

Mark Manson

Life Advice That Doesn't Suck

7 Strange Questions That Help You Find Your Life Purpose

No idea what you should do with your life? Ask yourself these funny, but thought-provoking questions.

3 minute read by [Mark Manson](#)

One day, when my brother was 18, he waltzed into the living room and proudly announced to my mother and me that one day he was going to be a senator. My mom probably gave him the “That’s nice, dear,” treatment while I’m sure I was distracted by a bowl of Cheerios or something.

But for fifteen years, this purpose informed all of my brother’s life decisions: what he studied in school, where he chose to live, who he connected with, and even what he did with many of his vacations and weekends.

After almost half a lifetime of work later, he’s the chairman of a major political party and a judge. He also ran for state congress in his 30s and barely lost.

Don’t get me wrong. My brother is a freak. This basically never happens.

Most of us have no clue what we want to do with our lives. Even after we finish school. Even after we get a job. Even after we’re making money. Between ages 18 and 25, I changed [career aspirations](#) more often than I changed my underwear. And even after I had a business, it took another four years to clearly define what I wanted for my life.

Chances are you're more like me and have no clue what you want to do. It's a struggle almost every adult goes through. "What do I want to do with my life?" "What am I [passionate](#) about?" "What do I *not* suck at?" I often receive emails from people in their 40s and 50s who *still* have no clue what they want to do with themselves.

The Problem with Looking for a "Life Purpose"

Part of the problem is the concept of "life purpose" itself. The idea that we were each born for some higher purpose and it's now our cosmic mission to find it. This is the same kind of shitty logic used to justify things like spirit crystals or that your lucky number is 34 (but only on Tuesdays or during full moons).

Here's the truth. We exist on this earth for some undetermined period of time. During that time we do things. Some of these things are important. Some of them [are unimportant](#). And those important things [give our lives meaning](#) and [happiness](#). The unimportant ones basically just kill time.

So when people say, "What should I do with my life?" or "What is my life purpose?" what they're actually asking is: "What can I do with my time that is important?"

This is an infinitely better question to ask. It's far more manageable and it doesn't have all of the ridiculous baggage that the "life purpose" question does. There's no reason for you to be contemplating the cosmic significance of your life while sitting on your couch all day eating Doritos. Rather, you should be [getting off your ass](#) and discovering what feels important to you.

One of the most common email questions I get is people asking me what they should do with their lives, what their "life purpose" is. This is an impossible question for me to answer. After all, for all I know, this person is really into knitting sweaters for kittens or filming gay bondage [porn](#) in their basement. I have no clue. Who am I to say what's right or what's important to them?

But after some research, I have put together a series of questions to help you figure out *for yourself* what is important to you and what can add more [meaning to your life](#).

These questions are by no means exhaustive or definitive. In fact, they're a little bit ridiculous. But I made them that way because discovering purpose in our lives should be something that's fun and interesting, not a chore.

So whether you're looking for your dream job, thinking about starting a second career, or you just don't want to spend your entire life wondering "what if...", hopefully you find some meaningful answers to these ridiculous—but kind of thought-provoking—questions.

"What shit sandwich do you want to eat?
Because we all get served one eventually."

MARK MANSON

1. What's Your Favorite Flavor of Shit Sandwich and does it Come with an Olive?

Ah, yes. The all-important [question](#). What flavor of shit sandwich would *you* like to eat? Because here's the sticky little truth about life that they don't tell you at high school pep rallies:

Everything sucks, some of the time.

Now, that probably sounds incredibly pessimistic. And you may be thinking, "Hey Mr. Manson, turn that frown upside down." But I actually think this is a liberating idea.

Everything involves sacrifice. Everything includes [some sort of cost](#). Nothing is pleasurable or uplifting all of the time. So, the question becomes: what [struggle or sacrifice](#) are you willing to tolerate? Ultimately, what determines our ability to [stick with something we care](#) about is our ability to handle the rough patches and ride out the [inevitable rotten days](#).

If you want to be a brilliant tech entrepreneur, but you can't [handle failure](#), then you're not going to make it far. If you want to be a professional artist, but you aren't willing to see your work rejected hundreds, if not thousands of times, then you're done before you start. If you want to be a hotshot court lawyer, but can't stand the 80-hour workweeks, then I've got bad news for you.

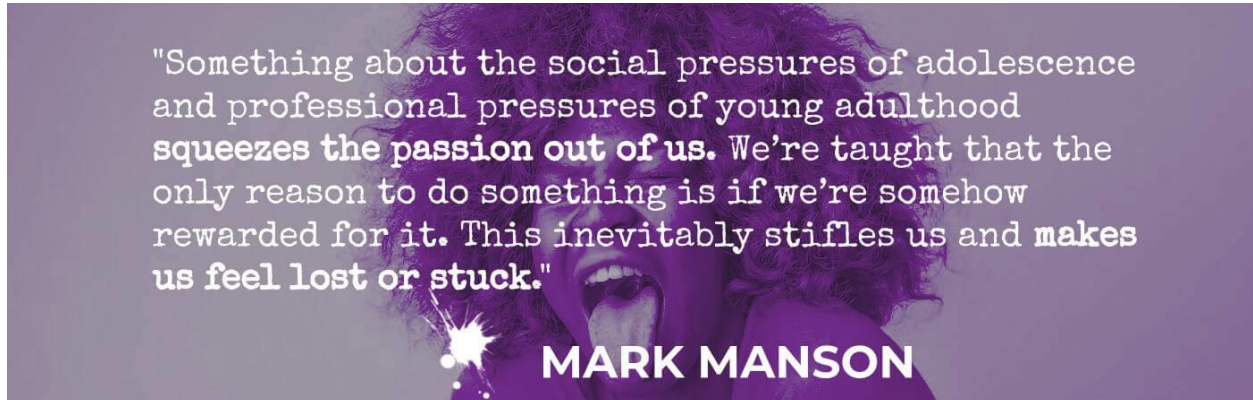
What unpleasant experiences are you able to handle? Are you able to stay up all night coding? Are you able to put off starting a family for 10 years? Are you able to have people laugh you off the stage over and over again until you get it right?



What shit sandwich do you want to eat? Because we all get served one eventually.

And your favorite shit sandwich *is your competitive advantage*. By definition, anything that you're willing to do (that you *enjoy* doing) that most people are not willing to do gives you a huge leg-up.

So, find your favorite shit sandwich. And you might as well pick one with an olive.



2. What's true about you today that would make your 8-year-old self cry?

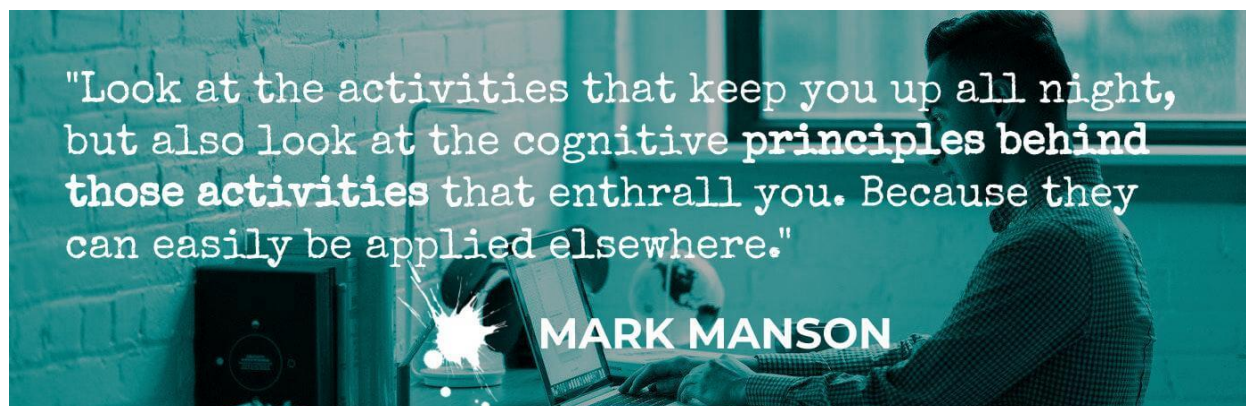
When I was a child, I used to write stories. I used to sit in my room for hours by myself, writing away, about aliens, about superheroes, about great warriors, about my friends and family. Not because I wanted anyone to read it. Not because I wanted to impress my parents or teachers. But for the sheer joy of it.

And then, for some reason, I stopped. And I don't remember why.

We all have a tendency to lose touch with what we loved as a child. Something about the social pressures of adolescence and professional pressures of young adulthood squeezes the passion out of us. We're taught that the only reason to do something is if we're [somehow rewarded for it](#). And the transactional nature of the world inevitably stifles us and makes us feel lost or stuck.

It wasn't until I was [in my mid-20s](#) that I rediscovered how much I loved writing. And it wasn't until I started my business that I remembered how much I enjoyed building websites — something I did in my early teens, just for fun.

The funny thing though, is that if my 8-year-old self asked my 20-year-old self, "Why don't you write anymore?" and I replied, "Because I'm not good at it," or "Because nobody would read what I write," or "Because you can't make money doing that," not only would I have been completely wrong, but that eight-year-old-boy version of me would have probably started crying. That eight-year-old boy didn't care about Google traffic or social media virality or book advances. He just wanted to play. And that's where passion always begins: with a sense of play.



3. What makes you forget to eat and poop?

We've all had that experience where we get so wrapped up in something that minutes turn into hours and hours turn into "Holy crap, I forgot to have dinner."

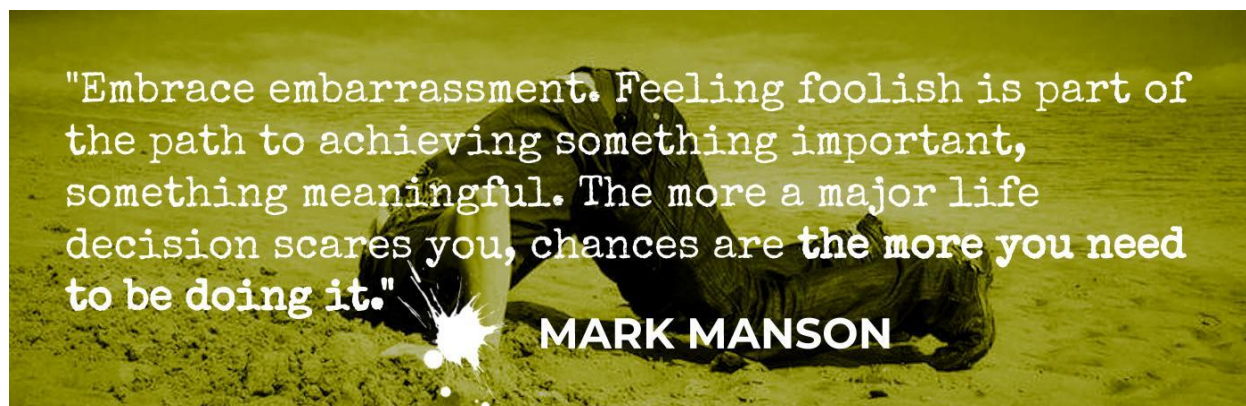
Supposedly, in his prime, Isaac Newton's mother had to regularly come in and remind him to eat because he would spend entire days so absorbed in his work that he would forget.

I used to be like that with video games. This probably wasn't a good thing. In fact, for many years it was kind of a problem. I would sit and play video games instead of doing more important things like studying for an exam, or showering regularly, or [speaking to other humans face-to-face](#).

It wasn't until I gave up the games that I realized my passion wasn't for the games themselves (although I do love them). My passion is for [improvement](#), being good at something and then trying to get better. The games themselves — the graphics, the stories — they were cool, but I can easily live without them. It's the competition with others and with myself that I thrive on.

And when I applied that obsessiveness for [self-improvement](#) and competition to my own business and [to my writing](#), well, things took off in a big way.

Maybe for you, it's something else. Maybe it's organizing things efficiently, or getting lost in a fantasy world, or teaching somebody something, or solving technical problems. Whatever it is, don't just look at the activities that keep you up all night, but *look at the cognitive principles* behind those activities that enthrall you. Because they can easily be applied elsewhere.



4. How can You Better Embarrass Yourself?

Before you are able to be good at something and do something important, you must first suck at something and have no clue what you're doing. That's pretty obvious. And in order to suck at something and have no clue what you're doing, you must embarrass yourself in some shape or form, often repeatedly. And most people try to avoid embarrassing themselves, namely because it sucks.

Ergo, due to the [transitive property of awesomeness](#), if you avoid anything that could potentially embarrass you, then you will never end up doing something that feels important.

Yes, it seems that once again, it all comes back to [vulnerability](#).

Right now, there's [something you want to do](#), something you think about doing, something you *fantasize* about doing, yet you don't do it. You have your reasons, no doubt. And you repeat these reasons to yourself *ad infinitum*.

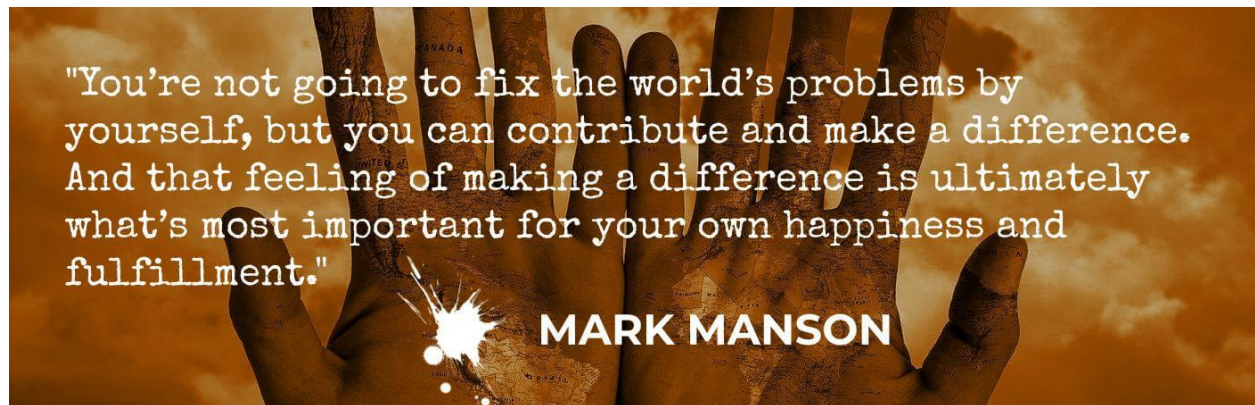
But what are those reasons? Because I can tell you right now that if those reasons are based on [what others would think](#), then you're screwing yourself over big time.

If your reasons are something like, "I can't start a business because spending time with my kids is more important to me," or "Playing Starcraft all day would probably interfere with my music, and music is more important to me," then OK. Sounds good.

But if your reasons are, "My [parents would hate it](#)," or "My friends would make fun of me," or "If I failed, I'd look like an idiot," then chances are, you're actually avoiding something you truly care about because caring about that thing is what scares the shit out of you, not what mom thinks or what Timmy next door says.

Great things are, by their very nature, unique and unconventional. Therefore, to achieve them, we must go against the herd mentality. And to do that is scary.

Embrace embarrassment. Feeling foolish is part of the path to achieving something important, something meaningful. The more a major life decision scares you, chances are the more you need to be doing it.



5. How Are You Going to Save the World?

In case you haven't seen the news lately, the world has a few problems. And by "a few problems," what I really mean is, "[everything is fucked](#) and we're all going to die."

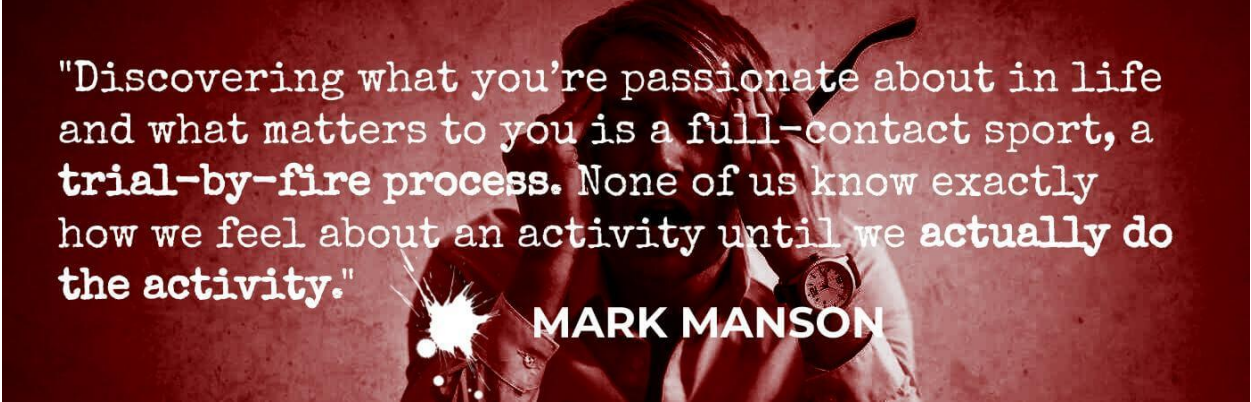
I've harped on this before, and the research also bears it out, but to live a happy and healthy life, we must hold on to values that are greater than our own pleasure or satisfaction.¹

So pick a problem and start saving the world. There are plenty to choose from. Our screwed up [education systems](#), economic development, domestic violence, [mental health care](#), governmental corruption. Hell, I just saw an article this morning on [sex trafficking in the US](#) and it got me all riled up and wishing I could do something. It also ruined my breakfast.

Find a problem you care about and start solving it. Obviously, you're not going to fix the world's problems by yourself. But you can contribute and make a difference. And that *feeling of making a difference* is ultimately what's most important for your own happiness and fulfillment. And importance equals purpose.

Now, I know what you're thinking. "Gee Mark, I read all of this horrible stuff and I get all pissed off too, but that doesn't translate to action, much less a new career path."

Glad you asked...



"Discovering what you're passionate about in life and what matters to you is a full-contact sport, a **trial-by-fire process**. None of us know exactly how we feel about an activity until we **actually do the activity**."

MARK MANSON

6. Gun to Your Head, If You Had to Leave the House All Day, Every Day, Where Would You Go and What Would You Do?

For many of us, the enemy is just old-fashioned complacency. We get into our routines. We distract ourselves. The couch is comfortable. The Doritos are cheesy. And [nothing new happens](#).

This is a problem.

What most people don't understand is that passion is the [result of action](#), not the cause of it.^{[2](#), [3](#)}

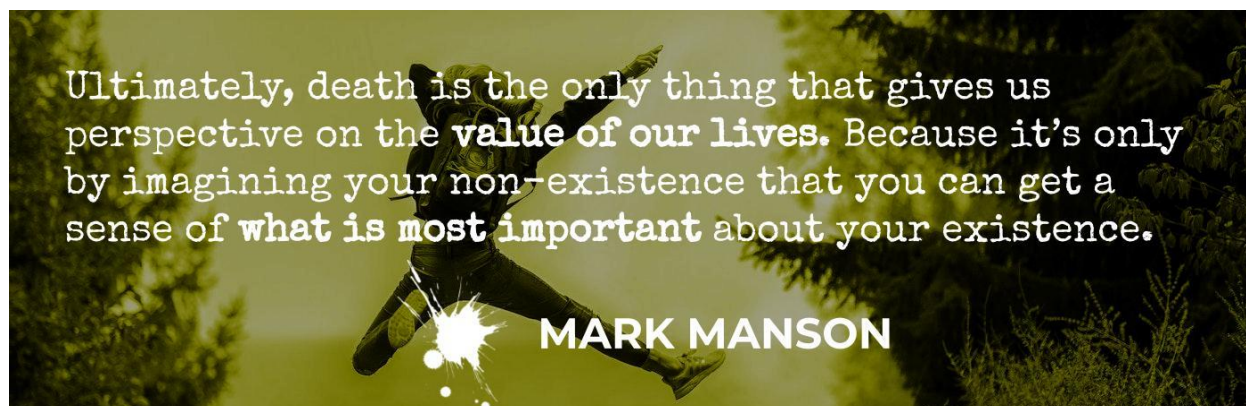
Discovering [what you're passionate about in life](#) and what matters to you is a full-contact sport, a trial-by-fire process. None of us know exactly how we feel about an activity until we *actually do the activity*.

So ask yourself, if someone put a gun to your head and *forced* you to leave your house every day for everything except for sleep, how would you choose to occupy yourself? And no, you can't just go sit in a coffee shop and browse [Facebook](#). You probably already do that. Let's pretend there are no useless websites, no video games, no TV. You have to be outside of the house all day every day until it's time to go to bed — where would you go and what would you do?

Sign up for a dance class? Join a book club? Go get another degree? Invent a new form of irrigation system that can save the thousands of children's lives in rural Africa? Learn to hang glide?

What would you do with all of that time?

If it strikes your fancy, write down a few answers and then, you know, go out and actually do them. Bonus points if it involves embarrassing yourself.



7. If you know you were going to die one year from today, what would you do and how would you want to be remembered?

Most of us don't like thinking about death. It freaks us out. But thinking about our own death surprisingly has a lot of practical advantages. One of those advantages is that it forces us to zero in on what's actually important in our lives and what's just frivolous and distracting.

When I was in college, I used to walk around and ask people, "If you had a year to live, what would you do?" As you can imagine, I was a huge hit at parties. A lot of people gave vague and boring answers. A few drinks were nearly spat on me. But it did cause people to really think about their lives in a different way and [re-evaluate what their priorities were](#).

Ultimately, death is the only thing that gives us perspective on the value of our lives. Because it's only by imagining your non-existence that you can get a sense of what is most important about your existence. What is your legacy going to be? What are the stories people are going to tell when you're gone? What is your obituary going to say? Is there anything to say at all? If not, what would you like it to say? How can you start working towards that today?

And again, if you fantasize about your obituary saying a bunch of badass shit that impresses a bunch of random other people, then again, you're failing here.

When people feel like they have no sense of direction, no purpose in their life, it's because they don't know what's important to them, they don't know what their values are.

And when you [don't know what your values are](#), then you're essentially taking on other people's values and living other people's priorities instead of your own. This is a one-way ticket to [unhealthy relationships](#) and eventual [misery](#).

Discovering one's "purpose" in life essentially boils down to finding those one or two things that are bigger than yourself, and bigger than those around you. It's not about some great achievement, but merely finding a way to [spend your limited amount of time well](#). And to do that

you must get off your couch and act, and take the time to think beyond yourself, to think greater than yourself, and paradoxically, to imagine a world without yourself.

***Note:** I've recorded a 10-minute audio commentary where I make a guilty confession about this article, and I go into why, and how, I wrote it. Site members can listen to it in the [audio archive](#). To become a site member, [click here](#).*

How to Know Who You Really Are

We all think we know ourselves well, but psychological studies show otherwise. In fact, most of us are somewhat deluded about ourselves. I put together a 22-page ebook explaining how we can come to know ourselves better, just fill out your email in the form.

You'll also receive updates on new articles, books and other things I'm working on. You can opt out at any time. See my [privacy policy](#).

Footnotes

1. Sagiv, L., & Schwartz, S. H. (2000). [Value priorities and subjective well-being: direct relations and congruity effects](#). *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 30(2), 177–198.[↵]
2. Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). [Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work](#). *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 21–33.[↵]
3. Newport, C. (2012). [So Good They Can't Ignore You: Why Skills Trump Passion in the Quest for Work You Love](#). *Business Plus*.[↵]