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# THE MEANING MINDSET: *EXISTENTIAL AGENCY IN AMERICA*

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## Key Findings:

- ✓ Most Americans (69%) agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life (high existential agency). This is the case for both men and women and across regions of the country.
- ✓ Household income is positively associated with existential agency. However, the majority of Americans in every income group agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.
- ✓ The percent of Americans reporting high levels of existential agency has increased from 63% in 2021 to 69% in 2022.
- ✓ Work is positively associated with existential agency. Employed and retired Americans are more likely to agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life than Americans who are not working and not retired.
- ✓ Existential agency increases with age, but a majority of Americans across all age groups agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.
- ✓ Marriage is positively associated with existential agency. Married Americans are more likely to report high levels of existential agency than Americans who never married or are divorced, separated, or widowed.
- ✓ Though the percent of Americans reporting high levels of existential agency generally increased across groups from 2021 to 2022, there was a dramatic increase among adults under the age of 25. In 2021, only 39% of young adults reported high levels of existential agency. In 2022, 63% of young adults reported high levels of existential agency.
- ✓ Belief in the American Dream is strongly associated with existential agency. Some 81% of Americans who believe they have achieved the American Dream and 72% of those who believe they are on their way to achieving the American Dream agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Only 44% of those who believe the American Dream is out of reach agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.
- ✓ Level of education is positively associated with existential agency. However, the majority of Americans across all levels of education agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.



## INTRODUCTION

The quest for meaning in life plays a fundamental role in human progress and flourishing. When people believe they have the power to live meaningful lives (“existential agency”), they are motivated to improve their own lives and the lives of others. In 2021, the Archbridge Institute published the first report on existential agency in America. The current report is a 2022 update.

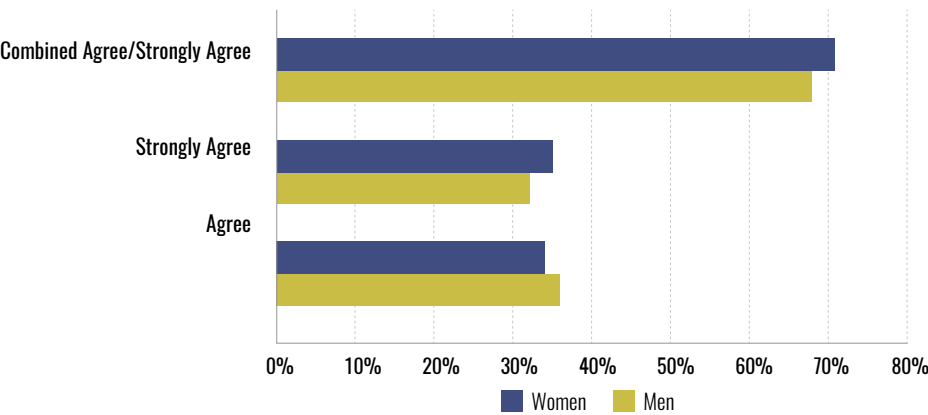
## A SNAPSHOT OF AMERICAN EXISTENTIAL AGENCY

To measure the existential agency of American adults, as part of a larger survey conducted by the Archbridge Institute, we asked just over 2,000 US adults to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: “I have the power to live a meaningful life.” For this report, individuals who agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life are classified as having high existential agency, though those in the strongly agree group represent the highest level of existential agency.

### American men and women report similarly high existential agency

Overall, most Americans (69%) agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. And this is the case for both men and women.

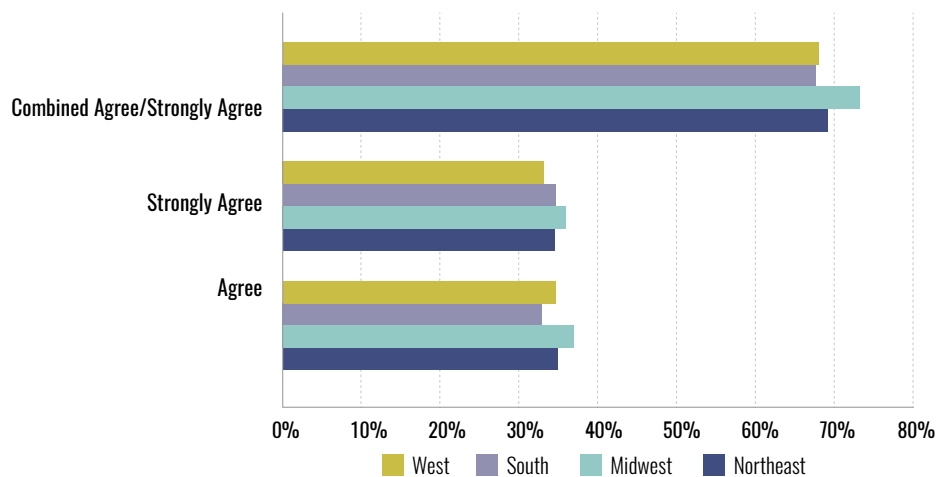
**Figure 1 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY FOR AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN**  
*“I have the power to live a meaningful life”*



## Americans living in different regions of the country report similarly high existential agency

The Midwest is the region with the highest percentage of Americans who agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life, but there is very little difference across regions.

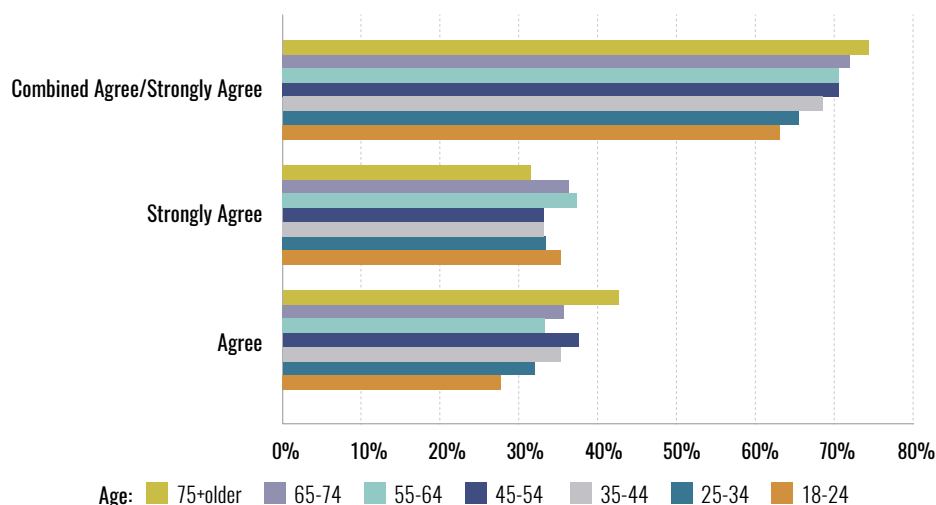
**Figure 2 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY ACROSS AMERICA**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Older adults report higher existential agency than younger adults

In general, existential agency increases with age. There is over a ten-percentage point difference between American adults in the oldest age group and those in the youngest age group. However, most Americans, regardless of age, agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Interestingly, last year (2021), a minority (39%) of adults under the age of 25 reported high levels of existential agency. The results this year suggest a dramatic change in the mindset of young adults.

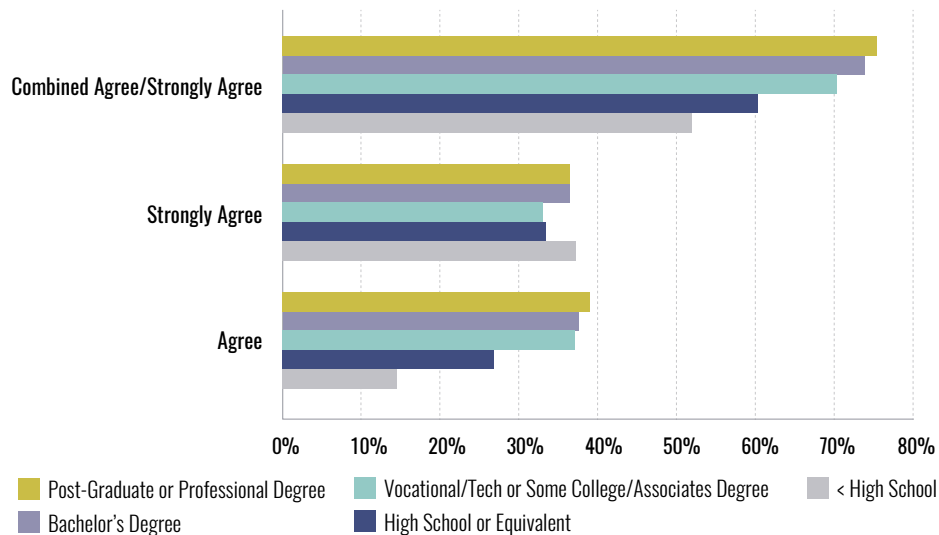
**Figure 3 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY ACROSS GENERATIONS**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Americans with higher levels of education report higher existential agency

Education is positively associated with existential agency. Just over half (52%) of American adults without a high school or equivalent level of education agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. For every group with some vocational training or education beyond high school, over 70% report high levels of existential agency.

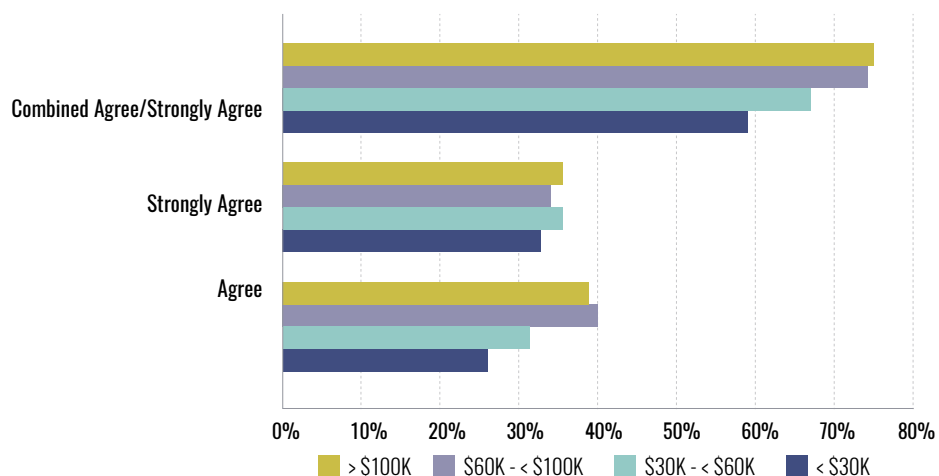
**Figure 4 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EDUCATION**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Americans in higher income households report higher existential agency

Nearly three-quarters of Americans with household incomes at or over \$60,000 per year agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. However, the majority of Americans in every income group report high existential agency.

**Figure 5 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*

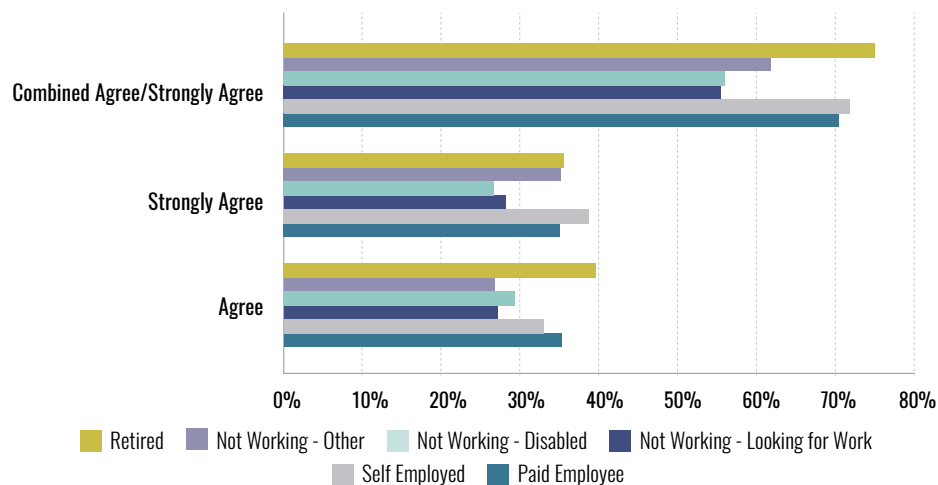




## Employed and retired Americans report higher existential agency than Americans who are not working

Three-quarters of retired Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Among non-retired Americans, work is positively associated with existential agency. More than 70% of working Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Only 56% of Americans who are out of work but are looking for work agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

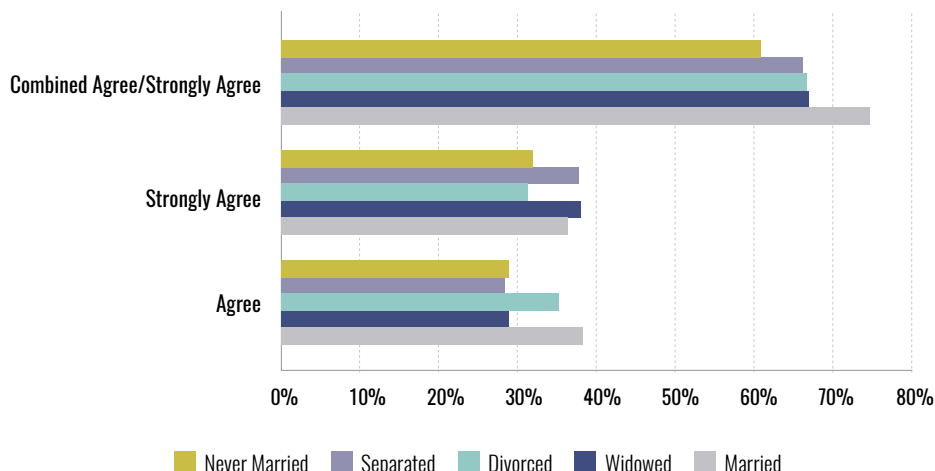
**Figure 6 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AND EMPLOYMENT STATUS**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Married Americans are the most likely to report high existential agency

Three quarters of married Americans, 61% of never-married Americans, and around 66% of currently separated or divorced Americans agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

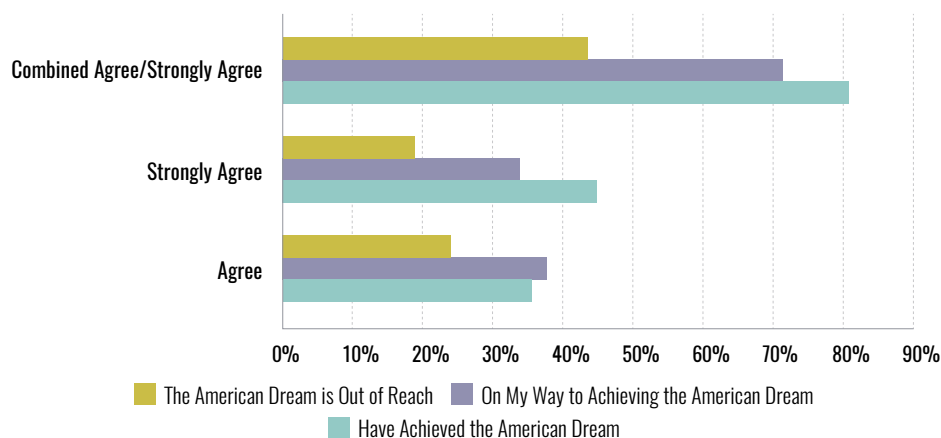
**Figure 7 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## Americans who believe they have achieved the American Dream or are on their way to achieving it are much more likely to report high existential agency than those who believe the American Dream is out of reach

Over 80% of Americans who believe they have achieved the American Dream and over 70% of Americans who believe they are on their way to achieving the American Dream agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. Only 44% of Americans who believe the American Dream is out of reach agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life.

**Figure 8 | EXISTENTIAL AGENCY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM**  
*"I have the power to live a meaningful life"*



## WHY A MEANING MINDSET MATTER FOR HUMAN PROGRESS AND FLOURISHING

Humans are a uniquely existential species.<sup>1</sup> We are driven by a quest for meaning in life. A large body of research indicates that finding meaning is important for both mental and physical health. People who feel meaningful are more satisfied with their lives<sup>2</sup> and less at risk of depression,<sup>3</sup> drug and alcohol abuse,<sup>4</sup> and suicide.<sup>5</sup> Life inevitably involves pain and suffering. Eventually, we all experience hardship, lose loved ones, and must face death ourselves. Meaning is a vital psychological resource for navigating these challenges in healthy and productive ways.<sup>6</sup> The belief that one's life is meaningful also predicts future physical health and longevity.<sup>7</sup>

Meaning in life contributes to individual flourishing beyond mental and physical health. For instance, working adults who view their jobs as meaningful demonstrate stronger job performance than those who don't view their jobs as meaningful.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, students who view their educational goals as meaningful perform better in school.<sup>9</sup> Research also finds that meaning in life predicts gains in household income and net worth over time.<sup>10</sup>

Meaning helps people flourish in many areas of life, in part, because it is a self-regulatory and motivational resource. The more people believe that they have a meaningful role to play in the world, the more motivated they are to direct their behavior in ways that helps keep them alive and thriving. For example, people are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors such as physical exercise when they are focused on meaning in life.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, students are more likely to persist on tedious academic activities and avoid

distractions (e.g., watch viral videos or play video games) when they associate their education with meaning in life.<sup>12</sup> More broadly, studies I conducted with my research team find that when people reflect on what makes their lives meaningful, they are more motivated to pursue their goals and more confident they can achieve them.<sup>13</sup> Other researchers find a similar relationship between meaning in life and goal motivation.<sup>14</sup>

Meaning not only motivates people to regulate their own behavior in healthy and productive ways, it also inspires them to serve others. For instance, my colleagues and I have found that the more people are focused on living a meaningful life, the more motivated they are to pursue prosocial goals and the more likely they are to engage in prosocial behavior such as volunteering and charitable giving.<sup>15</sup> In short, meaning in life supports both individual and community flourishing.<sup>16</sup>

The research showing that meaning serves a self-regulatory function highlights a more agentic and action-oriented dimension of meaning. Meaning inspires people to take responsibility for their lives and thus motivates goal-directed behavior. My colleagues and I refer to this aspect of meaning as existential agency, which is defined as the belief that one has the ability to find, maintain, and restore meaning in life. In other words, existential agency is more than just believing that one's life has meaning. It more specifically represents a self-determined mindset about meaning. To be existentially agentic is to believe in one's own ability to create a meaningful life, despite the barriers, challenges, and tragedies one faces in life. In our research, we find that existential agency uniquely predicts motivation. For instance, the greater the level of existential agency among aspiring entrepreneurs, the more motivated they are to pursue their business startups.<sup>17</sup>

Existential agency is an important psychological component of a free and flourishing society. The more individuals view themselves as existential agents, the more they will take responsibility for their lives, be engaged in their communities, and have the type of positive and solution-oriented mindset that promotes human progress and societal wellbeing.

## CONCLUSION

The current survey offers a snapshot of existential agency in America. Most Americans are existentially agentic; 69% agree or strongly agree that they have the power to live a meaningful life. However, there are notable differences among Americans. Older Americans are more likely to believe they have the power to live meaningful lives than young American adults. Education, income, work, marriage, and belief in the American Dream are also positively associated with existential agency. Efforts to understand, promote, and accelerate human progress and flourishing will benefit from future research examining ways to promote existential agency, as well as future research examining how existential agency may support the types of aspirations and actions that help individuals reach their full potential and make important contributions to their families, communities, and broader society.

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

For this survey we partnered again with NORC at the University of Chicago and its AmeriSpeak® panel. AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. The nationally representative sample consisted of 2,073 respondents. The survey was conducted May 26–31, 2022



## ENDNOTES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**DR. CLAY ROUTLEDGE** is the Vice President of Research and Director of the Human Flourishing Lab at the Archbridge Institute, the co-editor of *Profectus* (a periodic magazine on human progress and flourishing), and the co-host of *The Profectus Podcast*. He is also a visiting fellow with the Program on Pluralism and Civil Exchange at the Mercatus Center. Prior to joining the Archbridge Institute, Dr. Routledge was the Arden and Donna Hetland Distinguished Professor of Business at North Dakota State University and a faculty scholar at the Sheila and Robert Challey Institute for Global Innovation and Growth.

Dr. Routledge is a leading expert in existential psychology. His research examines how the human need for meaning in life influences and is influenced by different cognitive processes, self-regulation, momentous life experiences, personal and professional goals, creativity, social connections, cultural worldviews, spirituality and religiosity, entrepreneurship, and prosocial behavior. He has published over 100 scholarly papers, co-edited three books on existential psychology, and authored the books *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource* and *Supernatural: Death, Meaning, and the Power of the Invisible World*.

His work has been featured by many media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Times*, *CBS News*, *ABC News*, *BBC News*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, *NPR*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *HGTV*, *Men's Health*, *Wired*, *Forbes*, *BBC Worklife* and many others. He has authored dozens of articles for popular outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, *National Review*, *Entrepreneur*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Scientific American*. He also wrote the documentary short film *Why do We Feel Nostalgia?*



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