

Short Article

New Thinking on Psychological Health: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Life

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Purpose and meaning in life are now vibrant topics in multiple domains of science and practice. We recently published a collection of articles on purpose and meaning in life to showcase the rich content of this emergent work [1]. Contributors brought differing samples, measures, and contexts to the collective inquiry. Most visible in prior studies have been those linking purpose in life to specific aspects of health, such as risk for various disease outcomes and length of life (mortality). Here the special issue carved new territory. Links between purpose in life and waist circumference, an indicator of abdominal obesity, was shown to be mediated by healthy eating [2]. Activist purpose, defined as commitment to engage in social activism, was associated with good health behaviors [3]. Links between religiousness/spirituality and mortality were mediated by purpose in life and social support [4]. Purpose in life moderated relationships between self-rated health and mortality [5]. And low levels of purpose, personal growth, and social connection were linked with increased risk for deaths of despair (due to suicide, addiction, and alcoholism) compared to risk of death due to heart disease [6].

Importantly, other contributors to the special issue probed what precedes these later life outcomes—that is, what early life influences contribute to the emergence of meaning and purpose. Childhood relationships with significant others were examined. Supportive and loving parents in early childhood development had strong impact on the sense of meaning for those in university, with effects mediated by experiences of loneliness [7]. Early influences that shape beliefs such as rigid interpersonal schemas were seen to compromise adult meaning and purpose, however clinical intervention can help with restructuring such schemas to foster improved mental health in adults [8]. Other early-life inquiries focused on educational interventions to promote multiple aspects of eudaimonic well-being in elementary and high school students. Findings showed that preexisting levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety can be obstacles to the development of well-being [9]. Another study examined at-risk adolescents who participated in a sailing experience designed to nurture meaning, identity, commitment, social well-being, and self-acceptance [10]. Together, these contributions offered new insights about child and adolescent experiences that nurture or undermine meaning and purpose.

Another section examined the psychosocial correlates of meaning and purpose. Longitudinal analyses showed how aspects of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being were linked with depressive symptoms, with findings showing reciprocal relationships across time [11]. The connections between meaning in life and character strengths were examined showing that hope, spirituality, zest, curiosity, and gratitude were the strongest predictors [12]. A separate study linked meaning and purpose with sociodemographic factors (age, educational status, work status) as well as with stress, spirituality, optimism, depressive symptoms, social support, and quality of life [13]. Together, these new findings continue mapping of the nomological network of meaning and purpose.

A section on distinct contexts such as work, major public stressors, and the natural environment were considered for understanding what nurtures or undermines meaning in life. The double edge of meaningful work was examined—which can both enhance motivation and performance in organizations, while eroding well-being and increasing the chances of burnout for individuals—with calls to elevate decency as a critical antecedent of meaningful work [14]. A further context pertained to how meaning in life mediates or moderates negative emotion in the face of social unrest and the pandemic [15]. The natural environment was examined as another context wherein nature may play important roles in helping humans find coherence, significance, and purpose [16].

Two final contributions focused on translational science and community action. One called for a stronger reciprocal relationship between research and application with primary emphasis on justice, equity and a commitment to influence public policy [17]. A final article laid out a transdisciplinary approach to meaning-making by describing a set of community-based, context-sensitive and socially responsible interventions designed to be applicable to everyday life including discourse in the public square, intergenerational life stories, and the use of literature, art, and museums to educate for meaning [18].

The special issue concluded with advocacy on two fronts. The first called for new thinking that weaves topics of purpose and meaning together with concern about human virtues and ethics. So doing is necessary to address some of the world's gravest woes, such as

widening inequality, systemic racism, and climate change. A second call is for greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners, so that scientific advances are not sequestered in scholarly journals but are rapidly applied and refined in the real world. Together, we believe that a moral foundation to meaning and purpose research combined with greater collaboration with practitioners will set the stage for the pursuit of meaning and purpose in directions that strive to create a more just, fair, and sustainable world.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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