Questions to consider:
What's the point of living?
Why am I here?
How can I live meaningfully if I don't believe in an afterlife?
How can I make a difference if everyone who is affected by my actions will also die one day?
What happens when you die?
Is it logical to be scared of dying?
Is it ethical to have children?
Am I insignificant?
How can I truly understand and connect with others when the only reality I will ever experience is my own?
Is it better to take risks when given the chance, or to take the safest route possible in any given situation?

“Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.” –Carl Sagan
The only reality that any of us will ever experience is our own. We are all seeing the world through our own eyes. Every single person you come into contact with—every person stuck in traffic next to you on the highway, every person who has ever checked you out on a cash register, every person you have gotten into an inflamed political or religious argument with on Facebook—has lived a life just as complex as your own. You are merely a character in everyone else’s story. The happiest moment of your entire life will happen at the same time as the saddest moment of someone else’s. And, as you lay on your deathbed—babies will be born all over the world, marriages will begin and end, and people will be enjoying their vacations or mindlessly getting through the workday. Truly, I am the center of my own world, and you are the center of yours, and in the context of the universe—we are not really significant at all. How then, can we connect? I can’t read your thoughts and you can’t read mine. I can’t understand anything the way that you do because you have a lifetime of experiences, memories and thoughts that I will never have. Furthermore, people (including myself) tend to act differently around others. If none of us are ever being truly genuine, can we really even know each other?

I can’t answer the previous questions. But I do think that recognizing your role—as a supporting character in everyone else’s story—can help you find empathy and sympathy for others. When you understand that everyone else’s life is just as important to them as yours is to you, it is easier to forgive people for actions you deem “harmful”. It is easier to find qualities you admire in people you don’t agree with. And when you understand that we are at the mercy of the universe—each of us merely a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a speck—you are humbled. When I feel cocky about an accomplishment, extremely nervous in a social situation, hopelessly sad, or embarrassed beyond belief—I think about the fact that I am tethered by gravity to a planet that is spinning and rotating through the universe, and everything seems a little bit less important. If you accidentally fart in class, or wave back at someone who wasn’t waving at you in the first place, or hook up with someone who then proceeds to avoid eye contact with you every time you see them—think about your place in the beautiful, mysterious, infinite universe, and realize that in the grand scheme of things— it doesn’t matter all that much.
What's the point, then?

If we are all going to die anyway-if we are insignificant in the universe-if every person we effect in this lifetime will one day die too-if humans will one day be extinct-if we are doing more harm to the planet than good-why bother? Why should I subject myself to the agony of existence? Why should I drag myself out of bed every morning? Most of the days that I experience in the life will not stand out in my memory, after all. They all just sort of meld together to form a fuzzy blob of consciousness. Many of my memories aren't even reliable because my brain tricks and manipulates me. Furthermore, it is a scientific fact that we experience most of this life by processing our world in an implicit, peripheral mode. That means most of what happens in our brain is happening outside of our awareness. Many of our memories and associations are formed without our knowledge. If I am lucky enough to live to be old but I can't remember most of my life or even understand why I feel the way that I do-why does it even matter? I am still searching for an answer. I personally don't think there's a point. But I do think I am beginning to understand how to make this life worth my time.

As I said before, we can never be sure what other people are thinking or feeling—even if they tell us—because we are all operating with a different brain. However, great beauty can be found in moments experienced with others. Many of my most important memories come from these moments of connection. My first road trip with my best friend after I got my license and the freedom that I felt, that time we hiked the pinnacles during a thunderstorm and found ourselves standing in a cloud at the top, the time I laid silently on the ground with new friends in Arizona—contemplating the beauty of a night sky unencumbered by light pollution, the day of that fateful mushroom trip when a friend talked to me on the phone for hours because I was seriously contemplating suicide for the first time in my life, the moments spent with the only person I feel I have ever been truly in love with—these moments have given my life meaning. I am sure you have many memories like this as well. We are social creatures, it is to be expected. Social interaction is complex and confusing and oftentimes determined by arbitrary social norms—but I find that the bonds I share with other people often give me a reason to keep going when I feel like giving up. While social interaction is indeed very important to us in many ways....
We need alone time too. I wouldn't be the person I am today if I did not spend so much time by myself. When we are alone, we can exist without social pressure to conform or be unique. We can peer into our own minds. We can ask ourselves important questions about our values, stereotypes and beliefs. Alone time is a good time to practice mindfulness as well. As I mentioned before—it can be difficult to understand why life matters if you can't even remember most of it. I am sure you find yourself going through the motions quite often, as I do. Sometimes I drive somewhere and I find that I don't even remember the trip. My brain relies on past information to get me through the day—so I don't have to think very hard about what I'm doing most of the time. My brain takes care of everything for me. Of course, we evolved to be this way because it is beneficial for us to be able to react automatically. However, I have found that mindful alone time is very beneficial to my emotional health. Light a candle, smoke a bowl, have some tea, draw a picture, listen to your favorite music, sit somewhere with a nice view, listen to the sounds of nature, or even just allow yourself to exist in silence. No matter what you do—try to do it intentionally. Pay attention to your surroundings. You may not remember it—but it will do wonders for your present emotional health and well-being.

What happens when you die? This question has plagued philosophers, scientists, and every day people for thousands of years. It's not a new question. Of course, science can explain what happens to us physically when we die. We first experience clinical death—our hearts stop pumping blood, we stop breathing. Then we experience biological death—our cells deteriorate, the brain shuts down. Eventually organisms begin to break our body down, and unless we are mummified—our physical body will be gone. But what about US? What about our consciousness? Does it live on without us? Do we retain any semblance of what it means to be? Many people around the world who practice religion believe that their spirits will live on in an eternal afterlife. Many other people believe in ghosts—spirits who are trapped here on earth. Some people have near-death experiences which lead them to believe various things about what happens when you die. But truly, we can know none of these things for sure. Just as there is not a single human on this planet who can know with certainty that God does or does not exist (no matter what they may profess) there is not a single person on the planet that can know what happens to us when we die. We will only know when we die ourselves—but if we are dead, can we really even know?
I am partial to the belief that upon death, we cease to exist. I could be wrong of course, but I think it is very important for every person to at least consider this possibility. It is possible that when you die, it will be as it was for billions of years before you were born-you will not know anything. You will not feel anything. You will be nothing. You will no longer even be a "you". It is terrifying to me that there will come a time in which I might never ever again experience the excitement of new love, the adrenaline rush from taking a risk, the confusion of a difficult math problem, the terror of interacting with people at a party, the embarrassment of saying something dumb in front of people whose opinions I hold in high regard, the deep sadness of losing someone I love-I feel lucky to be able to experience any of these feelings, even the ones that suck. I feel sad when I think about the fact that my mother probably hasn't been looking down on me from "heaven" as everyone has tried to tell me throughout my life. I feel sad that my grandfather will die soon, and that he probably will not be able to live to see his dying wish come true—my graduation from college. I feel sad that there is probably no higher power with my best interest in mind. But, at least I am alive to feel sad. I am here, and that is something.

If the death of my body kills my consciousness too, how can I live a fulfilling life? The truth is, the possibility of ceasing to exist makes this life even MORE important. People say "live each day as if it were your last" and you say "yeah whatever". It's such a cliché and on social media sites the text is usually superimposed over a sunset or the ocean or some other stereotypical bullshit that might want to make you throw up in your mouth a little. But I hope you take the time to ponder it. Any day could be your last day. You could die in your sleep, in a car accident, from a virus, in a mass shooting—I could keep going but I won't. The point is—you are definitely going to die one day, and that day could be today. When you truly realize that, you will hopefully find yourself living in a more meaningful way. You may want to try to live your life in such a way that if you died—you could do so peacefully, with the knowledge that you experienced all the goodness you could. It is very important, though, to live for your future self too. You might die today, but you also may not. So you must find a balance between taking risks and preparing for your future. Sometimes you may want to say "fuck it, I want to get hammered tonight because I'm young" but you should also maybe say "I shouldn't start smoking cigarettes or keep eating unhealthy food every day because my future self will suffer for it". I'm still working on that last part.
A few years ago, a friend of mine fell 100 feet off of a cliff. The paramedic who retrieved him had a heart attack on the way back up. Both of them lived to tell the tale. Last year, several members of a family I knew since childhood drowned when their boat overturned on a lake. Some of the people on the boat lived, some of them died. It is amazing that human bodies can be both incredibly resilient and unimaginably delicate. Some people die of pneumonia and for others it is merely a temporary burden. Some people survive high falls and gnarly car accidents, others die from infected cuts, heat stroke, and head injuries. When these tragedies or so-called “miracles” happen, people are quick to say “This is all part of God’s plan!” But, what if God isn’t real? What if there is no plan, or point, or God-given purpose for any of us? Isn’t it just as likely that every single thing that happens to every person on this planet is just a result of decisions made by every single other person? And those decisions happened because of the millions of years of evolution that led us to where we are today—animals with a frontal cortex and the ability to communicate through complex language. And that evolution happened because our planet is the exact right distance from the sun. We can keep going back in time-looking at the consequences that arose from certain actions—until we arrive at the beginning.

Does this mean that everything I (and you) experience is merely a product of everyone else’s experience? I’m going to say—probably. We are products of our culture and our parents. All of our new ideas and languages and art and inventions build upon the discoveries of others before us. Furthermore, diseases, disorders, and even traumatic experiences can be passed down to us through our genes. That leads me into another question...is it ethical for me to have children? I have lived through several traumatic experiences. Am I going to pass those on to my kids? Mental illness—including depression and anxiety—run deep in my family. Will I pass that on? Even if I don’t, is it right for me to bring new life into this world, knowing that they will have the same questions as I do—knowing that they will one day have to grapple with their own mortality too? And what about the predicted population increase? We can’t support the current population with our existing infrastructure, so is it ethical for me to just add to the problem by having kids? I could adopt, but I want to experience motherhood. I want to know what it’s like to feel new life growing inside of me. Isn’t that really selfish? Do I want kids just because I am an animal, therefore I am biologically driven to reproduce? Is it because I desire love so much that I am willing to birth a human just so someone in this world will love me unconditionally?
What if I have a child and I raise them to be understanding and loving and open minded—will they change the world for the better? Isn't it responsible for us to have children and raise them with the tools and knowledge they need to foster understanding between cultures, and to take steps to reduce our impact on the planet? But...isn't morality kind of subjective anyway? It is like everything else—a product of our society. What is good for someone in one place may not be good for someone in another. What one person deems morally wrong—take abortion, for instance—may be necessary and reasonable for someone else. So what would it even mean to raise a “good” child? And then I tell myself—I choose to exist every single day. Regardless of the complicated emotions I feel, the sometimes crippling anxiety, the persistent depression—I choose to keep going. I love being alive. I feel so incredibly lucky and amazed and confused by this weird and wonderful existence. I choose existence over non-existence every single day that a tragic accident or disease fails to kill me. Would my child do the same?

Don't worry, I'm almost done. Thanks for sticking with it if you have made it this far. I hope that you are asking yourself your own hard questions, and that you are coming up with your own plan for living a meaningful life—whatever that might mean for you.

I would like to talk now about animals and plants. After all, humans make up a very tiny portion of the life on this earth. It is impossible for us to be aware of the multitude of life flourishing around us at any moment. There are bacteria—not visible to the naked eye—in and on our bodies and all around us. When we walk on the grass, we are walking on or around thousands of insects. There are creatures—animals and otherwise—flying around in the air and hanging out in trees. There are fish and coral and thousands of species that live underwater. In the deep ocean, there are many creatures we haven't yet discovered. There are dogs, elephants, hippos, deer, wolves, antelope, grass, flowers, fruits, vegetables—I could write for who knows how many years and still be unable to name all of the life that surrounds us. They flourish because of delicate cycles. For instance, weather patterns determine many of the adaptations plants and animals have evolved over time. Another VERY important cycle is the life cycle in general. Here, I like to think about food webs. The herring feeds on phytoplankton, the salmon feeds on the herring, the bear feeds on the
salmon, and when the bear dies—other creatures and plants—including fungi—break down its body and use its energy—and then other animals feed on the nutrients of the fungi. The cycle of life and death contributes to the delicate balance of the earth. One creature must die so that another may live. I take comfort in this fact. Energy cannot be created or destroyed. So I know that when I die, my body will eventually be broken down by other creatures who will benefit from the energy I pass on to them. They will live through my death. And within them, a little piece of me will live. And when they die, other creatures will benefit from their energy, which is wrapped up in mine.

On a related, somewhat morbid note—the chemicals involved in both the embalming and cremation process can be quite harmful to the earth. If this is something that concerns you, you may be interested in researching eco-friendly burial options. One emerging popular product to help you accomplish the task of an eco-friendly burial is the Coeio Infinity Burial Suit. It uses two types of mushrooms and different microorganisms to aid in decomposition, help neutralize toxins, and transfer your nutrients to plant life.