

The Function of Meaning and Purpose for Individual Wellness

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The authors review the literature on meaning and purpose in life as it relates to models of individual wellness. An overview of wellness models illustrates the importance of a sense of meaning to wellness. Suggestions are provided for how counselors may work with clients' sense of meaning in therapy.

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The general public and health care practitioners have become increasingly interested in finding alternative paradigms to the biomedical model (Gordon, 1981; Granello, 2000; Gross, 1980; Still, 1986; Witmer, 1985; Wulff, Pedersen, & Rosenberg, 1990). In contrast to the biomedical model, wellness is a paradigm that has a *salutogenic* (i.e., health enhancing) focus (Ardell, 1977; Deliman & Smolowe, 1982; Dunn, 1961; Johnson, 1986; Opatz, 1986; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Tubesing, 1979). The general public's interest in wellness has continued to grow. For example, a study (Eisenberg et al., 1993) on the use of alternative practices to traditional medicine found that, in the previous year, one third of Americans used a treatment that could be classified as unconventional (e.g., acupuncture, massage). In addition, 75% of the spending for these treatments (the total of which was \$13.7 billion) was out of pocket (Eisenberg et al., 1993).

Possibly in response to the interest expressed by the general public, more mental health practitioners and physicians are adopting holistic medicine practices as part of their approach to patient care (Pert, 1997). The National Institutes of Health, in reaction to the growing practice and scientific interest in this area, opened its Office of Alternative Medicine in 1992 (recently renamed the National Center for Complementary Medicine and Alternative Medicine) to promote the study of wellness, holistic practices, and adjunctive medical services.

Despite this increased interest by both the general public and the health care community, there is currently no clear definition of a *well person* (Granello, 1995, 1999). The World Health Organization (1958) included some definitional

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characteristics in a 1947 statement saying that health is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease" (p. 1). This definition supports the idea that if an individual is to be considered healthy, there are discrete spheres of human functioning in which the individual must strive to achieve health or wellness. Dunn (1961) characterized wellness as a "dynamic striving" inherent in individuals that drives them to achieve their highest potential. From a therapeutic practice perspective, Westgate (1996) noted that the holistic implication of the wellness perspective was that one could not treat one component of a person without knowing the balance of all components.

One characteristic of an individual that has been suggested as being an important sphere of functioning in wellness models is having meaning and purpose in life. The purpose of this article is to review the literature related to meaning in life and wellness. It is beyond the intended scope of this article to define *meaning* or *purpose* or to review implied definitions from the literature. Rather, we review the proposed functions and benefits for individuals having such qualities (i.e., meaning and purpose) and their relationship to individual wellness.

INCLUSION OF MEANING AND PURPOSE IN WELLNESS MODELS

Several authors have proposed models in an attempt to define the specific physical, psychological, and social characteristics of a well person, and all of these models place emphasis on meaning and purpose in life (Hettler, 1986; Sweeney & Witmer, 1991; Zimpfer, 1992). Zimpfer proposed a wellness model based on his treatment of clients with cancer. His model includes seven areas of treatment important for client wellness: medical health, immune function, lifestyle management, spiritual beliefs and attitudes, psychodynamics, energy forces, and interpersonal relations. Zimpfer used the spiritual dimension of his model to assert that meaning in life is a crucial element for wellness (Zimpfer, 1992).

A second wellness model, developed by Hettler (1980, 1986), includes six dimensions of wellness: intellectual, emotional, physical, social, occupational, and spiritual (Opatz, 1986). In this model, both the occupational and spiritual dimensions are related to meaning and purpose. *Personal satisfaction* and *personal value* are terms, used in the definition of the occupational dimension, that relate to the construct of meaning. Furthermore, the definition of the spiritual dimension includes the phrase "willingness to seek meaning and purpose in human existence" (Opatz, 1986, p. 61).

A third wellness model that can be a useful aid in organizing a client's wellness treatment is the life span model. The Adlerian concepts of social interest and striving for mastery are used as the theoretical bases of this model and are used to provide a rationale to explain why individuals wish to achieve a wellness lifestyle (Sweeney & Witmer, 1991).

The life span model consists of five "life task" categories that are viewed as necessary to wellness. These life task categories are spirituality or

transpersonalism, self-direction, work and leisure, friendship, and love. Each of the life tasks is further separated into a total of 16 subscales (i.e., Spirituality, Sense Of Worth, Sense Of Control, Realistic Beliefs, Emotional Responsiveness, Intellectual Stimulation, Sense Of Humor, Exercise, Nutrition, Self-Care, Gender Identity, Cultural Identity, Stress Management, Work and Leisure, Friendship, Love; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). This model includes in the definition of the *spiritual* or *transpersonal life task* the idea of purpose in life, which is viewed as the core of wellness (Myers, Hattie, & Sweeney, 1999).

Chandler, Holden, and Kolander (1992) proposed a holistic wellness model that is similar to the life span model and that includes five primary dimensions: social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and occupational. Their model asserts that for each of these dimensions of wellness, there is a spiritual component and a personal component, and the willingness to seek meaning is an element of spiritual wellness (Chandler et al., 1992).

The authors of these wellness models have often cited meaning and purpose as an important characteristic of the well individual (Hettler, 1986; Myers et al., 1999; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Zimpfer, 1992). *Meaning* and *purpose*, however, are broad terms that have been defined in the literature from many perspectives, including existential, behavioral, cognitive, and spiritual (Ingersoll, 1998). In some instances, these constructs have been included in the models without clear explication of what contribution or role they play in relating to wellness (Chandler et al., 1992). Clearly, a sense of meaning or purpose regarding a specific situation in life is often presumed to benefit an individual's well-being, but how this benefit is manifested in specific behaviors is less frequently examined (Chandler et al., 1992; Suyemoto & MacDonald, 1996). Whether the construct of meaning should be included in wellness models requires further investigation. It is hoped that a review of the literature on meaning and purpose will help provide information on how this construct functions as a component of wellness models as currently theorized.

MEANING: RELATIONSHIP TO WELLNESS

Meaning and Intrapsychic Functioning

One way that meaning may have positive effects on individual wellness is related to intrapsychic functioning. For example, meaning can help inspire a sense of personal values (Westgate, 1996). Several authors have pointed out the existence of reciprocal influences between an individual's belief system and his or her sense of meaning (Hatfield & Hatfield, 1992; Suyemoto & MacDonald, 1996; Westgate, 1996). An individual's belief system can influence and enhance the sense of meaning, while simultaneously an individual's sense of meaning may guide the person toward adopting a certain belief. An individual's sense of meaning can also dictate or inspire values for living that are congruent with those beliefs. Thus, such a person may feel both guided by values when facing challenging situations and validated when acting in ways that are based on these beliefs.

Meaning may also contribute to the development of an individual's sense of identity. As one example, Pettie and Triolo (1999) noted how ideas concerning meaning that result from serious illness can begin to integrate into an individual's sense of identity. DeNeve and Cooper (1998) noted how a person's vocation could contribute to a sense of personal identity as well as purpose. Meaningful identity can be constructed by seeing oneself as allied with something or someone outside oneself (Green, Fullilove, & Fullilove, 1998). The literature clearly suggests that meaningful identity is relevant to individuals' overall level of wellness.

Meaning in Relation to Individual Behavior

Meaning can have effects on an individual's behavior by influencing both the initiation of new habits and adherence to existing positive habits (Dishman, 1982; Hermon & Hazler, 1999; Prochaska, 1995; Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). This might be expected because the individual's sense of meaning can counterbalance discouragement—the “why bother” or “it's not worth it” attitudes that inhibit behavioral change and the maintenance of the new behavior (Westgate, 1996). This can also be a helpful perspective when beginning to implement new behaviors. It often takes an additional element of motivation to begin a new activity, and a sense of purpose or meaning could be a deciding factor. This could happen by mentally associating the target behavior to an element of higher purpose (e.g., “I'll do this for my family” or “Let's win one for the Gipper”).

DeNeve and Cooper (1998) suggested a modulating effect of personality that influences how well a person does or does not adapt to life events. They suggested that meaning might be related to this modulating effect, thus also implying that meaning may have a positive impact on how well someone adapts to the changes and challenges of life.

In addition to promoting “behavioral follow-through” (i.e., moving from contemplation to an action stage of behavior), meaning can aid the ongoing maintenance of health-enhancing behaviors. In contrast to the New Year's resolution phenomenon with its short-lived new goals, a sense of purposefulness related to either the specific goals or more generally to one's own life can inspire perseverance and ultimately greater benefits. It is possible, therefore, to speculate that individuals with a sense that life is meaningful may engage in behaviors that are oriented to the preservation of their lives and adherence to their goals. Examples of concrete ways that these types of preservation behaviors could relate to wellness would be seeking preventative medical care, such as yearly checkups or using seat belts when driving.

Interpersonal and Social Effects of a Sense of Meaning

In addition to intrapersonal functions of meaning, the literature also contains references to a sense of meaning that is interpersonal in nature and to

the community effects related to wellness. One example is how belief related to a sense of meaning might compel an individual to seek out and identify with others who share similar beliefs (Westgate, 1996). Religious groups are examples of such social dynamics, although many groups focused on less profound levels of meaning are created and sustained through some beliefs held in common (as in the softball team that endorses some value in social recreation and exercise). Involvement in any such group can serve to increase social contact and connectedness and, thus, presumably aid in some level of social support and decrease isolation (Westgate, 1996). Beardslee et al. (1998) noted that a sense of meaning may be shared among the members of a group or family, and this sense of meaning might, serve to enhance the interpersonal bonds among the group members as well as to enhance members' intrapersonal sense of meaning (Ornish, 1998).

In addition to promoting greater social involvement, meaning may enhance an individual's sense of the importance of others—particularly if the sense of meaning is "other-directed" (e.g., the purpose of my life is to serve others, to promote the welfare of the community; Mack, 1994). Adler's concept of social interest, which he posited as the primary measure of an individual's mental health, is related to this aspect of meaning (LaFountain, 1996). Mack noted Kunkel's "we-psychology" that suggested spirituality (and thus related concepts of meaning) is promoted by other-oriented experiences. Other authors have commented on the narcissism of our time—linked to beliefs about hopelessness and helplessness and ultimately a lack of meaning—as a societal ill and threat to individual wellness (Westgate, 1996). Persons with an other-directed sense of purpose would be less prone to such problems.

In a more general sense, such meaningful involvement could help prevent the "existential vacuum" construct suggested in logotherapy (Frankl, 1978, 1984; Salthouse, 1998). This problem is characterized by a fundamental uncertainty about the value of one's life, leading to a deficit in meaning and resulting in unfulfilling states ranging from frustration to boredom. If an individual's sense of meaning and purpose is intact, it seems less likely that such uncertainty would arise or persist. Also, when an inner satisfaction is not maintained, an individual might be more tempted to fill the void with any number of substitutes in an attempt to compensate—some of which are not conducive to wellness (e.g., addictive behaviors, unhealthy relationships) and can increase stress (Salthouse, 1998). When these voids are filled with meaning, these temptations are less likely to have the same appeal, and thus wellness is enhanced.

Finally, a cognitive framework of purposefulness can increase a person's ability to make sense of life experiences (Suyemoto & MacDonald, 1996). All events—good and bad—can be filtered through the fabric of an individual's beliefs about the meaning of life in general and about an individual's own life in particular. Such a process can serve not only to reinforce the very same beliefs (either by challenging or supporting them), but it can also serve to prevent overly negative reactions to negative life events, because such events

are viewed within the context of the “bigger picture” of one’s life purpose—the individual sense that life is worth living (Ingersoll, 1998). Similarly, such an “organized” sense of life can minimize any sense of chaos to which an individual might be more vulnerable without such a perspective—and chaos is typically not beneficial to individual wellness. Also related to making sense of experiences, Frankl (1978, 1984) suggested that a sense of meaning can help an individual to make sense of suffering and, thus, to cope with it better when such suffering cannot be avoided. A sense of meaning may, therefore, enhance an individual’s wellness by acting as an explanation for life events that are perceived as stressful.

Meaning and Health Benefits

An extension of these ideas is that meaning may have a stress-buffering effect (Drew & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1998; Lightsey, 1997; Westgate, 1996). Similar to the aforementioned concept of helping with ongoing maintenance of behaviors, meaning may help individuals tolerate negative events or setbacks better, thus preventing or decreasing potential stresses related to such circumstances. This might be expected because a person would be focused on the underlying purpose of the activity and not just on the activity as an isolated event. Successes or failures in specific situations, therefore, can be framed as elements within a larger perspective of life purposes, and excess stresses resulting from overemphasis on the importance of isolated events can be diminished or eliminated. Salthouse (1998) noted another perspective on this stress–meaning relationship, “It is amazing how much stress we can endure when we perceive some meaning in the stressful situation” (p. 103). This suggests that the level of stress may be unchanged but that an individual’s capacity to handle stress improves when there is a sense of meaningfulness related to it.

One area in which the benefits of meaning might be found is in preventative capacities, or in identifying what problems those with a stronger sense of meaning seem to avoid. As already mentioned, there is some speculation that purposefulness in life serves as a stress-buffering effect. It has been suggested that having a sense of meaning decreases vulnerability to depression because a sense of purpose in life can stand in opposition to the sense of hopelessness that often characterizes depression (Westgate, 1996). It might also be inferred that involvement with meaningful activities could allay depression that would otherwise evolve. As Frankl (1984) more simply suggested, a sense of meaning can give a person a reason to be happy.

It can also be hypothesized that the physical body experiences positive biochemical advantages if a person has a greater sense of meaning in life (Ryff & Singer, 1998). This is inferred primarily as a side effect of a number of the suggestions that have been previously offered. One example is the positive impact on the body that may result from increased general life activity, as suggested by the potential increase in behavioral follow-through and

maintenance of such behaviors. This more active person would enjoy the physical benefits of being more active. Even if the activities were not physically rigorous, an individual might still expect that the physical consequences would be better than if the same person was inactive or unmotivated. Similarly, if meaning can act as a stress buffer, the person enjoying decreased stress would also avoid the potential physiobiochemical problems generally associated with stress. In addition, other belief perspectives have been shown to improve elements of physical health. Lightsey (1997) noted one example of research that showed beliefs about self-mastery and self-efficacy were correlated with positive immunological changes. Similarly, Mason (1996) supported the premise, through research in psychoneuroimmunology, that people can affect their immune systems through their behaviors. A sense of purposefulness may also promote such positive physiological results.

In addition to noting the wellness-enhancing effects associated with the presence of meaning in a person's life, the detrimental effects of a lack of meaningfulness can be explored as a method to assess the importance of meaning in people's lives. Salthouse (1998) suggested that whereas meaningful activities and relationships created healthy tension, the lack of meaning promoted unhealthy stress and "existential frustration." Westgate (1996) claimed that feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness are among the best documented elements of depression in the clinical literature. Pettie and Triolo (1999) described a state of alienation (also noted in Westgate, 1996) and vulnerability associated with the lack of a sense of meaning. Although this does not suggest that all clients experiencing these states are lacking in meaningfulness in their lives, it does seem to imply that some clients may be lacking meaning and hope and, thus, could benefit from exploration of these topics in therapy.

RELATIONSHIP OF MEANING AND WELLNESS TO PRACTICE

Wellness counseling highlights a salutogenic, or health-based, perspective as opposed to the pathogenic, or disease-based, models that have grown out of the medical model (Ryff & Singer, 1998). In other words, it focuses more on how to maintain and add good things to promote good health instead of seeking how to treat or eliminate bad things. The various potential functions of meaning suggest that it might be a beneficial area of clinical focus—either to help sustain wellness in individuals who are functioning well or to promote improved well-being in individuals who are not functioning as well.

With some clients, it can be predicted that their struggles with finding meaning in their lives will be evident. The extant works in existential theory and logotherapy would likely be good resources for how to begin processing such concerns therapeutically. The counselor may want to use bibliotherapy as a technique by having a client read a relevant text on meaning and then processing it together.

With other clients, it may not be so readily evident that a sense of meaning is a missing ingredient in their well-being. Often, data are collected from the

client at the time of intake, using a structured psychosocial interview regarding family, occupation, or church participation. One idea to promote exploration of a client's sense of meaning in client sessions is to further process and review these data about relevant life areas (religion/spiritual involvement; relationships, including family, vocational, etc.) with clients to assess which areas in their lives emerge as either most important or most unimportant. Further exploration could then involve questioning about what elements of the important areas stand out for the client and then, if applicable, how these elements might also be relevant in the unimportant areas.

The counselor can help the client to understand that there are various avenues for seeking or finding reinforcement for personal meaning. Religious and spiritual involvement is often cited as a primary resource for promoting and sustaining a person's sense of meaning (Westgate, 1996). More precisely, meaning and purpose are usually included as fundamental elements of spiritual wellness models (Westgate, 1996). Although such involvement can be key, it is not the only source for such content in one's life because not all perspectives on meaning in life need to be related to spiritual matters. Another potential area of life that can be important is community involvement, because an individual's sense of purpose may be based on his or her role in the community. Similarly, personal relationships offer possibilities to inspire a sense of purposefulness because people may define their importance on the basis of their roles in relation to other people.

Vocation offers another route to developing a sense of personal meaning and purpose (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Dorn, 1992; Mack, 1994). Although work is typically considered an important facet of life, in counseling, it is sometimes neglected as an area that is potentially significant to the formation and preservation of a sense of personal meaning. Indeed, Mack suggested that meaning can be discovered through the creation of work. Likewise, DeNeve and Cooper noted that the typically goal-directed nature of work could contribute to a sense of purpose. Unfortunately, counselors may quickly adopt the perspective of "career counseling" rather than fostering an exploration of personal meaning related to what an individual does in his or her work.

Finally, some people develop a sense of meaning from highly individualized experiences. These experiences, at times, are considered transcendent due to either the context of the experience or the profundity of the person's reaction (Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Westgate, 1996). In other cases, such experiences are just extremely meaningful, even if they were only isolated events, and their aftereffects are long lasting. Where an individual finds meaningfulness seems less important to individual wellness than does the possession of the characteristic itself. If clients believe that some aspect of their life is meaningless, the counselor can help them to see that there may be compensating factors in other areas of their life. The counselor can help clients avoid generalizing a feeling of meaninglessness from one area of life into all the other areas of life.

Another possibility of helping a client when a sense of meaning seems elusive is to help them search for and identify past sources of meaning in their lives (Salthouse, 1998). Thoughts to pursue include identifying what brought joy, satisfaction, or purposefulness in the past, which could lead to the possibility of resurrecting those feelings by starting or renewing appropriate activities. Developmental psychology (Crespi & Generali, 1995) implies that because people progress through different life stages and challenges, people struggling with their sense of meaning in life may be facing new life issues that will require adaptation in order to find new meanings. This perspective might not endorse the review of past meanings but might, instead, focus on issues related to current life-stage conflicts. Helping clients to reframe their feelings of purposelessness and lack of meaning into a belief that they have the ability to feel meaning (e.g., they could do it in the past, so they can do it now) or as a developmental struggle can be a useful therapeutic technique.

Cultural or societal variables are also affecting clients and their conceptions of meaning. As an example, Crose, Nicholas, Gobble, and Frank (1992) noted possible gender differences regarding wellness and perspectives on meaning and suggested that men may develop more of a sense of purpose in life through work and achievement, whereas women may be more oriented to success in relationships. Other cultural factors may contribute to different concepts of what is meaningful. Ultimately, this also implies that wellness itself is not a one-dimensional construct. Therapy efforts may be enhanced when the counselor maintains an awareness of these factors and can guide clients appropriately through explorations of meaning.

Finally, it may be useful to consider how meaningfulness or purposefulness can be included as elements of holistic client assessments for treatment. Several wellness instruments that include subscales related to sense of meaning have been reviewed in the literature (Granello, 2000). The Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle, for example, includes the subscales Spirituality, Work & Leisure, Friendship, Love, and Sense of Worth (Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Meaningfulness or purposefulness might not be the best focus of treatment, of course, but including them within the assessment process could elicit whether they are significant matters that could be addressed in treatment.

CONCLUSION

In reviewing the literature concerning the relationship of wellness and meaning as psychological constructs, it is apparent that wellness and meaning are significantly related. There is a limited amount of literature linking these two topics, even though meaning is given an essential role in defining individual wellness. Most of the existing literature is theoretical or case based.

As more interest in wellness develops and theoretical models for individual wellness are proposed that include meaning as a central component, more research will be needed to explore the relationship between these two con-

structs. Future research might explore the connection between sense of meaning and actual health care behaviors or patterns of health care utilization. Clearly, more research is needed in this area. It seems that there is a basis in the literature for asserting a relationship between wellness and a sense of meaning; however, that relationship has not yet been widely investigated empirically.

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*Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend.
Inside a dog it is too dark to read.*
—Groucho Marx (1890-1977), Comedian

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