



# Meaning in Life is Associated with Greater Exercise Behavior

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## Introduction

Nearly 70% of persons in the United States are overweight or obese. Being overweight puts people at risk for a variety of health problems, including high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, and/or heart disease/attacks. In light of previous research demonstrating that increased meaning in life (MIL) is associated with greater well-being, the present work examined whether heightened trait and state MIL increased exercise behavior. Whereas Study 1 was correlational in nature (i.e., the Meaning in Life Questionnaire; Steger et al., 2006), Study 2 manipulated MIL through a writing task. Health behavior was assessed using Fitbit activity trackers (i.e., step count).

## Study 1 Method

- Participants were 73 undergraduate students (56 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.03$ ) recruited from introductory psychology classes who received partial course credit.
- Individuals took part in four different sessions (4-5 days apart; see Kersten et al., 2016 for similar procedures). During Session 1, everyone was given a wireless activity tracker (i.e., *Fitbit One*) to record their physical activity (i.e., steps taken) over 2 weeks.
- Participants completed a Qualtrics survey to assess presence and search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006). Example items included, “My life has a clear sense of purpose” (5 items;  $\alpha = .85$ ) and “I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful” (5 items;  $\alpha = .90$ ).
- Persons returned to the lab two additional times (Sessions 2-3) to charge the trackers. Session 4, which occurred 2 weeks following the first session, was when activity trackers were returned and all participants’ data were uploaded wirelessly via computer.



## Study 1 Results

	Steps Taken	Steps Taken <sup>1</sup>
Meaning Presence	$r = .276, p = .018$	$r = .248, p = .036$
Search for Meaning	$r = .164, p = .166$	$r = -.033, p = .783$

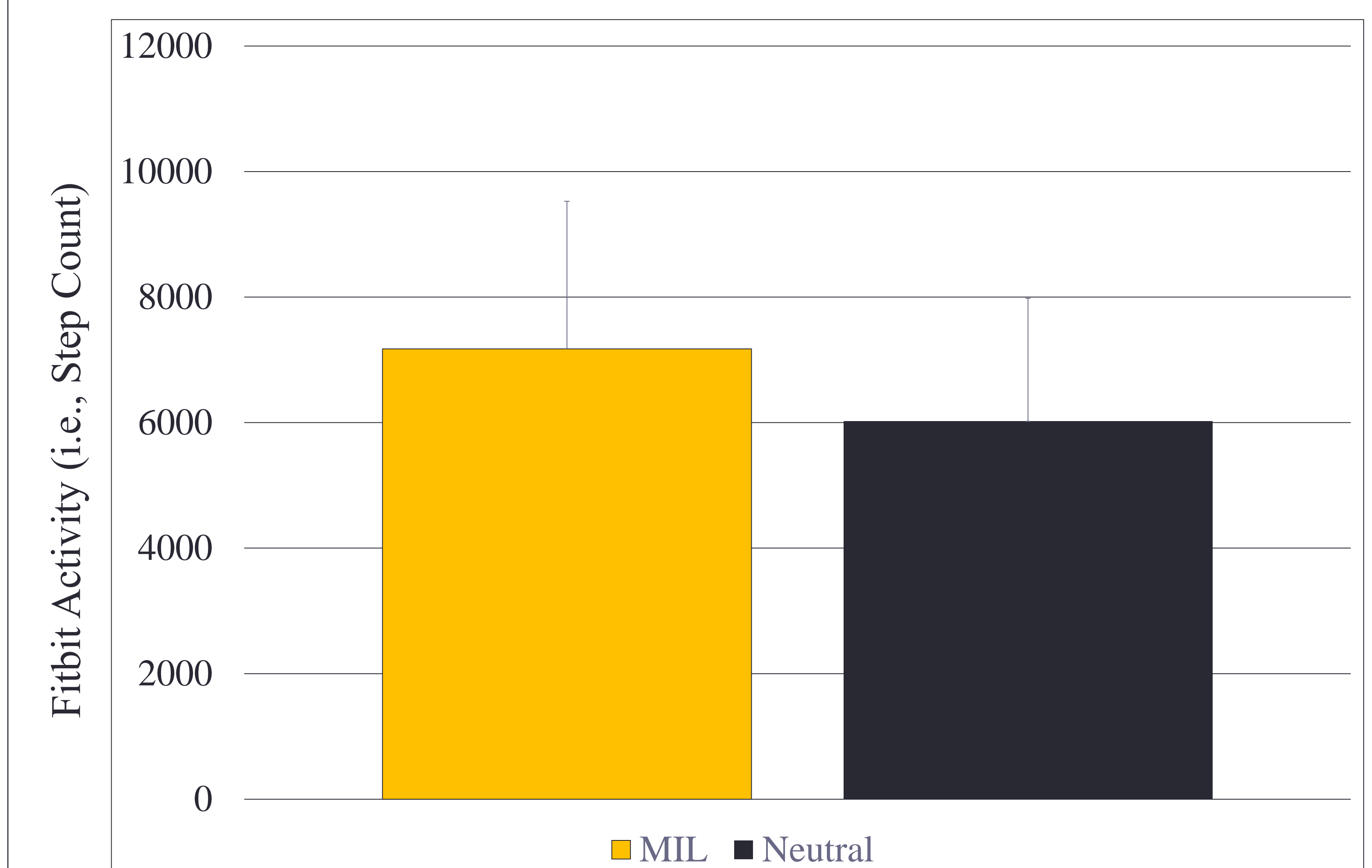
<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked to indicate the number of days they worked out on average per week. Responses ranged from 0 to 7 days. Partial correlations between MIL and health behavior while controlling for prior exercise experience.

- Although there was no association between search for meaning and Fitbit activity, there was a positive relationship between presence MIL and health behavior. This was found regardless of whether participants engaged in previous exercise behavior.

## Study 2 Method

- Seventy students (46 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.44$ ) received course credit in exchange for their participation.
- Individuals completed three sessions over the course of 8 days. Fitbits were issued in Session 1, along with the introduction of the MIL manipulation. Participants in Session 2 were asked to complete the same prime while their activity trackers were charging. Fitbits were returned during the final session where data were uploaded to a computer.
  - **MIL condition:** Please think about something from your life that makes you feel meaningful, like your life has purpose. Specifically, try to think of something that makes you feel the most meaningful. Then, spend a few minutes writing about this in the space below. When you are done, you can continue on to the next page.
  - **Neutral condition:** Please think about something ordinary in your life that occurs on a routine basis. Then, spend a few minutes writing about this in the space below. Describe the experience and how it is routine. When you are done, you can continue on to the next page.

## Study 2 Results



- MIL persons engaged in significantly more exercise than control persons,  $t(68) = 2.235, p = .029, \eta^2 = .26$ . Prior exercise did not serve as a significant covariate ( $p = .495$ ), nor did it affect the relationship between MIL and Fitbit activity.

## Discussion

- Two studies demonstrate that greater instances of MIL (either as a trait or state) are associated with heightened engagement in health activities.
- Given that many individuals struggle to achieve and maintain a healthy lifestyle, it seems especially important to identify effective ways to improve one’s physical condition. As the present research suggests, MIL may serve as an important health intervention.
- Despite limitations (e.g., college student samples; missing baseline assessments of Fitbit activity; inability to examine variables of a mediating/moderating nature), the current work is important in identifying a low cost intervention (e.g., writing) to increase health and well-being.