

The Psychology of Progress

Existential psychologist Clay Routledge joins Chelsea Follett to discuss how Americans think about the future, trends in mental health, the "crisis of meaning," and how nostalgia can drive progress.

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Critics of material progress often point to a "crisis of meaning": a widespread sense of purposelessness and the loss of clear values or direction in modern society.

The data, while hotly debated, are potentially concerning; in the wealthiest countries in the world, many people—especially in younger generations—report feeling lonely, anxious, depressed, and generally pessimistic about the future.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, existential psychologist Clay Routledge joins Chelsea Follett to discuss his research into these trends and how we should interpret them.

[Listen to the interview](#)

Below is an edited and abridged transcript featuring some highlights from the interview.

Let's start with the [Progress Pulse Initiative](#), a project of yours that sets out to explore a fundamental question: do Americans believe humans will make significant progress on big societal and global challenges in the coming decades, making life better for future generations, or do they think we will fail?

Tell me about this project and what you found.

This initiative is part of a broader project I call "the psychology of progress." In the progress space, there's a lot of interest in economic policies, the technological and scientific drivers of progress, and institutional forces. All very important, of course. But when I started following the different thinkers in this space, I noticed there wasn't a lot of talk about what's happening inside individual human minds. But psychology is important to progress. Think about individual traits related to progress, like curiosity, openness, creativity, resilience, and motivation. And then there are questions like, how do you lead teams? How do you cultivate talent? And critically, culture matters a lot to progress.

The Progress Pulse idea was that, in addition to studying these individual traits, we should get a sense of what the public thinks about progress. And so, every month, we'll be doing a national survey of around 2000 US adults in partnership with the Harris Poll. And we'll just be asking a couple of questions. We started with a very simple question: "When you look to the future, do you see progress, or do you see decline?" And people are pretty evenly divided on that. Around half look to the future and see hope and promise; the other half think life will be worse for future generations.

You did find some differences among groups. You found that the youngest Americans, especially young women, are the most pessimistic, while older Americans are the most optimistic. What might explain those findings?

Yeah. It's a great question. In a previous survey, we looked at the concept of hope and found that self-reported mental health was the strongest predictor of people's attitudes about the future, and young people report worse mental health. That seems to account for a lot of the pessimism. If you're depressed or anxious, you tend to fixate on what's going wrong instead of what's going right.

On the other side, you might say, well, older people have the advantage of wisdom and experience; they can look back and say, "You think now's bad? We had world wars; we had the threat of nuclear Armageddon. We made it through that." They have a perspective that young people don't. So, it's not just about the vulnerabilities that younger generations have but also the strengths and broader perspective of older generations.

Are anxiety and depression among young people increasing over time?

This is hotly debated. Certainly, at the self-report level, young people today are saying they're more anxious and depressed. Some more objective outcomes, such as hospitalizations and suicide attempts, are consistent with that. However, some experts argue that part of the rising hospitalizations might have something to do with better reporting.

A lot of these statistics might also be due to cultural changes. Young people today are more likely to interpret normal psychological distress using the language of mental health. Sometimes this is referred to as the "pathologization of normal psychology" or "concept creep," which is the idea that we're expanding these mental health terms beyond their original definitions. Also, a fairly high percentage of people diagnose themselves with depression without a clinical assessment. All this makes it more difficult to know the extent of this issue.

There's also evidence that when people start to think of themselves as mentally unwell, they put themselves on the path to being mentally unwell. So, if you think of yourself as someone who suffers from an anxiety disorder, you might use that as an excuse to avoid things that make you uncomfortable. Well, that makes you more likely to develop anxiety. What you should be doing is exposing yourself to the things that make you uncomfortable and working through it, which is what would happen if you went to a good clinical psychologist. So, self-diagnosing can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So there is some evidence that young people may have a darker view of the world. This gets into the [Visions of the Future](#) initiative. Could you tell us about that?

The Visions of the Future report is a really cool project. We partnered with a London-based firm called discover.ai, which has a team of experts who try to figure out how people are talking about things online using a machine learning platform. It's a qualitative assessment, almost like you would if you were a marketing firm or brand looking to see what people think about different styles, aesthetics, or certain products.

We did that, but instead of looking at products, we looked at visions of the future. We asked, in the spaces where young people gather, what's the mood when they talk about the future? We found that, while there are aspects of the future young people seem excited about, like advancements in healthcare, they're generally pessimistic. They're more worried about the dangers of artificial intelligence than excited about the benefits. They're more likely to think that the American dream has been lost. They're worried about climate change, political polarization, and the culture wars. So, unfortunately, the mood in these spaces is dark.

But these are important insights for those of us who believe in progress. A lot of times, people are pessimistic because they have an inaccurate understanding of progress. They think the world has gotten worse on measures that have actually improved. Knowing who is pessimistic about the future gives us the opportunity to persuade them.

Many people say that there is a crisis of meaning. I'm curious what you think about that. But before you answer, could you explain the difference between meaning and happiness?

Well, in psychology, happiness falls under the category of emotion. Feeling happy is an emotional state; it's a mood. So, if you feel good in the moment, you might say, "I'm happy." And if that happens often, you might say, "I'm a happy person." So, it can also be a personality trait based on your general proclivity towards a positive mood. Certain philosophers and psychologists talk about happiness in a different, richer way, but that's how I think about happiness.

When we talk about meaning, we're adding in other cognitive and motivational dimensions. Humans self-reflect. We think about who we are, who we want to be, and our place in the world. It turns out that if you feel like you have a purpose, like you're playing a significant role in the world, then you feel like your life is full of meaning.

Meaning tends to be associated with happiness. It's bi-directional; research shows that when you're in a good mood, it's also easier to see how your life is meaningful. But this doesn't mean that meaning and happiness are synonymous. For instance, things you value can be stressful and unpleasant. Those of us who are parents can easily come up with examples. Or think about people who work in difficult jobs, like police officers and first responders, who have to see some tough stuff. They might be going through a bad day while simultaneously feeling like their life is extremely meaningful. The relationship also goes the other way: meaning fuels happiness. Doing something difficult and stressful, like training for a marathon, might make you miserable in the moment but happier in general because exercising discipline and making progress towards a goal feels good.

It does seem like humans crave challenging endeavors. Some people argue that all our material progress, which has made life easier, has contributed to a crisis of meaning. What are your thoughts? Do we have a crisis of meaning?

I've certainly expressed that concern in the past. Consider the trends in young people's mental health. Anxiety and meaning are highly related because meaning is an anxiety buffer. When your life feels meaningful, you're more robust against hardship. You might think, "Right now, this is difficult, and I'm worried, but I have a reason to be here. I have a purpose, and I can push through." So, it's possible that rising rates of anxiety, if those rates are real, are related to a decline in meaning. On the other hand, there's also other evidence that, in general, people do see their lives as meaningful. While traditional sources of meaning like religion and marriage are declining, people are creating new sources of meaning that we're not doing a good job capturing.

I try to find a middle ground here. Maybe there are unique existential challenges that emerge in a highly affluent secular world with rapid technological change. Things that are good for economic growth and exploring new ideas might also make us feel unsettled and anxious. But I tend toward the idea that humans are existential entrepreneurs; we create new sources of meaning. Given all our intellectual assets as a species, I'm more confident that we'll come out of this okay.

One way to determine whether affluent societies have a crisis of meaning might be to look at impoverished countries today. Do people with a much lower living standard also report a crisis of meaning?

In rich Western countries, people report being happier, but people in poorer countries report higher meaning. Part of that is explained by higher levels of religiosity. Part of that might also be that it's easier for people in poor countries to detect meaning. If every day is a struggle for survival, you can easily see how people in your family and community depend on you.

That being said, within rich countries, poor people report lower meaning than higher-income people. It's likely that, in the technologically advanced and wealthy world, we're dealing with a whole different set of cultural issues. For example, it's harder to appreciate material progress when you're on social media thinking, "Look at these rich people and the amazing lives they're presenting." There's a sort of irony where the privilege of having the technology to be on Instagram makes it more difficult to see the meaning in your own life because you're making unhealthy social comparisons.

I want to ask you about your book, [Past Forward: How Nostalgia Can Help You Live A More Meaningful Life](#). At Human Progress, we often discuss the dangers of romanticizing the past. So, sell me on nostalgia.

There are dark sides to nostalgia, but they're far outweighed by the positives.

As you point out, people do romanticize the past. Oftentimes, people associate this tendency with conservatives, but people on the left sometimes have this view of the past where people lived in harmony with nature and didn't need material things, and life was like a Disney movie or something.

However, for most people, most of the time, that's not how they're using nostalgia. Nostalgia is not making them see the past as better than the present. What's happening is that the people are seeing problems in the present, and that's making them nostalgic. For example, some of the most nostalgic people I've met are very active in the progress movement. They say things like, "Things aren't great right now; there's too much negativity, there's too many barriers to building and creating and entrepreneurship." Then they say, "Okay. Where can I find the inspiration for how to do things differently? Well, we used to be able to build a bridge in weeks. Americans were proud. We went to the moon."

And so, a lot of times, nostalgia is not trying to repeat the past, it's pulling inspiration from the past. If you want to change the future in a positive way, the past might have some clues.

So that's my pitch, and I'm prepared to litigate it with data. For instance, you might think that nostalgia correlates with being close-minded, but the people who are the most dispositionally prone to nostalgia also tend to be the most open-minded. They're more creative. There are a lot of false ideas around nostalgia that aren't empirically substantiated, and while there are ways that nostalgia can be bad, they're far outnumbered by all the positives.

I'll admit that I am a bit of a nostalgia skeptic, but when you put it that way, I see how nostalgia could be helpful. Maybe what you're saying relates to what you said earlier about how older people, who remember what life was like in the past, tend to be more optimistic about the future.

Yeah, I think that's true. We've been talking about historical nostalgia, but a lot of times, people are doing what we call personal nostalgia. They're not saying life was better in the 1950s or 1800s or pre-industrialization. They're looking to their own past.

Now, there's a concept in psychology called fading affect bias, which is that the impact of negative experiences tends to fade faster than that of positive experiences. So, it's easier to look back at the past through rose-tinted glasses. But that can also be good for our psychological well-being.

Do you know the phrase "Youth is wasted on the young"? That's not entirely true because older people can capture a youthful spirit using nostalgia. We did some research years ago on this, and we found that around the age of 40, nostalgia begins to make people feel younger than their biological age, and this matters because the age you feel is often how you act. You could be young but act old and think, "I can't do anything," or you could be old but act young and think, "I can go out in the world and do things." The more nostalgic people are, the lower their subjective age.

Another benefit is that, when we have decisions to make, nostalgia helps direct us. It reminds us of the experiences we cherish and where we find the most meaning. That pushes nostalgic people forward. They're more confident. They're more motivated to pursue their goals. They're more trusting of others. They're more willing to help others. They donate more to charity. I think it's because they're pulling energy and motivation from their bank of meaningful memories.

So many people blame technology for this alleged loss of meaning. You mentioned that you have a project on digital flourishing that finds a bit of a more positive story. Can you tell me a little bit about your findings there? Or maybe give us a preview.

We found that the vast majority of Americans, close to 80 percent, report they are digitally flourishing on most of the dimensions we measure. Things like, "Do I feel able to present who I truly am online? Do I feel connected? Do I feel like I'm building communities? Do I feel like I know how to share my ideas in a way that's respectful?" We also find that the people who are digitally flourishing are more likely to be flourishing offline as well.

So, the report is positive. Most of the attention in the public discourse is on all the bad things. And this report doesn't dismiss those concerns, but it shows the bigger picture, which involves lots of positives related to our digital lives. For example, people will often focus on how social media harms young women's self-esteem, but there are also a lot of young women on social media who are rocking it. They're building brands, they're finding connections, they're networking for their professions. They're using social media in all sorts of healthy ways. Instead of just focusing on what's going wrong, why don't we use those people as inspiration? What can we learn from the people who are using these technologies in ways that enhance their lives? That's what we're trying to highlight.