



1-on-1 with Ken Dychtwald: How to Tell When You're Off Track...and How to Get Back On

By Sandra Bienkowski
September 27, 2011

Ken Dychtwald is a psychologist, gerontologist, and founder and CEO of Age Wave, a consulting and research firm on aging. He's the author of the best-selling book *Age Wave: The Challenges and Opportunities of an Aging Society*. His most recent book is *A New Purpose: Redefining Money, Family, Work, Retirement and Success*. Dychtwald has shared his insights with numerous media outlets, including PBS, NPR, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*.

***SUCCESS*: How do people know when their lives aren't aligned with their purpose?**

Ken Dychtwald: It's a little like one of those metal detector things you see people use on the beach. It starts to tick, tick, tick when there is metal underneath. Most of us know when a relationship has run its course or a job no longer satisfies. We look in the mirror, and that person looking back at us is not the best version of the person we could be creating. It is then a matter of finding—what are the moments in your life when you have really felt on purpose? If you can understand what makes your heart sing and move elements of your life in that direction to bring it alive again, then you are moving toward your purpose.

So what does *on purpose* feel like?

KD: Purpose usually stirs for people when they've got a terrific body of connections and relationships. Purpose happens when people feel like they are engaged in something that is really a good fit for their mind, body, skill and aptitude, even when other people don't agree. Purpose also happens when people give back.

Some *SUCCESS* readers write to us and say they are unsure of their purpose. What's your advice for them?

KD: Each of us has to come to an understanding of who we are, our unique assets and appetites. What are your passions? And then craft a life and a social network that allows you to feel like you are fully in the game. And it's tricky. It would be easier to pick up the menu of "purposeful lives" and select one from columns A, B and C. But if it is not what makes you happy, and you are still doing what your parents wanted you to do today, 20 or 40 years later, then there is a hollowness to that, a disconnect. People need to stop and ask themselves: *What are the things I love to do in my life and how can I do more of that? What are the kinds of activities I have judged to be a waste of time at the end of the day, and how do I get them out of my life?*

Are you saying people need to devote some time to deep thinking?

KD: There are some of us who are analytical. I don't mean analytical in terms of stock picks. I mean in terms of sitting down, examining, like Socrates said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." I am that way. I meditate. I reflect. I speak to coaches, experts and counselors, and I have really attempted to plumb the depths of my life and self to discover what my path is. But, frankly, with due respect to people like that, there are other people who are intuitive and move in the right direction for themselves or who don't really need to figure it out in any grand way; they are just there, doing it.

Are there any outward signs that someone might be off track with their purpose?

KD: When you are young, there is a huge amount of attention that goes to making your parents proud or doing something you think will cause society to think highly of you—trying to acquire signs of success. Look at me; I have a house, two cars and all the latest technology. I have fancy clothes and lots of jewelry, so I must be happy. But I am increasingly convinced that one grows up and begins to realize, if you are not in sync or in deep connection with your own inner talent, inner drive and unique capabilities as a human being, and if you are not with the person you really love—no matter how good it looks in public—you will never feel full on the inside.

For the older people you've talked to whose lives got off course, what would be their advice to their younger selves?

KD: I'd say there are probably four or five slices of advice:

↔ **Be a little kinder.** Kindness is all too often left out of the equation of our lives. We live in a world that is so filled with competition, vitriol and moodiness. A little kindness would make each of our lives better.

↔ **Manage your time.** Do the A's. We spend a lot of our lives doing the C's. Doing the not as significant, not so fulfilling, not so purposeful things, assuming we will get around to the important priorities and often, people do not. Go back to the A's on your list and hug them. Stay on it.

↔ **Keep your priorities straight.** That requires a continual refreshing of what matters most to you and your family.

↔ **Do it.** There are so many people who just don't do it. Why don't you take the jump, make the decision and pull the switch? Or else, before you know it, you are going to be on your deathbed. It's really what happens. I know it sounds ludicrous because when you are young, you really do believe there is no end to your life, but that's not the way it turns out. Before you know it, you will be thinking, *I only have seven more summers to go*, and you don't want to look back and ask, *Why didn't I do it? Why didn't I make that change? Why didn't I go to that workshop? Why didn't I read that book? Why didn't I go to the gym? Why didn't I do what would make me happy?* More often than not, people know what their purpose might be but don't necessarily have the courage or the drive to do it. Most people get stuck in the execution.

So is it fear that gets people off purpose?

KD: Yes. Change is hard. They are frightened. What if I start a new business and it doesn't work out? What if I go across the room and introduce myself to someone and they reject me? There's all this fear of what could go wrong. There needs to be an equal, if not slightly greater, appreciation for what could go right. There are all of these possibilities waiting for us.

So, get your hand on your own rudder and steer your ship toward your own kind of bliss, peace of mind or joy. Is it an easy exercise? No. But is it ultimately the master game? Yes.

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