

Meaning in Life: Exploring Core Beliefs

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The Conceptualization of Meaning in Life

The study of beliefs about meaning in life represents a core area within positive and existential psychology, delving into how individuals construct and maintain the subjective feeling that their existence is valuable, purposeful, and coherent. Meaning in life (MIL) is fundamentally a cognitive and emotional assessment made by the individual, reflecting a deeply held conviction that one's life possesses significance beyond mere biological survival or hedonic pleasure. It is crucial to differentiate MIL from simple happiness or positive affect; while happiness is often fleeting and based on immediate emotional states, meaning is a stable, enduring judgment tied to one's deepest values and orientation toward the future. This structure of belief acts as a psychological compass, guiding behavior, providing resilience against adversity, and integrating disparate life events into a unified, understandable narrative. The strength of these beliefs determines an individual's ability to navigate the inherent chaos and ambiguity of existence, providing a framework through which suffering can be interpreted not as senseless tragedy, but potentially as a crucible for growth or an impetus for change.

Psychologists often conceptualize MIL not as a singular variable, but as a complex construct comprising several interconnected components, most notably the tripartite framework involving purpose, coherence (or sense-making), and significance (or mattering). These components represent the various dimensions of the belief system required for a life to feel meaningful. Purpose refers to the motivational and directional aspects--having goals, aims, and a sense of direction that extends beyond the immediate moment, often involving contribution to something larger than the self. Coherence is the intellectual component, reflecting the belief that one's life events, memories, and identity fit together into a comprehensible pattern, enabling the individual to make sense of the past and present. Significance, or mattering, is the evaluative and relational component, representing the belief that one's existence is intrinsically valuable, that one's actions make a difference in the world, and that one is valued by others. A deficit in any one of these areas can lead to feelings of emptiness or existential distress, even if the other two components are relatively strong; thus, a robust belief in meaning requires the synergistic integration of all three dimensions.

The critical focus in psychological study is on the subjective nature of these beliefs. Meaning is not something discovered objectively in the external world, but rather something actively constructed by the individual through interpretation, evaluation, and commitment to specific values and goals. This construction process relies heavily on cognitive schemas and narrative structures that filter experience and assign value. When these belief structures are stable and well-integrated, they provide a powerful source of psychological stability, buffering against stressors and contributing significantly to overall well-being. Conversely, threats to these meaning beliefs--such as major loss, trauma, or exposure to existential inconsistencies--can precipitate a deep crisis, forcing the individual to engage in intensive meaning-making efforts to reconstruct a viable belief system.

Therefore, the belief in meaning is a dynamic, adaptive system that requires continuous maintenance and occasional radical overhaul throughout the lifespan.

Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Meaning

The psychological inquiry into meaning is deeply rooted in centuries of philosophical debate regarding the good life and the nature of human existence. Ancient Greek philosophy, particularly the work of **Aristotle**, provided foundational concepts, distinguishing between **hedonia** (pleasure, comfort, and positive emotion) and **eudaimonia** (flourishing, living well, and actualizing one's potential). Eudaimonia, often translated as living a life of virtue and purpose, aligns closely with modern psychological definitions of meaning in life, emphasizing active engagement with the world and commitment to higher goals rather than passive enjoyment. This philosophical tradition established the premise that true human fulfillment requires more than mere satisfaction of desires; it necessitates the development of character and the pursuit of intrinsically valuable activities that contribute to a greater good, thereby cementing the idea that meaning is tied to self-transcendence.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the rise of existential philosophy, which profoundly influenced psychological understanding by challenging traditional sources of meaning (such as religion or predetermined social roles). Thinkers like **Friedrich Nietzsche** declared the "death of God," highlighting the collapse of universal, external meaning systems and placing the full burden of meaning creation onto the individual. This radical freedom, explored further by **Jean-Paul Sartre** and **Albert Camus**, suggested that existence precedes essence; humans are born into a meaningless universe and must courageously choose their values and actions to create subjective meaning, often in the face of the absurd. This existential perspective transformed the study of meaning from a search for external truth into an internal psychological imperative, recognizing the inherent anxiety that accompanies the responsibility of self-creation and value establishment.

Perhaps the most influential psychological figure bridging philosophy and clinical practice regarding meaning is **Viktor Frankl**, the founder of Logotherapy. Developed from his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, Frankl argued that the primary motivational force in humans is not the pursuit of pleasure (Freud) or power (Adler), but the "will to meaning." Logotherapy posits that meaning can be found in three primary ways: through creating a work or doing a deed; through experiencing something or encountering someone (such as love or nature); and crucially, through the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. Frankl's work cemented the belief that meaning is available even in the most dire circumstances, provided the individual can maintain a belief structure that allows them to perceive purpose and value in their struggle, thereby offering a therapeutic pathway for addressing existential vacuum and despair.

The Tripartite Model: Coherence, Purpose, and Significance

The contemporary psychological consensus often relies on the tripartite framework to dissect the cognitive architecture of meaning beliefs, differentiating between Coherence, Purpose, and Significance. Coherence, sometimes termed sense-making, is the foundational belief that the world and one's place within it are understandable, predictable, and logical. This is primarily a cognitive function, involving the continuous construction of a personal narrative that integrates past experiences, current reality, and future expectations into a smooth, non-contradictory whole. When coherence is high, individuals possess a strong sense of identity continuity and can interpret life events--even negative ones--as fitting into a larger, comprehensible scheme. Threats to coherence, such as sudden, inexplicable trauma or the loss of core beliefs, can lead to fragmentation, cognitive dissonance, and the feeling that life is chaotic or absurd, often manifesting as severe psychological distress.

Purpose represents the motivational and future-oriented dimension of meaning beliefs. It involves having overarching life goals and commitments that provide direction and structure to daily activities, driving the individual forward towards desired outcomes. Purpose is inherently linked to intentionality and the belief that one's actions contribute to the realization of these goals, whether they are personal achievements, contributions to society, or spiritual growth. A strong sense of purpose acts as a powerful motivator for perseverance, resilience, and goal attainment, providing the energy needed to overcome obstacles. Furthermore, purpose often involves self-transcendence--the belief that one's life is dedicated to pursuits outside of one's immediate self-interest, such as altruism, community service, or devotion to a cause, which heightens the feeling of meaning and fulfillment.

Significance, or mattering, is the evaluative component that addresses the intrinsic worth of the self and the perceived impact of one's existence on the world and others. This belief is heavily relational, rooted in the conviction that one is valued, needed, and that one's life leaves a positive imprint. Significance is distinct from self-esteem, which is a judgment of competence; significance is a judgment of value. When individuals believe they matter, they feel connected to a larger community and perceive their actions as having import, preventing feelings of isolation or futility. This belief is vital for mental health, as a lack of perceived significance is strongly correlated with feelings of alienation, depression, and despair, regardless of objective accomplishments. The interplay between coherence (understanding), purpose (direction), and significance (value) forms the robust belief system necessary for sustained meaning in life.

Cognitive Mechanisms and Meaning Maintenance

Beliefs about meaning are not static; they are actively maintained through complex cognitive and psychological processes. Core beliefs function as interpretative schemas, providing the lens

through which incoming information is processed and assigned value. These schemas, often deeply embedded and resistant to change, are critical for preserving the sense of meaning, particularly when individuals encounter threatening or ambiguous information. Belief systems often manifest in specific domains, such as religious faith, political ideologies, or personal philosophies, all of which provide ready-made answers to existential questions and define moral behavior, thereby stabilizing the individual's world view. The adherence to these systems minimizes the cognitive load required for continuous meaning-making and shields the individual from the anxiety of uncertainty.

The **Meaning Maintenance Model (MMM)**, developed by psychological researchers, posits that humans possess a fundamental need for meaning, which is satisfied by four core components: belonging, self-esteem, shared culture/worldviews, and physical order. When any of these meaning components are threatened--for instance, by social exclusion, failure, or the violation of physical laws--the individual is motivated to reaffirm meaning in any of the other domains. This model suggests that the defense of meaning is a highly flexible, compensatory process. For example, if an individual experiences a severe failure (threatening self-esteem), they might compensate by aggressively defending their political ideology (reaffirming worldview) or seeking deeper connections with their social group (reaffirming belonging). This defense mechanism illustrates the powerful, underlying psychological drive to preserve a coherent belief structure, highlighting meaning as a central organizing principle of the human psyche.

Furthermore, cognitive appraisal processes play a critical role in maintaining meaning, especially in the aftermath of negative events. When faced with adversity, individuals engage in meaning-making by re-interpreting the situation in a way that aligns with their core beliefs. This might involve finding a lesson in the suffering, attributing the event to a higher purpose, or reframing the outcome as survivable or even beneficial (e.g., "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger"). This active cognitive work of assigning value and explanation to otherwise senseless events is essential for preventing the collapse of the assumptive world--the fundamental set of beliefs about the safety, justice, and predictability of life. The ability to successfully engage in this reappraisal process is a key indicator of psychological resilience and the strength of the underlying belief system regarding meaning.

Measurement and Empirical Assessment

Empirically measuring subjective beliefs about meaning in life presents significant methodological challenges due to the construct's philosophical depth and inherent subjectivity. However, reliable psychological instruments have been developed to operationalize and quantify these beliefs, allowing researchers to study their correlates and developmental trajectories. One of the earliest and most widely used measures is the **Purpose in Life (PIL) Test**, derived directly from Frankl's Logotherapy, which assesses the degree to which an individual reports having clear life goals and

a sense of fulfilled existence. While foundational, the PIL is sometimes criticized for conflating psychological health with the presence of meaning.

A more contemporary and psychometrically refined instrument is the **Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)**, which distinguishes between two critical dimensions of meaning beliefs: the **Presence of Meaning** and the **Search for Meaning**. Presence refers to the extent to which individuals feel their lives are meaningful, coherent, and purposeful right now. Search refers to the strength of the individual's desire and effort to find or increase meaning in their life. This distinction is crucial because the presence of meaning is typically associated with positive outcomes (well-being, low depression), while a high search score, especially if coupled with a low presence score, can indicate existential distress, restlessness, and anxiety. The MLQ allows researchers to assess the dynamic state of an individual's meaning beliefs, recognizing that meaning is both a state of being and an active pursuit.

Empirical research utilizing these measures has established strong, consistent correlations between the belief in meaning and various indicators of positive functioning. High levels of meaning presence are robustly associated with greater psychological well-being, higher life satisfaction, enhanced physical health outcomes (including better immune function and longevity), and significantly lower rates of psychopathology, such including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Meaning acts as a protective factor, providing a cognitive framework that stabilizes the individual against external stressors. Furthermore, beliefs about meaning influence behavioral choices, encouraging engagement in health-promoting activities and fostering the development of resilient coping strategies, thus underscoring the vital role of these existential beliefs in overall human flourishing.

Meaning in the Context of Adversity and Existential Threat

The resilience of beliefs about meaning is most severely tested in the face of profound adversity, trauma, or the confrontation with existential threats. Major life crises, such as the death of a loved one, chronic illness, or widespread societal disaster, often shatter the individual's **assumptive world**--the core set of beliefs about the world being safe, predictable, and fair. When these assumptions are invalidated, the belief system regarding meaning can collapse, leading to profound psychological distress and the experience of existential vacuum. In these moments, the need for meaning-making intensifies, becoming a primary driver for psychological recovery.

Existential anxiety arises from the confrontation with the fundamental givens of existence, often summarized as death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. Theories like **Terror Management Theory (TMT)** argue that human cultural and meaning systems (including self-esteem and worldview defense) primarily function to manage the paralyzing anxiety generated by the awareness of one's own mortality. Beliefs about meaning--especially those embedded in

cultural narratives, religion, or legacy--provide symbolic immortality, allowing individuals to feel that they are part of something enduring that transcends their physical death. Therefore, the strength of the belief system acts as a psychological buffer, enabling individuals to function effectively despite the underlying awareness of inevitable demise.

Paradoxically, adversity can also serve as a catalyst for the construction of deeper, more robust meaning beliefs through the process of **Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)**. PTG involves positive psychological changes experienced as a result of struggling with highly challenging life circumstances. This growth often manifests in three key areas directly related to meaning: a greater appreciation for life, changed relationships with others (increased intimacy or compassion), and a profound change in life philosophy or spiritual development. While the trauma itself is destructive, the subsequent intense cognitive effort required to integrate the traumatic event into a revised, more resilient belief system ultimately results in a heightened and more enduring sense of meaning and purpose than existed prior to the crisis.

Clinical Applications and Meaning-Focused Intervention

Given the strong correlation between meaning beliefs and mental health outcomes, clinical psychology has developed specialized interventions aimed at fostering and reinforcing the individual's sense of meaning. **Logotherapy**, pioneered by Viktor Frankl, remains the cornerstone of meaning-focused therapy (MFT). Logotherapeutic techniques center on helping the client identify and commit to unique values and purposes, often utilizing techniques such as Socratic dialogue to challenge nihilistic attitudes, paradoxical intention to address anxiety, and dereflection to shift focus away from self-preoccupation toward meaningful engagement with the world. The goal is not to impose meaning, but to assist the client in perceiving the meaning that is already latent in their unique life circumstances.

Meaning work is increasingly integrated into mainstream cognitive-behavioral approaches, particularly in therapies like **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)**. ACT emphasizes values clarification--helping clients articulate what truly matters to them (their core beliefs about purpose and significance)--and then using those values as the compass for behavioral change. The therapeutic process in ACT involves identifying discrepancies between core values and current behaviors, and then committing to actions that are congruent with the client's deepest beliefs about what constitutes a meaningful life. This integration acknowledges that sustainable psychological change often requires alignment between action and deeply held existential beliefs.

The ultimate goal of meaning-focused intervention is to facilitate the client's capacity for **meaning-making**, recognizing that this is a continuous, active process rather than a final destination. Therapists assist clients in developing cognitive flexibility, challenging maladaptive schemas that impede the perception of purpose, and encouraging engagement in activities that reinforce the

belief in their own significance. Effective intervention recognizes that while suffering is inevitable, the attitude one adopts toward that suffering is a matter of choice and interpretation. By strengthening the belief system that supports purpose, coherence, and value, individuals gain the psychological tools necessary to construct a life that is not only happy, but fundamentally fulfilling and resilient.

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