAdams's narrative identity research shows that people who construct a coherent, self-authored life story — one that makes sense of who they are and where they are going — report significantly higher well-being and psychological maturity.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Is the life you're living the one you chose — or the one that accumulated around you while you were busy being what others needed?

1 – 4 • NEEDS ATTENTION

Living for others' expectations, unclear who you are outside your roles, choices feel constrained

8 – 10 • THRIVING

Strong sense of self, make choices from your own values, life feels authored by you

MY SCORE

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04

Growth & Challenge

Your ongoing engagement with difficulty in the service of your own development

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Csikszentmihalyi's flow research found that humans are most fulfilled not in leisure, but in states of absorbed challenge — where skill meets difficulty at the right edge. Dweck's (2006) growth mindset research shows that those who treat challenge as information rather than indictment consistently outperform those who avoid it. Neurologically, challenge is when the dopamine system is most robustly engaged — dopamine is released in the pursuit of goals, not merely their achievement. Comfort without challenge produces boredom. Challenge without support produces anxiety. The sweet spot is growth.

REFLECTION QUESTION

When did you last do something that genuinely stretched you — not performed growth, but actually felt the edge of your current capacity?

1 – 4 • NEEDS ATTENTION

Stuck in comfort zones, avoiding challenge, skills feel stagnant, bored or anxious

8 – 10 • THRIVING

Consistently learning, embracing difficulty, sense of forward development and expanding capacity

MY SCORE

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05

Physical Vitality

The condition of your body as both foundation and expression of your flourishing

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Physical vitality is not a lifestyle variable — it is the biological substrate of everything else. Aerobic exercise elevates BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), a neurotrophin that promotes neurogenesis and synaptic plasticity in the hippocampus — with effects on mood regulation comparable to antidepressant medication in mild-to-moderate depression (Schuch et al., 2016). Sleep deprivation degrades prefrontal function, emotional regulation, and decision-making within 24 hours. The body is not a vehicle for the mind. It is the condition in which the mind operates. Every other variable in this framework is mediated by how well your physical system is functioning.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Does your body feel like an asset — something that gives you energy, clarity, and presence — or a liability you manage around?

1 – 4 · NEEDS ATTENTION

Chronically depleted, poor sleep, sedentary, body feels like an obstacle

8 – 10 · THRIVING

Consistent energy, quality sleep, regular movement, physical system supporting not limiting life

MY SCORE

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06

Financial Security

The experience of adequate resources and freedom from the cognitive burden of financial stress

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Mani et al. (2013, Science) demonstrated that financial stress imposes a cognitive burden equivalent to losing 13 IQ points — not because people under financial strain are less intelligent, but because scarcity commandeers the executive function required for planning, self-regulation, and future orientation. Kahneman, Killingsworth, and Mellers (2023, PNAS) resolved the decades-long debate: for most people, more financial security is associated with greater well-being across the income range. The construct that matters is security — the felt experience of adequate resources and freedom from chronic financial anxiety — not wealth as an abstraction.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Does money feel like a resource in your life — something that creates options — or a source of ongoing tension that occupies mental space you'd rather use elsewhere?

1 – 4 • NEEDS ATTENTION

Chronic financial anxiety, scarcity mindset, money restricts options and occupies mental bandwidth

8 – 10 • THRIVING

Financial security, adequate resources, money is not a daily stressor, future feels possible

MY SCORE

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07

Contribution

The experience of positively affecting others and leaving a meaningful trace

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Erikson's (1950) theory identifies generativity — the need to create or nurture things that will outlast the self — as the central developmental imperative of mature adulthood. Neurobiologically, contribution activates the mesolimbic dopamine system (the same reward circuit as food, connection, and accomplishment) alongside the oxytocin system, producing the 'warm glow' documented across neuroimaging studies of charitable giving (Moll et al., 2006, PNAS). Critically: the wellbeing benefit depends on intrinsic motivation. Contribution that is freely chosen produces flourishing. Contribution that is obligatory produces resentment.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Do you feel that your existence is making a dent — that people, work, or the world is measurably better because you showed up?

1 – 4 · NEEDS ATTENTION

Actions feel self-contained, unclear impact, contribution feels transactional or obligatory

8 – 10 · THRIVING

Clear sense of positive impact, feel genuinely useful, contribution is freely chosen and meaningful

MY SCORE

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Presence & Aliveness

The capacity to be fully engaged with your actual life as it is being lived

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010, Science) found through smartphone experience sampling that human minds wander approximately 47% of waking hours — and mind-wandering consistently predicts lower happiness, regardless of what the task is. During flow states, the brain's default mode network (the seat of ruminative self-referential thought) powers down, and the prefrontal inner critic quiets — producing what Dietrich (2004) called transient hypofrontality. Presence is not a mood. It is a trainable attentional capacity: the degree to which you are genuinely engaged with the life you are actually living, rather than the one in your head.

REFLECTION QUESTION

When you're in a conversation, a meal, a moment — are you actually there? Or are you somewhere else, processing, planning, evaluating, absent?

1 – 4 · NEEDS ATTENTION

Chronically distracted, mentally elsewhere, going through motions, life feels unlived

8 – 10 · THRIVING

Genuinely engaged with life as it happens, capacity for absorption, moments feel real and vivid

MY SCORE

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Character & Virtue

The disposition to act in alignment with your values, consistently and especially under pressure

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

VanderWeele's Harvard Flourishing Program identifies character and virtue as a core domain of human flourishing — not merely correlated with it but constitutive of it. Longitudinal research (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2022) found that each standard deviation increase in moral compass is associated with a 31% reduced odds of depression onset. When we act against our values, the anterior cingulate cortex — the brain's conflict monitor — activates a stress response physiologically similar to physical threat (de Vries et al., 2015). Character is the slowest-moving variable in this framework. It is built through deliberate choice under pressure, accumulated over years. It does not produce flourishing alone — but without it, none of the other eight variables hold over time.

REFLECTION QUESTION

Are you the same person in private that you are in public? And when it costs something to be that person — do you still show up?

1 – 4 · NEEDS ATTENTION

Gap between values and actions, integrity feels situational, choices don't reflect who you want to be

8 – 10 · THRIVING

Consistent alignment between values and behavior, integrity holds under pressure, trust in yourself

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Your 9 Variables at a Glance

01	Purpose & Meaning	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
02	Relationships	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
03	Identity & Autonomy	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
04	Growth & Challenge	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
05	Physical Vitality	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
06	Financial Security	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
07	Contribution	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
08	Presence & Aliveness	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
09	Character & Virtue	MY SCORE _____ ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

WHAT THESE SCORES ARE TELLING YOU

- Any score below 6 is where your fulfillment is leaking. Start there — not with your highest variable.
- The variable with your lowest score is often the one you've been avoiding the longest.
- No single variable produces flourishing alone. The system works together.

This is your starting point. Not your diagnosis.

The research behind the 9 Variables is unambiguous: human flourishing is not accidental. It is the result of specific, identifiable conditions being met — and specific gaps being addressed. Most high performers have the business side mapped. What you're holding in your hands is the map for everything else.

1 Identify your lowest variable.

That is your highest-leverage investment right now — not the thing you're already good at.

2 Sit with your reflection questions.

The answers you avoid are usually the most important ones.

3 If you're ready to go deeper,

a Clarity Call with Laura is 60 minutes that changes the map of what's possible.

Book a Clarity Call

thelife20.com/clarity