


**What's the Purpose of Purpose?
Or the Meaning of Meaning**

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My background...

- Doctorate in Clinical Psychology
- World-first research on evidence-based life coaching as an applied positive psychology
- Co-Founder, Positive Psychology Institute
- Applied Positive Psychology
- Individual, Educational & Organisational Services
- Teach Applied Positive Psychology, Coaching Psychology Unit, University of Sydney



My work is meaningful!



Why meaning?
Be careful what you wish for?






Vs


My aims this morning...


1. Introduce you to the psychological constructs of meaning and purpose as core topics in PP
2. Provide an overview of the scientific research
3. Encourage adoption of the scientist-practitioner approach
4. Encourage personal and professional reflections on the topic?
5. Meaning finding/making strategies



Authentic Happiness Theory
Seligman (2003)


- **3 Roads to the Good Life....**
- The Pleasurable Life
- The Engaged Life
- The Meaningful Life






"The great and glorious masterpiece of man is to live with purpose"

Michel de Montaigne
(French Renaissance Philosopher)






An exemplar...



Meaning/Purpose?


- Defining "meaning" and "purpose"
- History of research
- Research findings & current thinking...

Meaning: Definitions?


- The symbolic value of something;
- The significance of a thing, as "the meaning of life" (wikipedia)
- Meaning of Life vs Meaning in Life?
- Holy Question vs How I ought to live?
- Meaning is a broad concept (Damon)

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Purpose: Definitions?

- Damon (2003) suggests "purpose indeed has a special developmental role not captured by the more inclusive, diffuse, and pluralistic concept of meaning"
- Damon defines purpose as "a stable and generalised intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self"



Purpose: Definitions?

- Purpose is a goal of sorts (Damon, 2003)
- Part of one's personal search for meaning; but it also has an external component, the desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self.
- Unlike meaning alone (which may or may not be oriented towards a defined end), purpose is always directed at an accomplishment towards which one can make progress.



Meaning v Purpose

- Despite consensus regarding the importance of meaning in life, definitions & operationalisations of meaning in life have varied across theoretical and empirical works, generally defining meaning in terms of purpose, significance, or as a multifaceted construct (Steger)
- No one has attempted to draw boundaries between the related terms *purpose and meaning* (Damon)



Assessments

- Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Authentic Happiness website)
- Answer the questions on a scale of 1 (absolutely untrue) to 7 (absolutely true)
 1. I understand my life's meaning.
 2. I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.
 3. I am always looking to find my life's purpose.
 4. My life has a clear sense of purpose.



History...

- Jung
- Frankl
- Wong
- Steger
- Kashdan
- Damon
- **Also:** Baumeister & Vohs; Hicks & King; Ryff; Ben-Shahar.

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Man's Search for Meaning Viktor Frankl

- Viennese Psychiatrist who endured the Nazi death camps
- Discusses how victims of the Holocaust were able to find meaning in their lives
- Despite the physical and emotional torture that these people endured in the concentration camps, some of them found meaning, a sense of purpose, in the meager existence
- Developed "logotherapy": assisting the patient to find meaning in life




Man's Search for Meaning

- Human beings have a "Will to Meaning"
- A fundamental need to seek meaning & fulfillment in life.
- Man's search for meaning is his primary motivation in life
- **Existential Frustration:** the striving to find concrete meaning in man's existence
- **Noogenic Neuroses:** A man's concern, even his despair, over the worthlessness of life is an existential distress but by no means a mental disease.



Man's Search for Meaning

- Frankl's (1963, 1965) theory of meaning was heavily focused on the idea that each person has some unique purpose or overarching aim for their lives, comprehended in light of one's values, and enacted in reflection of one's community.
- Here meaning is experienced as what people are trying to do to enact their values.
- Thus meaning refers to people's pursuits of their most important strivings and aims in life.




Man's Search For Meaning

"What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him.


What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him"

"He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how" - Nietzsche




Man's Search for Meaning

- Frankl (1963) suggested that people find meaning by engaging in :
 - creative endeavours;
 - through elevating experiences; or
 - through their ability to reflect upon and grow from negative experiences and suffering.




Freud & Frankl

- Freud's "will to pleasure"
- Frankl's "will to meaning"
- Pleasure & Purpose – we need both!
- Tal Ben-Shahar argues ***"we need to gratify both the will for pleasure and will for meaning if we are to lead a fulfilling, happy life"***



Meaning in Life: Research?


- The scientific study of meaning largely has concentrated on understanding the consequences of believing one's life is meaningful ie Meaning Matters!
- Dozens of studies have been conducted which repeatedly demonstrate that people who believe their lives have meaning or purpose appear better off.



Meaning in Life

People who have meaning:


- Are happier (Debate et al 1993)
- Profess greater overall well-being (Bonebright et al, 2000); life satisfaction (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988); control over their lives (Ryff, 1989) and more engaged in their work (Bonebright et al, 2000)
- Also less negative affect (Chamberlain & Zika, 1998), workaholism (Bonebright et al 2000), suicidal ideation & substance abuse (Harlow et al 1986) and less need for therapy (Battista & Almond, 1973)




Meaning in Life

Research results – Who has meaning?

- Those who have dedicated their lives to an important cause or an ideal that transcends more mundane concerns report higher levels of meaning than other people.
- For example, Anglican nuns, Protestant Ministers and recently converted Christians all report higher levels of meaning in life.






Meaning in Life

- **Research results – Who has meaning?**
- Likewise, those who are struggling with psychological distress, such as psychiatric patients, members of substance abuse treatment groups and disruptive pre- secondary school students report lower levels of meaning in life.



Meaning in Life


- **Research results – Who has meaning?**
- There is some evidence that treatment of psychological distress enables people to rebuild meaning in their lives (Wadsworth & Barker, 1976).
- Thus research is consistent in affirming that meaning in life is part of the complex picture of human well-being and optimal functioning.



Meaning in Life


Steger suggests:

- Whilst perspectives on the essential underpinnings of meaning are somewhat varied.
- Nonetheless there is concordance around the idea that meaning is most fully achieved when people actively engage in pursuits that transcend their own immediate interests.
- Meaning may be further enhanced when people engage in important pursuits while operating under a clear understanding of one's worth, capabilities & attributes.



And Purpose?


- ***“When present, purpose in life is an overarching framework that is the basis for defining life goals and making decisions in everyday life”***
- Devoting effort and making progress towards these life goals provides a significant, renewable source of engagement and meaning.
- Kashdan - *“Let the research begin.....”*



Purpose in Life

Kashdan & McKnight, 2009


- Proposal that the concept of PIL represents a higher level psychological construct that offers insight into how and why certain people are healthy and successful in the long term...



Purpose in Life

Kashdan & McKnight, 2009

- Define purpose as “a central, self-organising life aim”
- **Central:** predominant theme of a person's identity
- **Self-organising:** provides a framework for systematic behaviour patterns in everyday life
- **Life Aim** – larger mission in the background..
- Kashdan & McKnight suggest that their definition provides an entry point to begin creating assessment devices to study PIL more directly...




Purpose in Life

Kashdan & McKnight, 2009


- Further discuss broader developmental process of purpose.
- Suggest 3 broad processes:
 1. Proactive
 2. Reactive
 3. Social Learning

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Purpose in Life (Proactive)

- Deliberate searching and refining process
- Person must possess a curious nature for the intentional pursuit of meaningful & rewarding behaviours.
- As an entry point, people need to be aware, open and receptive to new experiences and alternative ways to examine themselves & the outside world.
- A person then must be able to recognise & capitalise on situations that allow for the synthesis of potentially illuminating experiences.




Purpose in Life (Proactive)

- Includes intentionally embarking on restorative periods to reflect on and integrate material into associative networks that comprise the self.
- Such periods allow for revitalisation of a person's finite supply of stamina, attentional resources and self-control capacity to effectively adapt to the demands of everyday life.




Purpose in Life (Proactive)

- Furthermore, throughout the process, the person needs to have a stable self-concept connected to an enduring memory of an event.
- Also some level of serendipity whereby the person comes to the point of realisation that the search has borne fruits and that fruit provides a compass for her life..



Purpose in Life (Reactive)


- Hypothesis that a chance event transforms a person's focus and sense of personal meaning and therefore provides an alternative pathway for purpose development
- Transformative life events ie (near death experiences, death of loved ones.
- May initiate the formation of a purpose
- Stressful events may trigger a person to quickly re-evaluate priorities
- May happen at any time...



Purpose in Life


(Social Learning Development)

- Bandura (1977) – vicarious process of observing others, noting how the behaviours result in certain outcomes.
- Purpose for some may originate from others.
- Concept of viral transmission purpose spreading through others ie religious faith



Purpose in Life (Hybrid)



- There is no reason to believe that people develop purpose through only one process
- More reasonable to expect that people develop a purpose through all or a combination of the three developmental pathways.
- Therefore, purpose likely comes from a combination of three developmental processes..



Meaning & Goals?


The great use of life is to spend it doing something that will outlast it

William James

Meaning & Goals


- Emmons states that "goals allow lives to be meaningful and worthwhile and orient people to what is valuable and purposeful."
- Don't forget "not all goals are created equal"
- It is the pursuit of intrinsically motivated goals that are congruent with personal resources and values which contribute to a strong sense of meaning and are associated with life satisfaction and happiness.



Creating a Meaningful Life



To live a meaningful life, we must have a self-generated purpose that possesses personal significance rather than one that is dictated by society's standards and expectations

Tal Ben-Shahar




Creating a Meaningful Life: Individuals

- Therapy
- Coaching

Creating a Meaningful Life: Education

- For Staff – work as a calling?
- For Students – the purposeful life?



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Creating a Meaningful Life: Organisations

- Work as a calling?
- Strengths knowledge & strengths use

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Meaningful Work

"There is true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments & grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

George Bernard Shaw

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Job, Career or Calling

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Meaning Making? Linking Life Purpose

- Life Purpose: An overall theme for our life that transcends our daily activities.
- Career is utilised to assist in living our life purpose.
- **Example:**
- Life Purpose: Promote world peace
- Career: Mediator

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Purpose Statements

- Involves two parts:
 - (1) the essence (relatively stable);
 - (2) the expression (changes).
- EG To promote corporate integrity through my work as an executive coach.
- To help others create flourishing lives through my work as a psychologist.

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Clues to Life Purpose

- Reflect on life purpose questions...
- Listen to your intuition or "wise mind".




Meaning Making?

- **"A person cannot choose wisely for a life unless he dares to listen to himself, his own self, at each moment in life" - Maslow**
- **Tal Ben-Shahar** suggests that it's important to put time aside to take Maslow's dare, to ask ourselves the type of questions that can help us choose wisely:
 - **Are the things I'm doing meaningful to me?**
 - **Is my heart telling me I must change my life?**
- We have to listen, really listen to our hearts & mind....




Writing your Obituary

- Positive Psychology Exercise:
- **Obituary/Biography:**
- **Imagine that you have passed away after living a fruitful and satisfying life. What would you want your obituary to say?**
- Write a 1-2 page essay summarising what you would like most to be remembered for.....



A Course on the Meaning of Life


- Paul Wong, PhD
- **5 most basic questions:**
- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- Where am I going?
- What is the meaning of suffering & death?
- How can I find significance and happiness?
- **A helpful guide to examine our own lives?**
- www.meaning.ca



Meaning Making?



1. Identify the things which gives you meaning?
2. What can, or already does, provide a sense of purpose to your life as a whole?
3. What daily or weekly activities provide you with meaning?

Tal Ben-Shahar



Where to from here?

- Positive Psychology is not a spectator-sport!
- Walk the Talk....
- Crystallise & Prioritise your Values
- Write out your Bucket List....
- Write your Eulogy...

A final word....


The world into which we are born is brutal and cruel, and at the same time of divine beauty. Which element we think outweighs the other, whether meaninglessness or meaning, is a matter of temperament.

If meaninglessness were absolutely preponderant, the meaningfulness of life would vanish to an increasing degree with each step in our development. But that is —or seems to me— not the case.

Probably, as in all metaphysical questions, both are true: Life is — or has — meaning and meaninglessness.

I cherish the anxious hope that meaning will preponderate and win the battle

Carl Jung



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