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BRIEF REPORT



## Reflecting on death: Priorities for living well

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### ABSTRACT

The positive death movement has popularized considering one's mortality. Stemming from this, *Before I Die Walls* erected globally prompt individual reflection on life goals, considering life's finitude. The aims of the study: (i) examined relative extent of three categories of responses to a Before I Die task, moderated by age, and (ii) tested whether purpose in life is associated with categories of Before I Die responses, moderated by age. Young, middle aged and older adults ( $N = 195$ ) completed a Before I Die task (BID) and several measures including a purpose in life scale. BID task responses were reliably card-sorted into theoretically derived categories. Findings show responses most frequently represent living an Accomplished and Productive Life. Having higher purpose was related to focus on an Accomplished and Productive Life for younger adults. Before I Die walls may be a useful activity allowing adults to generate goals aligned with living well.

### Introduction

Death reflection is thought to encourage living well (Vail et al., 2012) by helping individuals prioritize personally important life experiences, given life's finitude (Bluck et al., 2022). One way that death reflection has been encouraged in popular culture is through a worldwide initiative that encourages individuals to publicly write responses to the prompt "Before I Die, I want to..." on community walls (Before I Die walls; Chang, 2013). The current study leverages this Before I Die Wall prompt. Our research provides a framework for examining Before I Die responses, guided by existing theory on living well, to further understand how death reflection may relate to setting priorities for living well.

The current study embraces the notion that death reflection may encourage living well (Vail et al., 2012). It does not, however, employ Terror Management Theory (i.e., TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986), one of the typical methods (e.g., experimental design manipulating mortality salience) to study death awareness. Classic TMT literature suggests negative outcomes of managing the inevitability of death. That is, individuals quell death-related anxiety by endorsing shared conceptions of reality (i.e., cultural worldviews) to transcend death, some of which may have negative

outcomes (e.g., materialism and greed: Kasser & Sheldon, 2000).

More recent research, however, investigates the positive side of terror management theory (Vail et al., 2012) which emphasizes that thoughts of death may influence positive outcomes. For example, some may uphold cultural worldviews through increased prosocial behaviors (Zaleskiewicz et al., 2015). The current study adopts a unique approach focused not on quelling anxiety but on consideration of life's priorities in the face of finitude. We suggest that contemplating life's finitude when articulating life goals can foster setting priorities for living well. While not closely knit with TMT, our study is in line with investigating positive outcomes of mortality awareness.

Some research outside of the TMT literature has also focused on how death reflection encourages positive consideration of life goals. For example, death education activities aim to reduce death anxiety and foster positive reflections on mortality (Testoni et al., 2020). Recent recommendations suggest basing death education initiatives in a positive psychology framework: not just targeting negative emotions about death but also promoting living positive lives through acknowledgement of mortality (Song et al., 2019). Our work on Before I Die initiatives takes that positive approach.

Empirical research has further examined how reflecting on mortality can clarify important life goals through the use of bucket lists and Before I Die tasks. For example, Periyakoil et al. (2018;  $N = 3016$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 50.0$ ) report that most of their online survey participants (91.2%) had previously generated lists of specific activities they wished to complete before death (i.e., bucket lists). Content analysis revealed five themes: time with loved ones, accomplishing goals, achieving milestones, financial stability, and travel-adventure activities. Similarly, Rawlings et al. (2018;  $N = 633$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 49.75$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.91$ ) asked participants to respond to a Before I Die task and found that the most common themes involved close relationships, meaningful activities, aspiring toward a better self, living life fully and feeling happy. Taken together, themes found in responses to these death reflection activities seem to reflect adults' concern with feeling they have lived well before death.

To move this field forward, we formalized these previous approaches by developing three theoretically grounded categories of living well: living a *Happy and Comfortable Life*, an *Accomplished and Productive Life*, and a *Rich and Varied Life*. Living well has sometimes been theoretically conceived in hedonic terms (Bauer, 2021). Our first category, Happy and Comfortable Life, is derived from the hedonic view of living well. That is, the Happy and Comfortable category focuses on pleasure and positive feeling states (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It is in line with a positive psychology focus on well-being (Diener, 2000) and the view that a country's success should be judged by the happiness of its citizens, [www.worldhappiness.report](http://www.worldhappiness.report).

The next category, living an Accomplished and Productive life, is based on views of normative adult developmental goals from lifespan developmental theory (Neugarten, 1976). For example, Staudinger and Kessler (2009) identified adjustment to one's adult role as critical: adjustment includes being able to fit well in one's expected adult roles and fill positions in society in a successful accomplished manner. This connotes living well by excelling in ways that are part of the mainstream societal master narrative (McLean & Syed, 2015) concerning achieving personal, family and career milestones and embracing societally valued character strengths (Park & Peterson, 2009).

Our final category, living a Rich and Varied Life is grounded in a theoretical view of living well that involves seeking new interests (Staudinger & Kessler, 2009) that may lead to growth. As described by Oishi and Westgate (2022), some individuals aim for a good life by seeing life as a process of discovery, seeking

new experiences to generally enrich life or in pursuit of positive self-change.

We also examined whether Before I Die responses vary across adulthood and, additionally, if they vary based on individuals' sense of purpose in life. Socioemotional selective theory (SST; Carstensen et al., 1999) suggests that as individuals age, they prioritize emotion-focused goals that improve quality of life over knowledge-related goals that help one build a better future. Perception of time left in life varies by age (Demiray & Bluck, 2014) and may be the trigger for differential goal focus (Brandtstädter et al., 2010). For example, Chu et al. (2018;  $N = 51$ , 24–75 years,  $M_{\text{age}} = 45.5$ ) found perceiving more time left to live was related to generating less emotionally meaningful goals during a death reflection activity.

Young adults, with more time left to live, prioritize developmental tasks (Erikson, 1963) that involve forging a normative adult identity including establishing typical role relations (i.e., finding a romantic partner, potentially bearing children). These developmental tasks focus younger, compared to middle and older adults, on living well in a particular manner: forging an accomplished and productive future adult life. Older adults face the developmental task of integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1963). This focuses them somewhat more on looking back on one's personal past, and not planning extensively for the long-term future. Following Erikson's developmental tasks, we hypothesize that younger people, with more life ahead, may focus on normative achievement-related goals (Flunger et al., 2016) that help them build success and autonomy as they enter adulthood.

In addition to age, one's sense of purpose may also affect Before I Die responses. Purpose guides intentionality, directing activities (Ryff, 1989) for living well. Interestingly, it is also often a feature of societal death notices. For example, obituaries may include purposeful, virtuous accomplishments (Payne et al., 2022). There is thus a clear conceptual overlap between living with purpose today and having an Accomplished and Productive Life before one dies. Other ways of living well, such as living a Rich and Varied, or Happy and Comfortable Life, may not directly depend on having a strong purpose in life.

These two factors, age and extent of purpose in life, may combine to affect death reflection responses. Individuals develop purpose in young adulthood (Bronk et al., 2009) when they often engage in prioritizing life milestones that help them become accomplished, productive adults (Ebner et al., 2006). Following this, we hypothesize that younger people,

with more life ahead, may focus on normative achievement-related goals (Flunger et al., 2016) that help build success and autonomy more so than middle-aged and older adults.

## Current study

The current study extends past literature on death reflection activities by presenting a theoretically derived scheme for categorizing Before I Die responses, attending to variation in responses across three adult age groups, and examining psychological characteristics (i.e., sense of purpose in life) that may affect how one engages with a Before I Die task. The aims were to (1.1) examine relative extent of the three categories of Before I Die responses, (1.2) with age as a moderator and (2.1) test whether adults' purpose in life is related to Before I Die Responses, (2.2) with age as a moderator. We expected most responses to reflect a societally normative view of living well, that is living an Accomplished and Productive Life, particularly for young adults. Greater purpose in life was expected to relate to more responses reflecting living an Accomplished and Productive Life, especially for the young.

## Methods

These data are part of a larger online study (McDarby et al., 2021).<sup>1</sup> Participants completed demographics, the Purpose in Life scale, and responded to a Before I Die task.

### Participants

English-speaking adults ( $N = 232$ ) in the United States were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Exclusion criteria further ensured data quality (Grysmann, 2015) with a final sample of  $N = 195$ . Studies have shown that MTurk is as representative as other recruitment methods, with results closely mirroring those from population-based samples (McCredie & Morey, 2019). Participants with a "Master Qualification" status were selected due to their history of higher quality responses. Exclusion criteria further ensured data quality (Grysmann, 2015) resulting in a final sample of  $N = 195$ .

### Demographic characteristics

Participants reported age, gender, and race/ethnicity using: American/Indian, Asian, Black/African American, Caribbean, Hispanic/Latino, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, White/Caucasian. The sample was largely Caucasian

(84.1%). Participants were 107 female, 88 male: young adults ( $N = 61$ ; 20–28 years,  $M_{\text{age}} = 25.35$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.06$ ), middle-aged adults ( $N = 65$ ; 40–50 years,  $M_{\text{age}} = 45.06$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.97$ ) and older adults ( $N = 69$ ; 60–72 years,  $M_{\text{age}} = 63.65$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.07$ ).

## Materials and procedures

### Purpose in life

On the Purpose in Life subscale of the Psychological Well-being Scale (Ryff, 1989), participants rated 7 items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ) from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*). Items include, "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life."

### Before I Die: Task instructions

Our Before I Die task was based on Before I Die walls (Chang, 2013). We used the instructions: "Think about your life for a minute. We all know that we will one day die. What is important to you to do before that time?" Participants were instructed to provide three open-ended responses to the prompt, "Before I Die, I want to ..." Similar BID tasks in prior research have asked for responses ranging from five (Periyakoil et al., 2018) to unlimited (Rawlings et al., 2018). Limiting to three responses prompted participants to selectively consider and focus on their most significant goals, thereby omitting those of lesser importance (Figure 1). For response examples, see Table 1.

### Before I Die: Categories and card-sort procedure

We developed three Before I Die categories in accordance with theory on living well. Living an Accomplished and Productive Life involves completing normative goals that follow a typical life script, focusing on achievement or status, and developing one's character. Living a Rich and Varied Life involves pursuing a variety of recreational, experiential activities. Living a Happy and Comfortable Life involves seeking hedonic pleasure (Kahneman, 1999) including striving for psychological health, pursuit of wellbeing, and reflecting positively on life.

We used the closed, single-criterion card sort method (Fincher & Tenenberg, 2005): categories for sorting responses were pre-established and each response was sorted into only one category. Four research assistants followed a card-sort procedural manual with detailed descriptions of the categories. Participants' three responses were each sorted into the best-fit category or 'other' if no category fit well. Inter-rater reliability across the four sorters was strong ( $ICC = .81$ ). The vast majority of responses were agreed upon at 75% or more of the

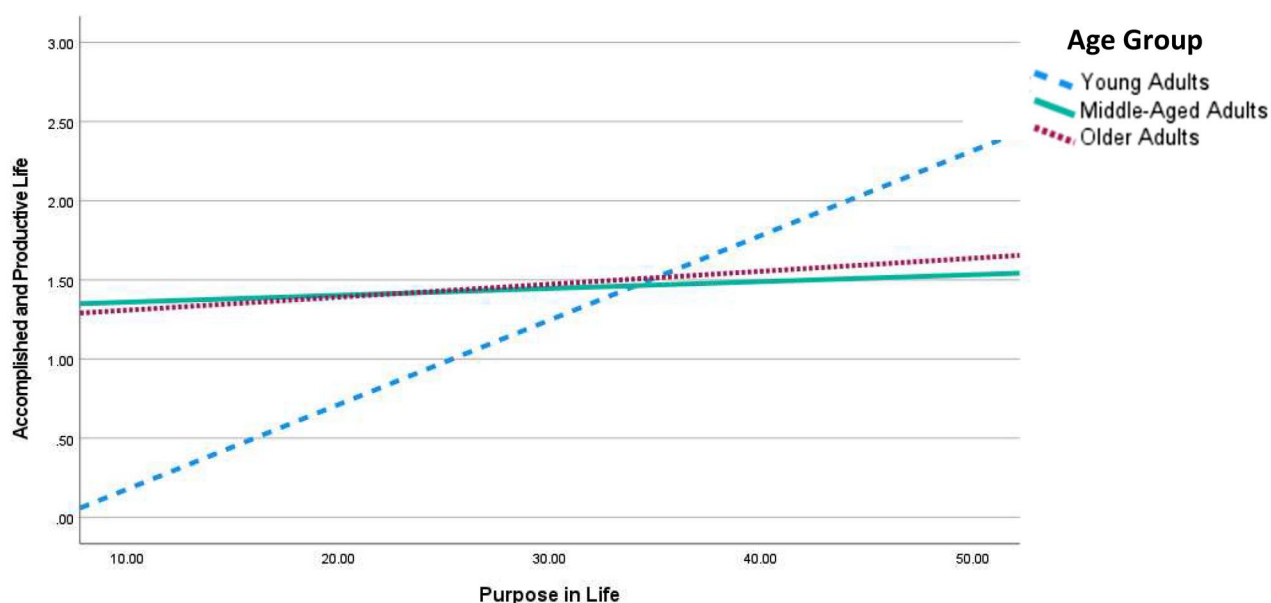


Figure 1. Relation of purpose in life to BID: Accomplished and productive life by age group.

Table 1. Before I Die: Participant response examples.

Before I Die Response category	Example
Accomplished and productive life	"Buy my dream house" "Get married" "Become rich and successful" "Be a mother" "Help others find God" "Be a good friend" "See my children flourish"
Rich and varied life	"Stay curious" "Explore the nooks and crannies of the world" "Witness a volcanic eruption" "Drive a truck across the country" "Go to all national parks" "Learn a foreign language" "Ride the Amtrak to Canada"
Happy and comfortable life	"Be happy" "Feel satisfied" "Stop worrying about trivial things" "Be at peace" "Enjoy retirement" "Live in the moment" "Enjoy my life every day"

group of card sorters and considered final ( $N = 536$  responses). Research assistants discussed discrepancies for the 49 responses with 50% or less agreement to agree on category assignments.

**Statistical analysis**

Bivariate correlations appear in Table 2. We examined age group by gender differences using chi-square analyses. Results confirmed unequal distribution,  $\chi^2 = 12.13$ ,  $p = .002$ , Cramer’s  $V = .25$ ,  $p = .002$ . As the age groups were unequally balanced for gender, gender was controlled in further analyses.

To address Aim 1, we conducted a repeated-measures ANCOVA, with age group (young, middle, older)

Table 2. Correlation matrix of all study variables ( $N = 195$ ).

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Age	–					
2 Gender	.24**	–				
3 BID: Accomplish-productive	.02	.02	–			
4 BID: Rich-varied	–.03	.05	–.33**	–		
5 BID: Happy-comfortable	–.04	–.04	–.41**	–.23**	–	
6 Purpose in life	.10	.08	.19*	.04	–.16*	–

Note: Age as continuous variable. As no transgender reported, gender was categorical: 1 = male, 2 = female. BID = Before I Die. \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ .

as the between-subjects factor, Before I Die response category as the within-subjects factor. Mauchly’s test of sphericity revealed non-equality in the variance between the Before I Die response categories ( $\epsilon = .90$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We thus interpreted results using Huynh–

Feldt corrections. We used paired-samples *t*-tests to follow-up on significant effects.

To address Aim 2, we used three regression models to examine associations between purpose in life and endorsement of each Before I Die category, with age group as a moderator. Due to the multicategorical moderator (age group) we used a Helmert coding system (Hayes & Montoya, 2017), such that two variables were used in the model to examine main age effects ( $D_1$ ,  $D_2$ ) and two to assess moderation effects of purpose by age ( $M_1$ ,  $M_2$ ). Use of two terms for each effect allows streamlined inspection of main effects of membership in each age group; for example,  $D_1$  tests differences between young adults and the two other age groups, while  $D_2$  reveals any potential differences between middle-aged and older adults. Numerical entry into each regression model was as follows: for young adults,  $D_1 = -.667$  and  $D_2 = 0$ ; for middle-aged adults  $D_1 = .333$  and  $D_2 = -.500$ ; and for older adults,  $D_1 = .333$  and  $D_2 = .500$ . For moderation terms ( $M_1$ ,  $M_2$ ),  $M_1 = \text{purpose in life} \times D_1$  and  $M_2 = \text{purpose in life} \times D_2$ . We also inspected change ( $\Delta$ ) in  $R^2$  scores in significant moderation models to support the relevance of the moderation terms in each model (Hayes & Montoya, 2017).

## Results

### Aim 1: Relative extent of Before I Die responses

The repeated-measures ANCOVA revealed a within-subjects effect,  $F(1.85, 353.23) = 7.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .31$ . Paired samples *t*-tests demonstrated that responses representing an Accomplished and Productive Life ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) were more prevalent than both Rich and Varied Life ( $M = 0.56$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ;  $t = 9.96$ ,  $CI: [0.79, 1.17]$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and Happy and Comfortable Life ( $M = 0.37$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ;  $t = 11.83$ ,  $CI: [0.97, 1.36]$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Rich and Varied Life was more prevalent than Happy and Comfortable Life ( $t = 2.51$ ,  $CI: [0.04, 0.34]$ ;  $p = .013$ ). Effects were not moderated by age group,  $F(3.70, 353.23) = 0.81$ ,  $p = .45$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ .

### Aim 2: Associations between purpose in life, Before I Die responses and age group

Regression results are presented in Table 3. Higher purpose in life,  $F(4, 190) = 2.66$ ,  $R^2 = .08$ ,  $p = .013$ , was positively associated with the Before I Die Accomplished and Productive Life category ( $t = 2.79$ ). Addition of the interaction terms in the model resulted in a significant  $R^2$  change ( $R^2\Delta = .04$ ;  $F = 4.09$ ,  $p = .018$ ). The interaction showed higher purpose in life predicted greater endorsement of Accomplished and Productive Life responses in

**Table 3.** Regression analyses predicting three Before I Die response categories ( $N = 195$ ).

Parameter	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	95% CI	
				LL	UL
<i>Criterion: BID accomplished and productive life</i>					
Constant	0.64	0.35	1.84	-0.05	1.35
Purpose in Life	0.02	0.01	2.79**	0.01	0.04
Age Group ( $D_1$ )	1.63	0.61	2.69**	0.44	2.83
Age Group ( $D_2$ )	-0.12	0.73	-0.17	-1.56	1.31
Moderator ( $M_1$ )	-0.05	0.02	-2.85**	-0.08	-0.01
Moderator ( $M_2$ )	0.00	0.02	0.23	-0.03	0.04
Gender	0.05	0.14	0.40	-0.22	0.33
<i>Criterion: BID rich and varied life</i>					
Constant	0.29	0.25	1.17	-0.20	0.79
Purpose in Life	0.00	0.01	0.40	-0.01	0.01
Age Group ( $D_1$ )	0.20	0.23	0.48	-0.62	1.05
Age Group ( $D_2$ )	-0.83	0.51	-1.63	-1.85	0.18
Moderator ( $M_1$ )	-0.00	0.01	-0.31	-0.03	0.02
Moderator ( $M_2$ )	0.01	0.01	1.10	-0.01	0.04
Gender	0.11	0.10	1.14	-0.08	0.31
<i>Criterion: BID happy and comfortable life</i>					
Constant	0.82	0.24	3.45***	0.35	1.29
Purpose in Life	-0.01	0.01	-2.22	-0.02	-0.00
Age Group ( $D_1$ )	-0.99	0.41	-2.42*	-1.80	-0.18
Age Group ( $D_2$ )	-0.30	0.49	-0.61	-1.26	0.67
Moderator ( $M_1$ )	0.03	0.01	2.39*	0.00	0.05
Moderator ( $M_2$ )	0.01	0.01	0.73	-0.02	0.03
Gender	-0.03	0.09	-0.31	-0.22	0.16

Note. Age group was as follows: 1=young adults, 2=middle-aged adults, 3=older adults. Multicategorical coding resulted in two age group variables ( $D_1$ ,  $D_2$ ) and two age by purpose moderator variables ( $M_1$ ,  $M_2$ ). Rich and Varied Life and Happy and Comfortable Life models are not interpreted as overall models were non-significant. Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . BID = Before I Die Task Category.

young adults compared to the other age groups ( $t = -2.85$ ,  $p = .005$ ) but with no difference between middle-aged and older adults ( $M_2$ ,  $t = 0.32$ ,  $p = .820$ ). The models predicting Before I Die, Happy and Comfortable Life,  $F(4, 190) = 1.99$ ,  $R^2 = .06$ ,  $p = .069$ , and Before I Die, Rich and Varied Life categories,  $F(4, 190) = 1.49$ ,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $p = .182$ , were not significant at traditional levels.

## Discussion

Young, middle aged, and older adults completed a death reflection activity, responding to Before I Die tasks, to consider their life goals in relation to life's finitude. Findings show that, across the adult lifespan, individuals most commonly generate Before I Die responses related to living an Accomplished and Productive Life. In addition, for younger adults, but not older age groups, having a stronger current sense of purpose in life was associated with more often generating responses related to an Accomplished and Productive Life.

### Living well Before I Die: Accomplished and productive

Our Before I Die response categories were designed to capture different perspectives on living well (Bauer,

2021) based on theoretical work on adaptation and growth orientations in adulthood (e.g., Staudinger & Kessler, 2009) and themes noted in previous research (e.g., Periyakoil et al., 2018; Rawlings et al., 2018). When asked what they want to do before death, participants most frequently nominated activities related to achieving an Accomplished and Productive Life. We acknowledge this finding may be affected by participants generating only three responses.

Popular literature often maintains that consideration of one's own eventual death "encourages us to live more intensely" (Coelho & Pickett, 1998; pp. 190). This is echoed in mainstream views that death can encourage individuals to live extraordinary, remarkable lives (e.g., extensive travel bucket lists; [www.bucketlisttravels.com](http://www.bucketlisttravels.com)). The view is that awareness of a finite lifetime inspires one to reject a normative life for the pursuit of exciting activities or extraordinary experiences. However, our results suggest that when prompted by mortality, adults appear to frame their goals in line with socially prescribed roles that fit with the mainstream master narrative of living an accomplished and productive life (McLean & Syed, 2015). This narrative emphasizes seizing opportunities and trying to excel, but within the frame of what are considered normative adaptive domains of adulthood (Staudinger & Kessler, 2009).

### ***Purpose in life: Young adults' perspective on living well before death***

Having a greater sense of purpose in life involves showing dedication toward accomplishing important life activities (Ryff, 1989). Our expectations regarding younger adults were borne out: having a stronger sense of purpose in life (i.e., striving toward creating and realizing future plans) was related to more Before I Die responses in line with becoming accomplished and productive before death. Purpose appears to motivate the young, helping them to achieve in ways that represent excelling in normative adult roles (i.e., fulfilling ideal hopes and dreams; e.g., buy my dream home, see my children flourish), becoming accomplished and productive adults. Young adulthood is characterized by a long, open-ended sense of future time left in life (Demiray & Bluck, 2014). This sense of a vast future may drive young adults, motivated by purpose, to strive toward milestones related to mainstream master narratives (McLean & Syed, 2015). In contrast, middle and older adulthood is characterized by a less open-ended sense of future time left in life, where purpose may not act as such driver. Moreover,

identity searching is a prominent concern in young adulthood, often linked with identifying purpose (Erikson, 1963; Bronk et al., 2009). By the time adults reach mid to late adulthood, a sense of identity and purpose are often more clearly defined (Bronk et al., 2009). While they still pursue goals related to accomplishment and productivity, it may not necessarily be driven by their sense of purpose.

Finally, there are of course multiple ways to live a good life, beyond being accomplished and productive, that were endorsed by our participants when considering what they want to do before they die. This study did not, however, identify variables that predict more frequently striving to live a happy and comfortable life (Deci & Ryan, 2008) or a life full of rich and varied experiences (Oishi & Westgate, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Death reflection activities such as Before I Die walls in public spaces help individuals consider life's finitude. We based our methodology in the current study on these walls, asking individuals what they want to do, before they die. For young adults in the midst of forging the adult life ahead, having strong purpose in life appeared to focus them toward normative, socially valued accomplishments that would help them take on productive adult roles. In considering what to do before death, however, participants of all ages were also interested in seeking all life has to offer and finding emotional well-being. Activities that promote death reflection may encourage goals for living well, however an individual chooses to define it.

### **Note**

1. The original study had two experimental conditions (see McDarby et al., 2021). There were no condition differences in purpose in life ( $t = 0.55$ ;  $p = 0.58$ ) or the Before I Die response categories ( $t$  ranges .62–.74;  $p$  ranges .046–.08). Therefore, data was collapsed across conditions for analysis.

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### **Disclosure statement**

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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