

Americans' views of life's meaning and purpose are changing

April 6, 2021

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—As Americans attempt to move past the life-altering effects of 2020, their perspective is shifting on some of the most significant questions facing humanity.

A new Lifeway Research study finds, compared to a decade ago, U.S. adults today are more likely to regularly wonder about meaning and purpose in this life but less likely to believe strongly finding a higher meaning and purpose is important.

Americans are also more likely to contemplate whether they will go to heaven when they die but less likely to believe strongly there is more to life than this physical world.

Asking the big questions

“In the midst of such a discouraging season, fewer Americans are convinced there is something more to this life than their daily activities,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research.

“A large majority still lean toward there being an ultimate purpose for a person's life, but instead of escaping the pandemic with thoughts of something greater, far fewer strongly hold such a view. A growing number of Americans have become open to the idea that this might be as good as it gets.”

Most Americans (57 percent) say they wonder, “How can I find more

meaning and purpose in my life?" at least monthly, with more than 1 in 5 saying they consider the question daily (21 percent) or weekly (21 percent). Few (6 percent) say they think about it yearly. Close to 1 in 4 (23 percent) say they never wonder about finding more meaning and purpose. Another 15 percent aren't sure.

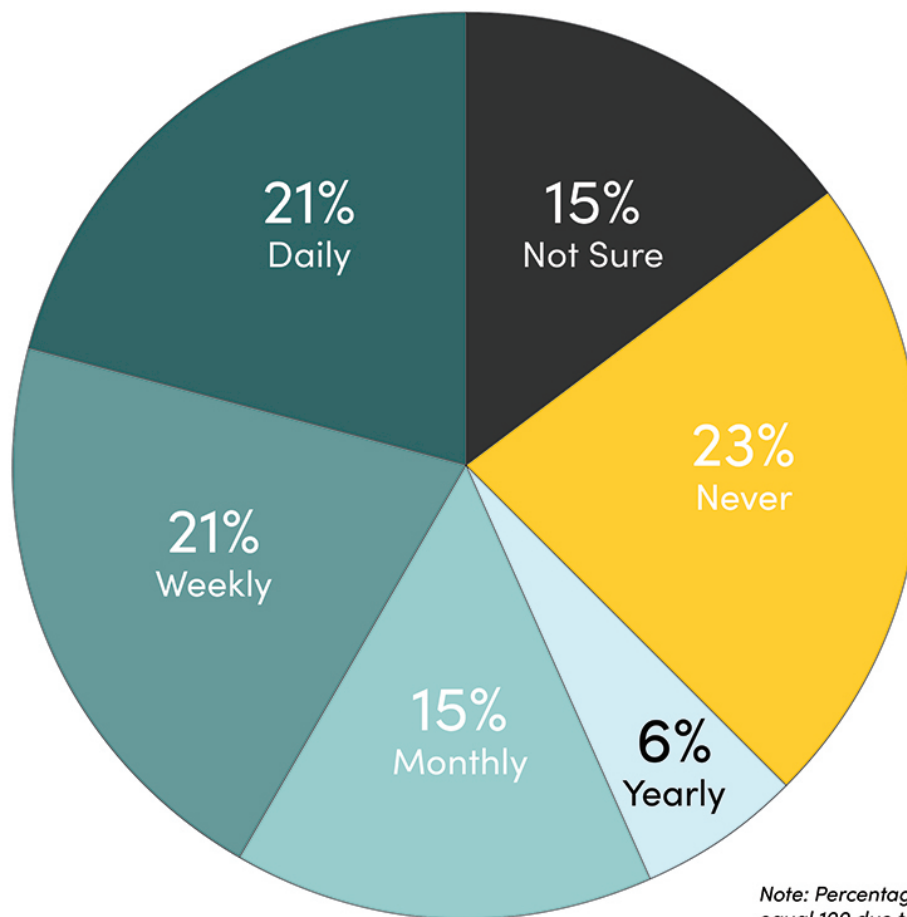
Compared to a 2011 Lifeway Research study, Americans today are more likely to think regularly about how they can find more meaning and purpose. A decade ago, 51 percent said they wonder about finding meaning and purpose at least monthly, with 18 percent saying they think about it daily and 19 percent saying weekly. Thirteen percent said they thought about that question yearly, and 28 percent said they never considered it.

"During COVID-19, many experiences, pleasures and metrics of success became irrelevant overnight," McConnell said. "It is not surprising that more people thought about their purpose and what matters in life."

Most Americans regularly think about finding more meaning and purpose in life.

“How often do you wonder: ‘How can I find more meaning and purpose in my life?’”

Among American adults



Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Not as certain as they used to be

Most Americans say everyone's life has a purpose, and it's important to them that they pursue their deeper purpose, but U.S. adults aren't as sure about that as they were a decade ago.

Four in 5 Americans (81 percent) believe there is an ultimate purpose and plan for every person's life. More than 2 in 3 Americans (68 percent) say a major priority in their life is finding their deeper purpose. Almost 3 in 4 (73 percent) say it's important they pursue a higher purpose and meaning for their life.

Each of those percentages are similar to 2011. There has been a significant shift, however, from strong agreement to more hesitant agreement. Those who strongly agree with each statement dropped, while those who somewhat agree rose.

"Few Americans are ready to deny there is an ultimate purpose and plan for every person's life," said McConnell. "But more are stepping back from this driving their own pursuits. Life has become a more pessimistic pursuit with fewer going all out for something better."

As Americans consider higher meanings, most believe they have found it. Close to 3 in 5 (59 percent) say they have found a higher purpose and meaning for their life, with 28 percent disagreeing.

Religiously unaffiliated Americans are the most likely to disagree (37 percent). Americans who belong to a religion other than Christianity are the most likely to agree (80 percent).

Among Christians, the more often they attend church, the more likely they are to say they have found a higher purpose and meaning for their life. Half of those who attend less than once a month (51 percent) say they've found

such meaning for their life, compared to 69 percent of those who attend one to three times a month and 76 percent of those who attend four times a month or more.

Life after death?

Close to half of Americans (45 percent) say they wonder, “If I were to die today, do I know for sure that I would go to heaven?” More than a third (37 percent) say they never think about that question, and 18 percent aren’t sure.

Compared to 2011, more Americans today say they wonder if they’ll go to heaven daily (15 percent to 8 percent), and fewer say they never think about it (37 percent to 46 percent). More now also say they aren’t sure how often they consider the question than a decade ago (18 percent to 12 percent).

Christians who attend worship services four times a month or more (46 percent) are as likely to say they never wonder about their eternal destination as the religiously unaffiliated (47 percent), but perhaps for different reasons. Those religious nones, however, are more likely to say they never ponder if they will go to heaven when they die than Protestants (37 percent) and Catholics (26 percent).

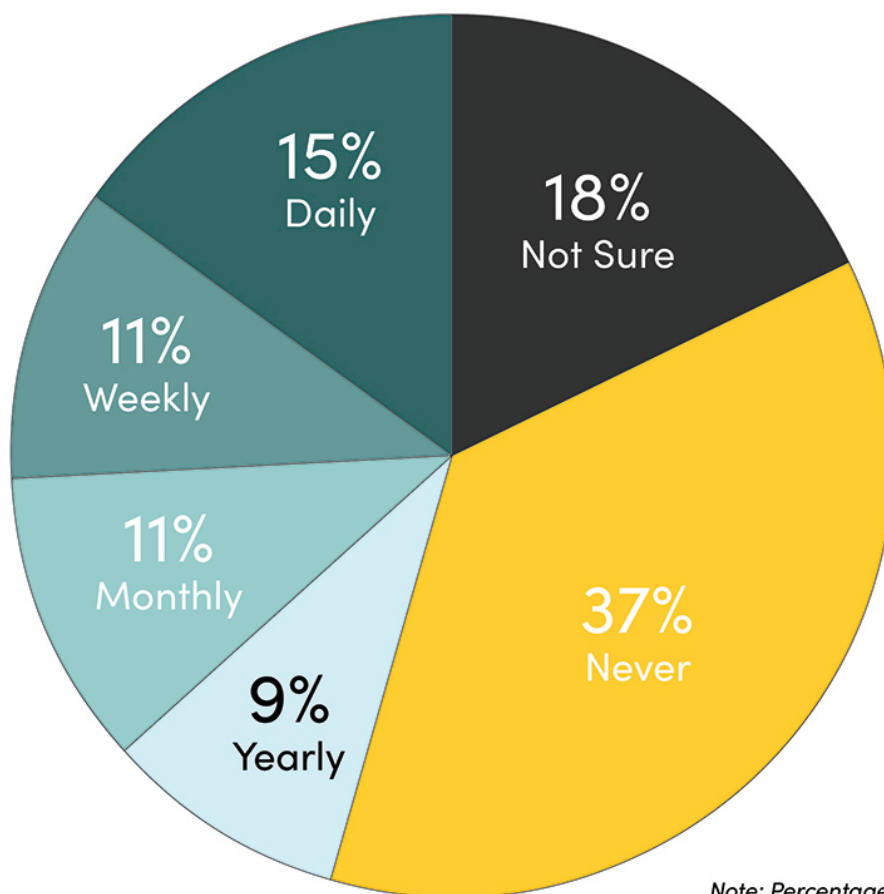
“The question of going to heaven doesn’t cross the minds of people who don’t believe in heaven and those who are completely certain they will go to heaven,” McConnell said. “While the Bible teaches one can be certain a place is prepared for you in heaven, nearly half of Americans pause each year wondering if heaven is waiting for them.”

Even if most Americans aren’t regularly contemplating their admittance to heaven, the vast majority believe there is more to life than just what they can see.

Close to half of Americans wonder if they'll go to heaven when they die.

"How often do you wonder: 'If I were to die today, do I know for sure that I would go to heaven?'"

Among American adults



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Is this all there is?

More than 4 in 5 U.S. adults (85 percent) believe there is more to life than the physical world and society. Few disagree (9 percent) or are not sure (6 percent).

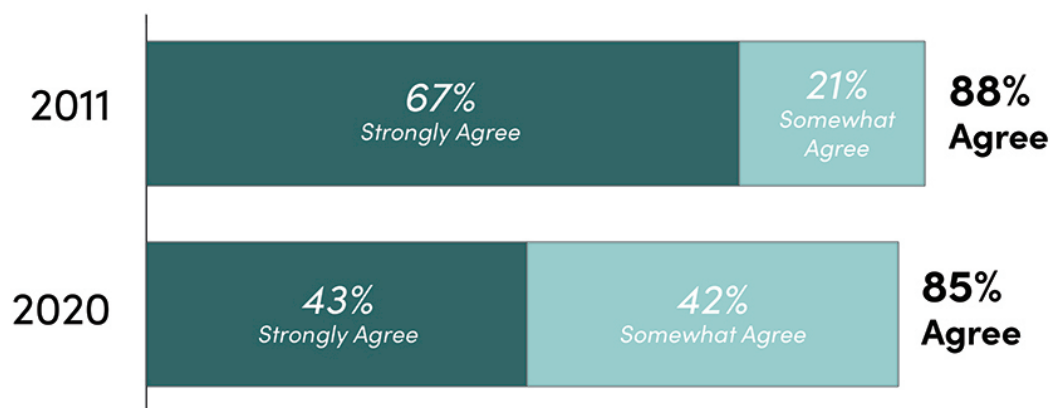
The total agreement percentages are similar to 2011, but there is significant movement away from certainty. In 2011, 67 percent strongly agreed, and 21 percent somewhat agreed. Today, 43 percent strongly agree, and 42 percent somewhat agree.

In the latest study, Americans ages 18 to 34 and those 35 to 49 (87 percent) are more likely to say there is more to life than the physical world than those 65 and older (79 percent). The religiously unaffiliated are the most likely to disagree (20 percent).

Fewer Americans express strong confidence that there is more than the physical world.

“There is more to life than the physical world and society.”

Among American adults



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The online survey of 1,200 Americans was conducted Sept. 9-23, 2020, using a national pre-recruited panel. Analysts used quotas and slight weights to balance gender, age, region, ethnicity, education and religion to reflect the population more accurately. The sample includes an over-sample of Americans with evangelical beliefs providing additional reliability for breakouts of this group. The completed sample of 1,200 surveys provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent. Margins of error are higher in sub-groups.