

## The Dynamics of Meaning in Life Among Older Adults Living Alone and Those Living with Family

### *Dinamika Makna Hidup Pada Lansia yang Tinggal Sendiri dan Lansia yang Tinggal Bersama Keluarga*

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#### **Abstract**

Differences in older adults' living arrangements shape how physical, emotional, and social needs are met, and they can influence quality of life and life satisfaction. Older adults who live alone may face greater risks of loneliness, limited access to day-to-day assistance, and declining well-being. In contrast, older adults who live with family often receive instrumental care, yet they do not always experience adequate emotional support and appreciation. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to understand the dynamics of meaning in life among older adults living alone and those living with family. Six participants were recruited (three living alone and three living with family). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation, and were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings indicate that older adults' meaning in life is constructed through self-acceptance, independence and productivity, gratitude and sources of happiness, spirituality, social relationships, contributions to others, and goals and future hopes. Dynamics of meaning in life are influenced not only by living arrangement but also by the primary anchor of meaning where older adults living alone tend to emphasize independence and local social networks, whereas those living with family tend to emphasize attachment and support within family relationships.


**Keywords :** Meaning in life; older adult; living alone; living with family

#### **Abstrak**

Perbedaan status hunian lansia memberikan dampak yang berbeda pada pemenuhan kebutuhan fisik, emosional, dan sosial, serta pada kualitas dan kepuasan hidup mereka. Lansia yang tinggal sendiri berisiko mengalami kesepian, keterbatasan akses bantuan, dan penurunan kualitas hidup, sementara lansia yang tinggal bersama keluarga mendapatkan perawatan namun tidak selalu merasakan dukungan emosional dan penghargaan yang memadai sehingga dari kondisi-kondisi ini menarik untuk melihat bagaimana lansia memaknai hidupnya. Tujuan penelitian adalah memahami dinamika makna hidup pada lansia yang tinggal sendiri dan lansia yang tinggal bersama keluarga. Penelitian menggunakan metode kualitatif fenomenologi dan enam partisipan dipilih terdiri dari tiga lansia yang tinggal sendiri dan tiga lansia yang tinggal bersama keluarga. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi dan dokumentasi kemudian dianalisis dengan teknik Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa makna hidup lansia terbentuk melalui penerimaan diri, kemandirian dan produktivitas, rasa syukur dan sumber kebahagiaan, spiritualitas, hubungan sosial, kontribusi pada orang lain, tujuan serta harapan masa

*mendatang. Dinamika makna hidup lansia tidak hanya dipengaruhi oleh status hunian, tetapi pada titik tumpu makna dimana lansia yang tinggal sendiri lebih menekankan pada kemandirian dan jejaring sosial sekitar, sementara lansia yang tinggal bersama keluarga lebih menekankan kelekatan dan dukungan dalam hubungan dengan keluarga.*

**Kata kunci :** Makna hidup; lansia; tinggal sendiri; tinggal bersama keluarga

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Humans are individuals who experience changes in life from one phase to the next. At each stage, individuals experience development from infancy through later life. Older adults (commonly referred to as *lansia* in Indonesia) are individuals who have reached the age of over 60 years (Kementerian Kesehatan, 2025). Older adults can be classified into age groups: young-old (60–69 years), middle-old (70–79 years), and oldest-old (80 years and above). This classification is based on physical and mental health conditions, social circumstances, levels of independence, and the extent of older adults' dependence on their environment (Kementerian Sosial, 2023). Older adults also differ in their residential status, or where they live. Data from Badan Pusat Statistik (2024) on living arrangements and household structure show that the majority of older adults live in three-generation households (35.73%), 34.45% live with their nuclear family, and the rest live alone.

Older adults' residential status is closely related to their situation as a vulnerable age group. Across the lifespan, older adults inevitably experience changes characterized by decline, which may be perceived as part of reaching the final phase of development (Hurlock, 1976). These changes include observable aspects such as physical condition, economic circumstances, cognitive functioning, psychological well-being, and social and economic dimensions (Yaslina Yaslina et al., 2021). Such age-related declines may contribute to various physical and mental health problems in older adults (Suarti & Valentina, 2024). As these declines occur, older adults may no longer be as productive as they were in late adulthood. Physical deterioration also increases their vulnerability to various illnesses, sometimes leading to the perception that they are merely waiting for death to arrive (Tjernberg & Bökberg, 2020).

Given the wide range of challenges they experience, older adults often require care, attention, and affection from family members and others. To meet these needs, many older adults choose to live with their children or grandchildren because, as age increases, barriers to living independently also become greater (Esri et al., 2022). The need for support among older adults varies depending on their physical, psychological, and social conditions. Older adults who live alone face a higher risk of difficulties in meeting their needs, ranging from physical and emotional to social aspects (Iamtrakul & Chayphong, 2022). Regarding emotional and social aspects among older adults living alone, loneliness is a common issue. A study by Sihab and Nurchayati (2021) on loneliness among older adults living alone found that loneliness was strongly influenced by the loss of a spouse. The study described this loneliness as emotional loneliness, namely the loss of a deeply meaningful relationship with a close person, which leads older adults to feel lonely.

A preliminary study conducted with an older adult living alone indicated that, when at home alone and no one visits or stops by, the older adult often feels lonely and empty. When experiencing these feelings, the older adult seeks activities outside the home, such as chatting with neighbors next door or simply walking around the neighborhood. These activities were perceived as fairly effective in reducing loneliness. Differences were also observed in the caregiving process when older adults living alone versus those living with family members faced illness. Older adults living with family, although they may have limited mobility, receive assistance from family members for visiting nearby health facilities, administrative procedures, and obtaining medication. This differs markedly from older adults living alone. Although they may still receive care from their children when ill, the process tends to be longer and more complicated, and older adults may sometimes have to wait considerably longer to obtain care.

Insufficient fulfilment of physical, emotional, and social needs that support the lives of older adults living alone may influence their condition, including their quality of life. Quality of life in older adults is influenced by several factors, including physical, social, psychological, and environmental factors (Ahmadi et al., 2023). This aligns with a study by Esri et al. (2022) comparing the quality of life of older adults living alone and those living with family. The findings showed that older adults living alone had a lower quality of life, whereas those living with family had a higher quality of life. Although living with family is often considered ideal in terms of social support and access to basic needs, older adults living with family may still experience unavoidable problems. In a study on differences in life satisfaction among older women, it was found that older women living with family reported lower life satisfaction than those living in a nursing home (Dando & Sudagijono, 2022). The study suggested that this was associated with factors such as emotional support, the quality of relationships among family members, and unmet feelings of being useful or valued, which substantially affect how older adults living with family experience life satisfaction.

Considering the conditions described above regarding the dynamics experienced by older adults living alone and those living with family, it is important to examine how older adults construct meaning in their lives. A meaningful life can emerge through lived experiences. Meaning in life, as defined by Frankl's (2006) through logotherapy, involves the process of discovering an essence that is meaningful for the individual, which may arise through creative values, experiential values, and attitudinal values, including in situations of suffering. Bastaman (2007) further extends this definition by stating that meaning in life refers to anything that is perceived as highly important, true, valuable, and believed to be a value worthy of serving as a direction or purpose in one's life.

Wong (2012) defines meaning in life by integrating the concepts of "existential meaning" and "situational meaning," which include purpose, understanding, responsible action, and evaluation of what has been done throughout one's lived life. Wong (2012) argues that individuals who live meaningful lives perceive their existence as not accidental, but rather directed, understood, and valued, accompanied by a sense of fulfilment when their life goals and values are achieved and aligned. In addition, Wong (2012) introduced the PURE model system, which aims to conceptualize subjective meaning in life for each individual through a positive approach. From these perspectives, meaning in life can be understood as a condition in which individuals perceive their lives as important and valuable. It is characterized by having life goals or an essential purpose, awareness of values considered precious, understanding of oneself and one's environment, the ability to take responsible attitudes, and the ability to appreciate and evaluate one's own life experiences.

Meaning in life can also be viewed through how individuals perceive themselves and the world, their understanding of their position in the world, and their reflections on what they have achieved (Steger et al., 2006). Among older adults, such reflection includes feeling valued, having life goals, and holding life values, even as they may have lost certain bodily functions

and experience limitations. A study by Cojocaru et al. (2025) involving older adults living in nursing homes found four sources of meaning in life namely the religious experiences, the legacy of moral and educational values, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and life goals connected to daily routines. Research on meaning in life among older adults has also been conducted by Puspardini et al. (2024) who analyzed the role of meaning in life in enhancing psychological well-being in later life. Their findings indicated that meaning in life is reflected in increased freedom of will, a stronger will to meaning, and the growth of meaning in life can help improve psychological well-being among older adults.

The life context of older adults living in institutional care is likely to differ from that of older adults living at home with family or living alone. Older adults living in institutions may experience more social interaction with peers (Ardhani & Kurniawan, 2020). They also tend to participate in a wider range of activities, from social to religious programs (Andriyan & Runtianing, 2020). Through such organized activities, older adults may engage in richer life dynamics and feel that their lives are more meaningful. However, activities available to older adults living in institutions may not be similarly accessible to older adults living alone or those living with family, making the process through which each older adult forms meaning in life an important issue to examine. This is because becoming an older adult is not experienced by only a few people, it is a life stage that, in general, will be experienced by all human beings.

Although research on meaning in life among older adults has been widely conducted, most studies still focus on older adults living in institutional settings or examine only one group of older adults, rather than specifically addressing older adults living alone and those living with family. A study by Baris et al. (2019) included two groups of older adults, those living in a *panti wredha* and those living with family in a village context. However, because the study used a quantitative method, the subjective experiences of older adults in finding meaning in life from both perspectives were not explored in depth. Cultural context, family values, and differing social support among older adults may influence the ways older adults experience life dynamics and construct meaning in life (Sulandari et al., 2024). Therefore, this study aims to explore in depth how older adults living alone and those living with family subjectively make meaning of their lives in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of older adults across different living arrangements.

## Method

This study was conducted using a qualitative phenomenological method. Qualitative research is an approach that focuses on understanding the meaning of individuals' or groups' experiences within a particular context and prioritizes interpretation over generalization (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore participants' perspectives in depth, enabling the researcher to understand the social phenomenon comprehensively. Phenomenological research aims to understand individuals' subjective experiences. Accordingly, this study sought to understand how older adults living alone and those living with family subjectively make meaning of their lives.

### *Participant*

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involves selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research requirements (Etikan et al., 2016). The researcher recruited older adults who live alone and older adults who live with family, with a total of six participants (three participants in each group). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) aged at least 60 years; (2) living alone or living with family; (3) able to communicate well and showing no signs of severe cognitive impairment; and (4) willing to

participate in the data collection process until completion. Based on these criteria, six participants were found to meet the following identities:

**Table 1. Identity of Participants**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age (Years)</b>	<b>Living arrangement</b>
SK	81	Live alone
KT	80	Live alone
KR	67	Live alone
SR	85	Live with family
ST	75	Live with family
MJ	82	Live with family

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected primarily through interviews. The study used semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was developed based on Wong's (2012) meaning-in-life framework, specifically the PURE model, which consists of Purpose, Understanding, Responsible Action, and Enjoyment or Evaluation. Another data collection technique was non-participant observation and voice-recording documentation, conducted with participants' permission to facilitate transcription of the interviews.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an analytical approach aimed at exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences by combining phenomenological description with the researcher's interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). The IPA process in this study followed several stages (Smith et al., 2009): (1) repeated reading; (2) initial noting; (3) developing emergent themes; (4) searching for connections across emergent themes; (5) moving to the next case; and (6) identifying patterns across participants' cases.

### ***Result***

Based on the interview data, the analysis identified five superordinate themes and twelve emergent themes that consistently described the meaning-in-life dynamics of older adults living alone and those living with family. The themes are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2. Superordinate Themes and Emergent Themes**

<b>Superordinate Themes</b>	<b>Emergent Themes</b>
<b>Adaptive Balance</b>	Self-Acceptance and Limitations
	Functional Independence and Productivity
<b>Inner Calm</b>	Practicing Gratitude and a Sense of Sufficiency
	Sources of Happiness
<b>Social Relationship Dynamics</b>	Family Relationships
	Social Contribution
	Conflict Resolution Strategies
<b>Legacy of Values</b>	Moral Advice
	Spiritual Role and Orientation
	Understanding of Self-Worth
<b>Purpose and Hope</b>	Life Purpose
	Future Hopes

### **Theme 1: Adaptive Balance**

This theme reflects older adults' efforts to adjust to later-life reality and find a "middle point" between what they wish to do and what they are still able to do. Meaning in life emerges through accepting limitations while maintaining everyday autonomy and productivity that remain possible.

#### ***Self-Acceptance and Limitations***

In this emergent theme, the meaning in life for the older adults comes from how they develop a sense of acceptance of their physical condition, which is no longer the same as in their youth. This includes the elderly's awareness of their "old age," which makes them easily tired and limits their ability to do certain things.

*"Yo... kesel yo tidak... yo payah yo tidak. Jeneng e orang tua, umur e wes 82."* (SK-S1-P1, 51-53).

*“Eee yo nek ndelok urip ki yo piye nduk, yo wes nek ngene iki dilakoni wae. Opo ae yo dilakoni, nek wes tuwek ngene gak iso opo opo yo wes nrimo nduk, ancen wes tuwek umur e”* (KT-S2-P1, 507-512).

*“Nek biyen sek seger waras iso dilakoni, saiki nek wes tuwek karek tenguk tenguk kadang ngelimpruk, yo mok njaluk mugo mugo sehat nek wes umur ngeneki wes keadaan e ngeneki.”* (ST-S5-P1, 556-561).

Participants consistently acknowledged aging as a natural condition, including fatigue, illness vulnerability, and reduced mobility. Acceptance was expressed as “recognizing” limits and continuing life without excessive resistance.

### **Functional Independence and Productivity**

Meaning in life also comes from independent efforts of older adults to meet their needs, care for themselves, and engage in activities. There are several differences in terms of independence, such as activities that provide financial assistance, and in the form of carrying out daily routines, such as participants who mostly clean the house and do other domestic work.

*“Resik-resik ngarep kui, koko ngguri kono kae, tapi nek ngguri ki ora mesti nduk, wedi lunyu, mbah e wes ngene iki wedi nek tibo awakke.”* (KT-S2-P1, 127-130).

*“Yo opo nduk yo adang masak terus mangan [...]. Yo karek iki omah e enek sing kudu diresiki opo gak, [...].”* (KR-S3-P1, 127-133).

*“Eee aku yo nek isuk ngono kui yo koyo biasane nduk. Yo nyapu yo resik resik umbah umbah ko mlaku mlaku bereng[...].”* (MJ-S6-P1, 171-181)

Independence and productivity from activities that can still be done to meet movement needs and are done at certain times, such as participants SR and ST.

*“Mbah e yo kadang yo nyapu kadang yo resik resik pawon ngono tok. Ngarepan kui nduk isuk sore kudu disapu, [...].”* (SR-S4-P1, 125-129).

*“[...]nek awakku gak loro ngono yo opo rekanane ndek nane pring pring tak sigari sak mene mene ngono kui [...] Kolo kolo yo kui, mangani pitik terus golek godong telo kui kanggo makani kelinci.”* (ST-S5-P1, 55-62).

### **Theme 2: Inner Calm**

Inner calm represents the emotional core of meaning in later life: feelings of peace, sufficiency, and life satisfaction. Calmness was built through gratitude and sufficiency with positive emotions, especially happiness rooted in relationships and simple daily joys.

#### **Practicing Gratitude and a Sense of Sufficiency**

The values of gratitude and sufficiency possessed by the older adult become a source of strength to carry on with life every day. There are several types of gratitude and contentment possessed by the participants, including understanding gratitude for the opportunity to still earn an income, even if it is not much, and for having a physical condition that is adequate to live a more meaningful life.

*“Nggeh mesti to neng nek bersyukur, nggeh alhamdulillah tasik diberikan penghasilan dan sehat walafiat.”* (SK-S1-P1, 202-204).

The values of gratitude and sense of sufficiency were also expressed according to the circumstances experienced by several participants, such as accepting the circumstances as they are, which have been given by the God and enough because their physiological needs, such as eating and sleeping, have been met.

*“Yoo nek opo opo cukup iso mangan turu iso sembayang yoo nek muni sejahtera yo sejahtera yo nduk. Yo alhamdulillah akeh akeh duno syukur marang Gusti Allah nduk.”* (SR-S4-P2, 214-218)

*"Eee yo alhamdulillah nduk. Diparingi opo ae nek sak iki ngene iki yo wes maturnuwun."* (KT-S2-P1, 322-323)

Participants also explained that there is no need to force circumstances to be better to the point of sacrificing peace of mind by going into debt. The meaning of life is derived from contentment and not forcing circumstances, as written by participant:

*"Kalih gusti Allah dibagei ngene yo wes ngene nduk gak usah mekso piye piye. Iyo nduk, yo mok alhamdulillah, piye meneh hahahah."* (KR-S3-P1, 228-231)

*"Iyoo nduk, pokok e kui ojo sampek, opo meneh utang. Ee nduk nduk jeneng e wong ra nduwe, petuk uyah yo tak pangan uyah nek aku [...] Sak iki wes ra enek opo opo yo piye meneh nduk, dicukup cukupno gak yo ngono."* (KR-S3-P2, 220-228)

A different sense of gratitude was expressed where the focus was on the good health they currently enjoy and linking it to the existence of their family, which they can still see today. Participants also mentioned that the good health he has been given is something that needs to be utilized as a form of gratitude.

*"Opo yo nduk.... yo paling yo saiki jek iso ngerti jaman saiki nduk, jek iso roh anak putu sing tak rumat. Yo awakku bereng saiki ndah nek mlaku gak toto ndelok yo ra ketok ngene tapi yo jek sehat alhamdulillah nduk."* (KT-S2-P2, 260-262)

*"Aku ngene ki alhamdulillah ngono sek dikek i sehat, jek iso momong anak putu buyut kabeh.[...]"* (MJ-S6-P2, 203-207)

### **Sources of Happiness**

The meaning in life that comes from the happiness experienced by older adults serves as a form of life satisfaction that they have. The greatest and most frequently mentioned source of happiness by participants came from family. As in the case of participants KT and KR, who felt happiness when they could still see their children and grandchildren and receive visits that filled the emotional void they felt when living alone.

*"Eee yo seneng opo yo nduk, yo sing penting iseh iso urip isih iso ngerohi anak putu buyut gak yo wes seneng, nek omah yo sek iso umek gak meneng ki yo seneng nduk"* (KT-S2-P1, 120-124)

*"Yoo seneng leh mestine. La aku ra enek sopo sopo di dolani yo seneng. Opo meneh karo putu yo nduk."* (KR-S3-P1, 478-480)

Happiness derived from family was also evident among participants who lived with their families, particularly through daily interactions and witnessing their children grow into adults who were perceived as successful and who continued to remember and care for them as parents. For participant SR, this attention was experienced as simple forms of happiness, such as having opportunities to talk with their children. In contrast, for participant ST, happiness was closely tied to their experience of illness and to their children's sensitivity in responding appropriately to the participant's health condition. These experiences were meaningful because they reinforced the participants' sense of having succeeded in their parenting role.

*"[...]mergo karo anak yo dijak jengkeran sopo sing gak seneng nduk."* (SR-S4-P1, 226-227)

*"[...] ngene iki yo akeh seneng e nduk. Ndelok kang Y ndelok K karo anakku kabeh ki wes podo dadi wong, wes podo iso mergawe [...] kabeh iling karo wong tuwek karo aku, yoo nek aku ngerosone seneng."* (SR-S4-P2, 156-162)

*"Yoo mandah seneng nek saiki aku.[...] anak sing pengerten, ngerohi nek wong tuwane loro. Ngger opo opo ngandari aku nek ojo mergawe nemen nemen [...] Walaupun kesel tenan, ngelakoni urip yahono yahene kok sing ngelakoni abot loro, eee saiki anakku iso mbales aku ngono."* (ST-S5-P2, 330-339)

Then, for participant SK, who lives alone, happiness comes from the livestock, namely the chickens he takes care of, seeing the chickens continue to grow well thanks to the care



provided by the participant. In addition, happiness also arises from social interactions with friends who often visit the participant's home and family, even though the family is far away from the participant and it takes more effort to meet the family.

*"Nopo nggeh neng... paling ngerawat ayam niku neng karo iseh enek konco-konco sing dolan. Kadang anak-cucu tapi kan jauh, jadine harus naik bis sendirian jauh kesana."* (SK-S1-P1, 85-89)

*"[...] Tapi dirumah juga seneng neng, kan ada ayam. [...] Soal e kan ada babon terus anak ayam itu, umpama babon e bertelur sepuluh terus netes delapan, lho itu kan udah memuaskan hati saya. Jadi, hiburan semata-mata yo ayam iku[...]"* (SK-S1-P1, 265-272)

### Theme 3: Social Relationship Dynamics

This theme reflects how participants manage their social interaction networks, which determine their emotional well-being and sense of security in old age, consists of family relationships, social contributions, and conflict resolution strategies.

#### Family Relationships

Family relationships are one of the pillars that support participants' lives and give them meaning. Each participant has a good relationship with their family, whether they live alone or with their family, even though the patterns differ.

*"Sama keluarga yo apik apik ae neng, tapi nek selama iki keluarga jauh yo gak iso petuk bebas ngono soal e kan jarak e jauh."* (SK-S1-P1, 108-11)

*"Yo nek P kui gawene nduk, gawene mboh opo gedang opo aku yo diteri nek karo P."* (KT-S2-P1, 35-37)

*"Eee nek kui yo sing Mojokerto kae nduk, nek rene nginep sak anak e sewengi bar ngunu muleh[...]"* (KT-S2-P1, 477-483)

Participants who lived alone often experienced limited opportunities to visit their families, particularly when family members lived far away. However, they still received visits from their children. For participant KT, regular visits from a nearby child helped meet daily needs, as the child frequently brought food or other items. In contrast, visits from children who lived farther away were typically less frequent but were experienced as meaningful forms of emotional support, such as staying overnight to provide temporary companionship..

*"Blonjo opo pengen opo yo kabeh mbak em leh, aku yo ra pengen opo opo karek dimasakno dipangan ngunu wes penak [...]"* (SR-S4-P1, 252-266)

*"Opo opo aku kan yo melok anak yo dadine wes gak enek pikiran. Ayem bereng nek ndelok anak putu bereng nduk aku ki, [...]"* (ST-S5-P1, 606-611)

*"Ogak aku nduk nek masak. Masak yo mamah e U kui sing masak nduk."* (MJ-S6-P1, 163-164)

For participants who live with their families, the relationship is characterized by instrumental support, such as daily needs being fully met by their children and grandchildren, so that good relations are maintained and the participants' lives are made easier because they do not have to think about anything for their daily lives as this is taken care of by their children.

#### Social Contribution

The meaning in life for the elderly lies not only in receiving, but also in the ability to give to others, which is reflected in the social contributions they make.

*"[...] koyo nyumbang mangan neng tonggo neng. Ngekei barangan koyo hasil tani hasil kebun sendiri tak kasih ke tetangga. Kadang yo dibalikno yo sama sama kasih satu sama"*

*lain neng.[...] Berbagi iku yo karo konco bereng neng. Nek mreng yo tak tawani sarapan tapi yo sak enek e neng. [...]*" (SK-S1-P1, 111-124)

*"Eeee nduk nek aku yo nek enek ki wong wong mesti yo tak kei. Nek wong wong ngono yo ngekei aku nduk, yo gelek ater ater mreng. Nha tapi nek aku ngene iki yo nek enek tak kei nek gak enek yo opo to nduk sing ape tak kekno [...]"* (KT-S2-P2, 147-169)

*"[...] yo paling nek diarani apik nek tonggo kui yo iling nduk, ngekei opo aku nduwe opo tak kei ngunu nduk, iling nek sekirane enek terus iso ngekei yo tak kei, nek gak yo tak bagi kene tok lha wong anak e enek telung omah. [...]"* (SR-S4-P1, 106-121)

Social contribution was reflected in participants' continued willingness to share with others, such as giving farm or garden produce to neighbors and friends and offering whatever food they had available. Even when resources were limited, sharing remained meaningful as a form of reciprocity and connection with the surrounding community. At the same time, participants were aware of their boundaries and only shared within their means, suggesting that these prosocial acts were not driven by self-imposed obligation but rather by sincere intentions and a realistic understanding of personal capacity.

*"Iyo leh nduk nek kui yo wes mesti. Wong kene nek nduwe gawe eee aku yo melok ngiwangi, sek putik putik opo sek ngewangi mbeteti pitik...]"* (MJ-S6-P2, 242-248)

Social contribution is also explained as direct action to help neighbors when they have needs or events where the participant assesses that even the smallest amount of help he can give will still be given as long as the participant is still able. This shows the participant's persistence in contributing to the community as part of his presence.

### **Conflict Resolution Strategies**

Participants collectively realize that conflict brings its own burden to each participant to be handled directly as an elderly person regardless of their residential status. Therefore, in their conflict resolution strategies, participants often choose to act passively in order to maintain their inner peace and ensure that harmonious social relationships are preserved, demonstrating that in the search for meaning in life, peace is prioritized over self-justification.

*"Masalah yo neng... nek aku yo biasane meneng ae neng. Misal e karo mbah J diseneni yo meneng ae. Tak mben wae neng. Aku tidak mau menonjolkan diri intine. Gak pengen nggarai perkoro neng, ngalah."* (SK-S1-P2, 89-94)

*"Aku ki nek wes dicelatuni wes moh guneman aku. Meneng wae. Meneng wae aku, tapi tak batin ae nduk. Tenan nduk. Aku tak batin ae nek bar enek wong piye piye karo aku[...]"* (KT-S2-P2, 105-116)

*"Yo nek e koyo di endo wong yo piye nduk nek aku meneng wae. Aku yo meneng, ncene aku gak tau nggolek masalah karo wong. Nek aku sing ngono yo tak mben nduk pe piye meneh."* (KR-S3-P2, 240-245)

Participants showed passive conflict resolution by ignoring others who sought problems with them. Participants chose to remain silent and not respond as the best response they could do to avoid further problems and impact on their daily lives.

*"Iyo yo meneng ae, doa tok aku eee mugi mugi Gusti Allah sing mbales.[...]"* (MJ-S6-P2, 214-221)

Passive attitude was also supported by a spiritual perspective, whereby they processed their hurt feelings by praying for those who criticized them, leaving the response to God.

### **Theme 4: Legacy of Values**

This theme describes how the older adults interpret their lives as a time to leave moral messages, life examples, and spiritual teachings for their children and grandchildren of the next generation. This legacy is not material, but rather values that are believed to give direction and

meaning to their lives, such as moral advice, spiritual role and orientation, and understanding of self-worth.

### **Moral Advice**

Moral advice is one form of legacy given by the older adults, especially regarding interpersonal kindness, family responsibilities, and daily morals

*“Eeh yo sing diwarisno ki opo leh nduk aku ra nduwe opo opo. Eee yo pandongan tok iki nduk... yo karo tak tuturi ngono nduk nek anak putuku, eee sing apik nek karo dulur karo wong opo meneh karo wong tuwek. Kabeh ki yo kudu rukun jeneng e wong urip. Yoo tak dongakno seger waras mben putuku isek iso ngerumat bapak ibuk e ngono nduk. Nek anakku yo mben iso ngerumat aku. Sing penting yo rukun karo sing apik karo wong.”* (KT-S2-P2, 370-387)

*“[...]nek wong ngeneki sing penting urip iku kudu sembayang, ojo lali wong tuwek, rukun sak kabehane, opo opo pokok e iling wong tuwek... yo jeneng e wong tuwek iso nuturi apik yo dituturi, tapi podo enom podo tuwek e nek salah yo tetep ngilingno.”* (SR-S4-P2, 136-139)

Moral advice is a form of contribution to the future of the family as well as a source of meaning that they continue to have an impact on future generations through prayer that the good deeds that should be done by their children and grandchildren are to fulfill their religious obligations, not to forget their parents, to always live in harmony, and to remind each other regardless of their position as children or parents.

*“Aku yo kor kui maeng, ojo lali panggonane, ojo lali bereng karo wong tuwo, karo sing ngerumat se ket cilik. Nek masalah wong tuwek mboh piye mboh piye dititeni. Nek barang tujuan elek ojo nganti sampek nyedak. Pokok e yo ngelakoni barang sing becik. Nek awak e iso ngelakoni keagamaan yo dilakoni terus, dilakoni mumpung sek iso saiki[...].”* (ST-S5-P2, 297-311)

Moral advice also focused on being able to put themselves in the shoes of children who have been cared for by their parents so that they can repay them by taking care of their parents sincerely, staying away from bad things and doing good deeds, and immediately fulfilling their religious obligations while they are still young so that they will not regret it later.

### **Spiritual Role and Orientation**

This shows that spirituality is a legacy of values that participants pass on to those around them. They not only advise their children and grandchildren to be diligent in worship, but also make prayer, worship, and their relationship with God the main source of meaning in their lives, even though some of them are no longer able to perform religious duties such as prayer due to their physical condition. This is reflected in the participants' quotes.

*“Yo ibadah neng, ibadah sholat limo wektu mbendino ben iling karo gusti Allah terus sholat jumat.”* (SK-S1-P1, 45-47)

*“Makane saiki nek sholat yo rung iso nduk. Nek bengi yo dongo ngono ae.”* (KT-S2-P2, 143-145)

*“Nek carane karek neng ati nduk, yoo nek ati niat yo niat nek atine kui yo kui. Carane yo opo nduk nek ogak sholat iku, yo karo melok ceramah melok sholawatan wiridan ngono kui leh nduk[...].”* (KR-S3-P2, 113-121)

*“Yo kor intine nek karo pengeran aku diparingi seger kewarasan yoo asline perkoro lima wektu, yoo agomo ngono lah. Tapi masalah e saiki keadaanku ngene nek ngelakoni angel. Nek neng sakjrone atiku yo pegangan e yo mok iso doa, doane wong tuwek, mugo aku kabeh sak anak putu diparingi slamet, di paringi kesehatan, ngono tok yo doa.”* (ST-S5-P1, 117-126)

The spiritual role of the participants is also that of parents who contribute to their children's lives through their belief that prayer is something that can encourage success and protect the safety of those they pray for.

### ***Understanding of Self-Worth***

Understanding of self-worth describes how participants perceive themselves through the personal values they have held throughout their lives. The way they understand who they are and how they live their daily lives is not only a reflection of their identity, but also a form of value inheritance that they indirectly pass on to their children, grandchildren, and social environment.

*“Aku nek elek elek ngunu kui gak tau nduk. [...] aku baturan setempoh ngupili jagung dino dino lah ratau jeneng eee rasan rasan wong golek perkoro ngono karo wong gak tau. Tenan nduk gak oleh nek aku, ojo sampek pokok e.”* (KT-S2-P2, 91-104)

*“Opo nduk, urip pokok e ngono yo biasa ae nduk. Urip ki biasa, eee awak e pengen mangan di mangan awak e pengen turu yo turu, koko nek wayah e sholat yo sholat. Sing penting bebas urip ki.”* (MJ-S6-P2, 317-322)

## **Theme 5: Purpose and Hope**

This theme describes how participants make the meaning of their lives in the final phase of life, including their life purposes and hopes for the future.

### ***Life Purpose***

Participants indicate that their life purpose has narrowed from being focused on productive roles to fulfill family needs to being focused on their personal lives as they reach older ages.

*“Anak wes berkeluarga wes merantau punya pekerjaan. [...] Wes gak mikir sing ora-ora nek kanggo anak. Karek mikir urip sendiri neng.”* (SK-S1-P2, 221-231)

*“[...]paling yo nek enom kae ngeragad i kudu akeh kesel bendino golek lawoh panganan nek saiki tuwek yo wes gak mek opo opo gak mikir nggolek nggolek* (SR-S4-P1, 345-350)

Life purposes that were once dependent on family responsibilities to fulfill needs have shifted to a focus on thinking about themselves, being free from obligations, and living life as seniors. Although participants SK still need to earn an income to fulfill their own needs due to their status of living alone.

*“Wong tuwek karek mikir sok mben iki nduk yo sangune pie.”* (KT-S2-P2, 276-277)

Participants also understood that their life purpose was to prepare provisions or life after death.

### ***Hope For The Future***

The hopes expressed for the future by participants who live with their families are to always be healthy and able to carry out activities that contribute to the family, such as taking care of the house where they live together.

*“Hmm... nek perkoro sing dereng sempat iku iki neng... ke masjid setiap hari neng iku gak sempat. Pengen neng setiap hari berangkat istiqomah ngono neng.”* (SK-S1-P2, 232-236)

*“Iyoo jek pengen sehat nduk. Yooo yo ndelok anak putu kui nduk. Ee nek en roh og putu cilik cilik terus menangi rabi sampek nduwe anak[...] ”* (KT-S2-P1, 330-338)

*“Yooo... nek di pundut yo dipundut, namikno ojo kok dikei loro nemen-nemen. Nek ku loro ki kawet cilik ngantek gede.”* (KT-S2-P1, 340-346)

Future hopes were generally realistic and spiritually grounded. Participants expressed aspirations to strengthen and maintain religious practice, particularly through more consistent congregational worship. They also hoped to remain in good health and to continue witnessing their children and grandchildren grow. At the same time, these hopes were often accompanied by surrender to God's will. Toward the end of life, participants also hoped to experience minimal suffering and to face death peacefully, so as not to become a burden to their families.

*"Yoo nek sak iki pengen e yo jek mek opo opo, sek ngewangi resik resik nyapu opo. Tapi nek karo kang em Y karo kang em K yo di penging wes tuwek dikon buk ae."* (SR-S4-P2, 199-203)

*"Tapi nek diarani sehat to pengen sehat yo pengen, biasa ngono lah, iso mloka mlaku. Nek sehat paling o yo resik resik nek omah tok kui leh."* (ST-S5-P1, 426-430)

The hopes expressed for the future by participants who live with their families are to always be healthy and able to carry out activities that contribute to the family, such as taking care of the house where they live together.

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand the meaning in life dynamics of older adults living alone and those living with family. Overall, the findings indicate that both groups were able to construct meaning in life through acceptance of aging and limitations, interpreting and sustaining social relationships, internalizing spiritual and moral values, and formulating simple yet clear goals in later life. The discussion below elaborates on these findings based on the five superordinate themes identified in the results: adaptive balance, inner calm, dynamics of social relationships, legacy of values, and purpose and hope.

Within the theme of adaptive balance, participants' meaning-making processes were initiated by changes in physical condition and bodily capability as they entered later life. Participants recognized that their bodies were no longer as strong as before, that they became more easily fatigued, and that they faced limitations in performing certain activities. Awareness of physical changes served as a foundation for self-acceptance, understood as the ability to adjust to one's condition and circumstances (Klussman et al., 2022). Importantly, this acceptance did not occur instantly, rather it emerged through reflection on later-life realities that required life adjustment and the regulation of activity according to remaining capacities. Adaptive balance was evident in how older adults actively reorganized daily life to remain independent and productive within feasible limits. Participants acknowledged physical decline yet continued to maintain meaningful light activities such as raising livestock, gardening, caring for the home, or helping with domestic work. This pattern reflects a balance between accepting limitations and preserving self-function, consistent with Lowe et al. (2024), who argue that adaptation in later life involves aligning expectations and activities with changing physical conditions. Thus, adaptive balance among older adults is not only about physical activity, but also about how they interpret remaining abilities as meaningful.

Among older adults living alone, physical changes appeared to sharpen the importance of independence. Participants seek to manage basic needs and household tasks for as long as their physical condition allows, while also setting boundaries to protect their safety. Independence in this context was not interpreted as the capacity to do everything fully, but rather as self-management, recognizing bodily limits, and adjusting activities realistically. This process was also shaped by life circumstances such as the loss of a spouse or separation from caregivers due to migration, which required participants to adapt to reduced immediate support. This aligns with factors influencing independence in older adults' daily functioning, including the absence of a spouse and limited family support (Haryati et al., 2022).

For older adults living with family, adaptive balance was more often enacted through changes and negotiations of family roles, such as taking on lighter household roles, caring for grandchildren, or maintaining routines that aligned with other family members. These role adjustments supported older adults in continuing to feel useful despite physical decline. This is consistent with Wong's (2012) concept of resource congruence, which proposes that successful adaptation depends on the extent to which situational demands are balanced by internal and external resources such as family support, physical health, and spiritual beliefs. Older adults living with family in this study appeared to rely more

on family support. Yet this reliance did not eliminate adaptive agency and some participants demonstrated independence when temporarily left alone, carrying out domestic tasks that were usually rare when family members were at home.

These patterns highlight an interaction between psychological processes and meaning-making experiences. Older adults did not merely encounter physical decline; they also reorganized meaning in life to remain aligned with personal values such as independence, usefulness, and sufficiency. This finding is consistent with Tsadok-Cohen et al. (2025), who reported that older adults who adjust expectations, manage activities according to capacity, and maintain meaningful engagement tend to exhibit better life balance and emotional resilience in later life. The pattern also aligns with Wong's (2012) meaning-centered approach, which emphasizes meaning in life as a key mechanism for transforming experiences of loss and limitation into opportunities for growth through the ABCDE strategy. Accordingly, acceptance should not be interpreted as passive resignation, but as a form of meaning regulation that helps older adults regardless of living arrangement, find a “middle point” between desired activities and actual capacities.

Inner calm in older adults emerged as an emotional core in meaning-making dynamics, characterized by feelings of peace, sufficiency, and satisfaction in later life (Aviisah et al., 2025). However, this calmness did not appear automatically. Instead, it was shaped by shifts in perspective as participants aged and experienced changes in physical capacity, social roles, and daily routines. If in earlier life stages happiness and satisfaction were often tied to productivity, physical strength, or financial responsibility, many participants in later life shifted toward a more accepting and “sufficiency-oriented” perspective, viewing life as still worthy of enjoyment even when it was no longer ideal. This shift was evident when participants linked calmness to elements that might previously have been perceived as minor, such as being able to eat, sleep, worship, see children and grandchildren, or care for chickens as a source of entertainment, which became central sources of joy and satisfaction. This is consistent with age-related shifts in happiness perceptions that increasingly emphasize simpler experiences as individuals grow older (Patrisia et al., 2025).

Both groups frequently referred to gratitude and sufficiency despite living in objectively modest conditions. Calmness was interpreted as the capacity to accept everyday realities, such as fluctuating strength, the need to choose activities carefully, or changing household situations. At this point, inner calm reflects the interaction between acceptance, emotion regulation, positive life appraisal, and meaning-making dynamics through re-prioritizing what is perceived as valuable. In Frankl's (2006) framework, this resembles tragic optimism, or the ability to maintain hope and a positive stance even when life includes loss or pain, because individuals still find something worth being grateful for. In other words, inner calm among older adults can be understood as the outcome of a repeated process: facing physical, social, and routine-related changes while continually reconstructing meaning so that life remains “something to be grateful for.”

The process of meaning-making in later life did not only occur at major transitions into old age, but also in day-to-day fluctuations, when the body felt weaker, loneliness emerged, family members were busy, or routines changed. Among older adults living alone, inner calm was often linked to accepting solitude and interpreting small activities as emotional support, such as raising chickens, caring for the house, and treating these routines as sources of enjoyment. Inner calm could form when solitude was not always experienced as a deficit but as a space to manage one's own rhythm, enjoy simple activities, and settle one's thoughts. This aligns with Santini et al. (2025), who suggest that positive solitude may support older adults in managing loneliness and achieving a calmer internal state. Thus, loneliness does not necessarily function as a destructive experience; it can be negotiated through meaning-making and routines that provide comfort.

Among older adults living with family, inner calm tended to emerge through relational reframing satisfaction derived from seeing children and grandchildren doing well, feeling cared for, and being able to meet basic needs and worship with fewer obstacles due to family support. Here, meaning-in-life dynamics shifted from satisfaction grounded in productive roles to satisfaction grounded in relational security and family-supported sufficiency. This pattern was evident, for example, in the participant case, earlier life satisfaction was associated with productive work experiences, while later-life calmness became linked to gratitude for children who supported daily sufficiency. Overall, this theme shows that meaning in life among older adults is not only tied to “large goals” but also to the ability to interpret simple routines and one's current position as something worthy of gratitude. This

aligns with Wong's (2012) meaning-centered well-being framework, in which meaning functions as a foundation of well-being that persists even when life conditions are far from ideal.

Social relationship dynamics highlight how older adults managed family relationships, social contributions, and conflict resolution as key components of meaning in life. Findings show that both groups interpreted family relationships as a main “pillar” of life, although the form and intensity of contact differed. Older adults living alone often experienced life as meaningful when children or relatives occasionally visited, or when they maintained positive relationships with people around them. Affectively, visits were commonly interpreted as moments that strengthened feelings of being cared for, belonging, and safety, making the day feel more “alive.” In the absence of visits, older adults were more vulnerable to loneliness, which was managed through alternative relationships or through self-acceptance of a quieter life rhythm. This aligns with evidence that the quality of intergenerational relationships is associated with reduced loneliness and more positive attitudes toward later life stages (Liu et al., 2022).

Older adults living with family experienced meaning through everyday togetherness, regular interaction, and the experience of caring for grandchildren. At this point, life often felt fuller when participants saw their children's families become stable and when grandchildren were present. This is consistent with Cojocaru et al. (2025), who found that interpersonal relationships, especially family and friendships are primary sources of belonging and meaning in life. The findings also suggest that social support from family and the surrounding environment is important for older adults to sustain meaningful life experiences. When support decreases such as when children become too busy to visit or when grandchildren move away, older adults may experience loss and loneliness because interactions that previously provided warmth and meaning diminish. Such shifts can reduce older adults' roles within the family and demand renewed adjustment to family conditions and support patterns (Dong et al., 2023), prompting older adults to seek alternative meaning sources, such as strengthening neighbor or community ties or becoming more socially active.

Another dimension of this theme involves social contribution and older adults' roles in the community. Narratives from participants SK, KT, and SR indicated a desire to continue sharing with others despite limitations, while MJ emphasized being “useful” through helping neighbors during communal activities. Such contributions often generated feelings of pride, worth, and usefulness when participants were still able to give. From Frankl's (1966) perspective, giving and serving others reflect self-transcendence, namely directing the self beyond personal needs. Frankl (2006) also argues that meaning can be found through creative acts and service to others even under difficult conditions. Similarly, research on prosocial engagement in later life suggests that meaningful involvement, such as volunteering, can strengthen well-being and purpose, especially when aligned with older adults' capacities and social networks (Hotta & Ishimaru, 2024).

In conflict resolution, older adults tended to prioritize patience and avoiding direct confrontation when tensions occurred with children, other family members, or people outside the family. Conflict may evoke discomfort, sadness, or worries about relational rupture, however, choosing restraint and de-escalation was often interpreted as preserving dignity, preventing relationship breakdown, and protecting inner calm. When harmony was maintained, older adults experienced relief and peace, reinforcing the belief that harmonious relationships are part of a meaningful life. This is consistent with Rokach and Berman (2020), who found that in later life individuals often avoid direct confrontation and prefer strategies that maintain emotional comfort and relational harmony. Krok and Zarzycka (2021) also reported that forgiveness tendencies and sustaining positive relationships are associated with higher meaning in life and psychological well-being among older adults.

The legacy of values theme highlights how older adults interpreted life as an opportunity to leave traces of the self through advice, moral exemplars, spiritual orientation, and the transmission of personal values to the next generation (Neller et al., 2023). This theme became salient as participants entered later life and began evaluating life not only in terms of “what has been achieved,” but also in terms of what values can still be passed on and what influence can continue. This process was reflected in participants' stronger emphasis on simplicity, modest expectations, working without pride-related concerns, maintaining politeness, and sustaining religious practice. Such values served as anchors that helped older adults feel whole and valuable amid changes in physical capacity, roles, and life rhythms. Aging, therefore, was not merely interpreted as decline but also as a phase of meaning consolidation and ensuring that a “good way of living” continues beyond the self.

Findings suggest that both groups perceived themselves as carriers of moral messages about how to live well. Participants framed “being a good person” as maintaining timely worship, sustaining good relationships, not burdening others, and modelling simplicity to children and grandchildren. These experiences show that meaning in later life is often sustained through consistent small acts like maintaining manners, practicing restraint, worshipping, and serving as an example, which also function as “evidence” to the self that life remains valuable. This aligns with Cojocaru et al. (2025), who identified intergenerational transmission of values as a key theme of meaning in life among older adults, where older adults experience life as meaningful when they can instil moral and spiritual values in younger generations through advice, life stories, or role modelling in religious and spiritual practice.

The purpose and hope how older adults interpreted life direction in later life. Findings indicate that life goals tended to narrow from earlier goals focused on providing for family and fulfilling productive roles toward more personal goals, such as maintaining health, preserving independence, continuing worship, and witnessing children and grandchildren living well. For some participants, there was a sense of relief when children became independent and were no longer perceived as dependents, leading goals to shift from earning a living to maintaining peace and not burdening anyone. This shift aligns with Steger et al. (2006) view that meaning in life includes the presence of meaning (a sense that life is meaningful in the present) and purpose (future-oriented direction), both of which can change across life stages, including later life.

Among older adults living alone, goals and hopes often centered on maintaining independence and hoping to die peacefully after feeling “enough” in fulfilling family roles. Among older adults living with family, goals were more integrated with relational roles such as continuing to accompany grandchildren, becoming a place for children to share stories, or maintaining harmony at home. This is consistent with Cojocaru et al. (2025), who identified daily goals and simple hopes as sources of structure and meaning among older adults in institutional settings. From Frankl's (2006) perspective, orientation toward goals, even small goals, reflects the will to meaning, namely the drive to continue finding something worthwhile to do and hope for even under constraints.

When older adults in this study expressed hopes to remain healthy, worship regularly, and occasionally see children and grandchildren, they were essentially holding onto a “thread” of meaning that protects them from emptiness. This aligns with Lara et al. (2020), who found that goals, hope, and perceived control together with social support and positive emotions contribute to hedonic balance and happiness in later life. Thus, purpose and hope reinforce that meaning in life among older adults is not only a reflection on the past but also a living orientation toward the present and future, even when time horizons are shorter and goals are simpler. Within Wong's (2012) framework, this reflects the purpose structure of meaning in life: older adults retain future orientation, expressed in ways that are more congruent with their physical and social conditions.

In summary, the meaning-in-life dynamics of older adults living alone and those living with family generally developed in a positive direction. However, the “anchor points” of meaning differed: older adults living alone tended to emphasize independence and local social networks, whereas older adults living with family tended to emphasize attachment and support within family relationships.

## Conclusion

The meaning in life dynamics of older adults living alone and those living with family are multidimensional and shaped by; (1) adaptive balance in responding to changes in physical condition and social roles, (2) inner calm rooted in gratitude and a sense of sufficiency, (3) the quality of social relationships, (4) the strength of spirituality, and (5) realistic goals and hopes in later life. Older adults living alone tended to construct meaning primarily through functional independence, efforts to avoid burdening others, and social support from neighbors and religious activities. Then older adults living with family tended to derive meaning through family roles, togetherness with children and grandchildren, and the instrumental support they received. The key distinction lies in the primary “anchor” of meaning, older adults living alone emphasized independence and local social networks, whereas those living with family emphasized attachment and support within family relationships.



## Recommendation

This study may encourage older adults to continue developing meaning in life as they age by maintaining feasible simple activities as sources of presence and self-worth, sustaining positive relationships with family and neighbors and nurturing spirituality. The findings may also inform the development of interventions oriented toward strengthening meaning in life, rather than focusing solely on physical symptoms or emotional complaints. For future research, it is recommended to expand both the number and diversity of participants (e.g., older adults in urban settings or with different religious/ethnic backgrounds) so that descriptions of meaning-in-life dynamics become richer and are not limited to a single sociocultural context.

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