

Your Bucket List

January 2012

My partner and I were recently discussing how quickly each year passes and it would seem that the older one gets, the quicker they go. This led to a discussion around all the things we would like to achieve before all of life passes – the colloquial bucket list as it is called. The term apparently entered popular use in the wake of the 2007 movie by that name. I'm not wild about the phrase, (from a positive thinking perspective), which has achieved clichéd status, although I understand and can appreciate what it is trying to capture and convey.

If you haven't heard about the bucket list, it is a list of all the goals you want to achieve, dreams you want to fulfill and life-experiences you desire to experience before you die. I did a google search for "my bucket list." The 2.5 million hits, some tiny number of which I read, provide some insight into what many people want to do in order to highlight their lives: travel and see the wonders of the world; have an adventure like white-water rafting; learn a foreign language; meet a celebrity; become rich; or accomplish something really demanding such as running a marathon.

Here are some of my thoughts about bucket lists from the perspective of positive psychology.

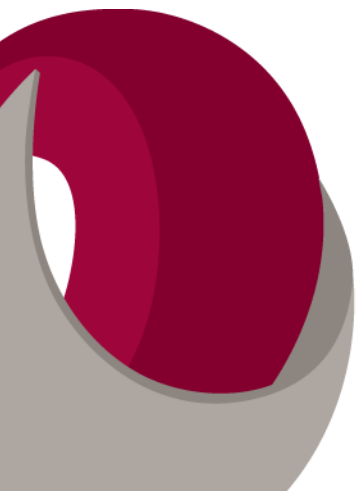
A bucket list is an attempt to make life memorable. What we remember are the peak events in our lives and the more positive of those we can generate, the more positive memories we can savour.

A bucket list can also be an attempt to make life meaningful, depending of course on the specific items. Many bucket lists connect people to something larger than themselves, typically other people and their welfare (e.g., take the entire family on a cruise). Positive psychology research suggests that this factor is a great contribution to a fulfilled life.

Regardless of their details, bucket lists embody what psychologists have learned about goal-setting. If you don't live your days by personal goals and plans, chances are you spend most of your time caught up in a flurry of day-to-day activities. Ever feel your days are passing by without any tangible output to speak of? What were your accomplishments in the past 3 months? What are your upcoming goals for the next 3 months? Look at the things you did and the things you're planning to do next – Do they mean anything to you if you are to die today? Having a bucket list reminds you of what's really important so you can act on them.

Goals can motivate us to accomplish things, but the most motivating goals are those that are hard and specific. Every bucket list I read on the Internet contained rich details about difficult things. Goals need to be coupled with plans for achieving them, but the right sorts of goals are the critical first step.

While bucket lists have purpose, they need to go beyond a checklist of items to achieve and a way of wearing a badge of achievement. A bucket list needs to be meaningful for it to create meaning, fulfilment and happiness in one's life.



Why have a bucket list? Even if you frequently live by goals or to-do lists, they are probably framed within a certain social context e.g., performance, career, health. A bucket list opens up the context. It's a forum to set anything and everything you've ever wanted to do, whether it's big, small or random.

The whole point of a bucket list is to maximize every moment of our existence and live our life to the fullest. It's a reminder of all the things we want to achieve in our time here, so that instead of pandering our time in pointless activities, we are directing it fully toward what matters to us.

Start writing down what comes to mind as you read these questions:

- What if you were to die tomorrow? What would you wish you could do before you die?
- What have you always wanted to do but have not done yet?
- What will you do if you have unlimited time, money and resources?
- Any countries, places or locations you want to visit?
- What are your biggest goals and dreams?
- What do you want to see in person?
- What achievements do you want to have?
- What experiences do you want to have / feel?
- Are there any special moments you want to witness?
- What activities or skills do you want to learn or try out?
- What are the most important things you can ever do?
- What would you like to say/do together with other people? People you love? Family? Friends?
- Are there any specific people you want to meet in person?
- What do you want to achieve in the different areas: Social, Love, Family, Career, Finance, Health (Your weight, Fitness level), Spiritual?
- What do you need to do to lead a life of the greatest meaning?

Come up with as many items as you can. The items should be things you have not done yet. Challenge yourself, Stretch yourself – This is a list of everything you want to achieve, do, see, feel and experience in your life.

