

Meaning and Motivation

By Mark R. Zuccolo, MA

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Meaning and motivation address basic human questions, whose answer can have a significant effect on happiness and well-being. These constructs can be incorporated in one's daily work environment as a therapist within the context of positive psychology.

Meaning

To find meaning in one's own existence means to define an ultimate purpose that transcends life's contingencies, while remaining capable of focusing on what happens in the present. According to Seligman (2002), meaning is attributed to positive or negative events; ensuing opportunities for growth and maturation can be confronted by using one's signature strengths and virtues. These efforts at full resource utilization and personal coherence can be more successful if they are part of an individual's global existential plan.

In a time in which old traditions have been superseded by uncertain new ones, in which institutions no longer are a stable point of reference, the individual is faced with a fundamental existential question: what is the sense of it all? For Viktor Frankl (1959), a prolific writer and a psychotherapist who described his experiences in Nazi death camps during World War II, mankind's search for meaning is a primary force in life and not simply a secondary rationalization of instinctual drives. He states that although mankind is free to choose, people are not instinctually driven to moral behavior; in each instance it is the individual who decides to behave morally, and is motivated by his or her values.

Research conducted on the benefits of having purpose in life shows that it can be a factor in adjustment, in overall quality of life, and in treating pathological conditions. Thompson (2003), in a major study of 1,391 adults with traumatic spinal cord injury, concluded that talk therapy aimed at strengthening the patients' sense of purpose in life was effective at improving their adjustment and quality of life. Other studies provide evidence that positive attributions of meaning can be useful for victims of trauma (Lantz, 1997); chronic pain (Khatami, 1987); Guillain-Barre syndrome (Stavros, 1991); acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (Giovinco & McDougald, 1994); and other life-threatening diseases (Kass, 1996). Numerous studies carried out within the field of positive psychology on resilience (Tugade, 2002), general mental health (Fairman & Knapp, 2005; Lopez & Magyar-Moe, 2006; Vaillant, 2003), hardiness and coping (Lloyd & Atella, 2000), and psychology in the workplace (Luthans, 2002) reveal that having a meaningful life promotes psychophysical well-being and happiness by providing a pervasive and transcendental sense that one's efforts matter.

According to the tenets of most religions, life is said to continue indefinitely even after physical death of the human body. The hope engendered by this spiritual belief has been shown to be beneficial in psychosocial rehabilitation (Longo & Peterson, 2002), in the workplace (Luthans & Jensen, 2002), in the treatment of infectious diseases (Kylmä, Vehviläinen-Julkunen, & Lähdevirta, 1999), and in the prevention of suicide (Vincent, Boddana, & MacLeod, 2004). Meaning is also posited as beneficial not only to the individual who possesses it but also to society at large, in studies on the development of more effective leaders (Peterson & Luthans, 2003), the growth of social capital (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004), political life (Gagnolati & Stupak, 2002), and economics (Giacalone, Paul, & Jurkiewicz, 2005).

The meaning of one's own life, to be beneficial, must be the product of one's convictions and inclinations, not imposed from the outside. Intrinsic meaning can make individuals more determined in reaching their objectives, more motivated, more active, more involved and participating, because they feel that what is transpiring is in response to their own desires. Intrinsic meaning, moreover, allows individuals to use their own strengths and to abide by their own virtues, which further contribute to a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. Happiness and well-being, therefore, can be experienced on the way toward one's objectives and well before these are actually reached. In this respect, Seligman states that "a happy individual need not experience all or even most of the positive emotions and gratifications. A meaningful life adds one more component to the good life--it is the use of your strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than (we) are" (Seligman, 2003, p. 127).

Motivation

From the attribution of meaning stems the motivation to move forward and to grow. In its most basic definition, motivation is a construct used in order to explain the onset, the direction, the intensity and the persistence of behavior directed towards the attainment of one or more objectives.

In modern psychological terminology, as well as in common parlance, the word motivation is used interchangeably to define different constructs and concepts. It may be used in reference to Freudian impulses (Freud, 1950), Skinnerian conditioned responses (Skinner, 1938), Maslowian need fulfillment efforts (Maslow, 1987) and other heterogeneous processes and behaviors. Motivation is also sometimes described as push and sometimes as a pull, depending on whether its behavioral (motivation as need fulfillment) or psychodynamic (motivation as the pull of primordial forces) characteristics are emphasized (Lazarus, 1993). The problem with

these definitions is that they may oversimplify motivation, emphasizing its showier manifestations and neglecting other important aspects, such as its circular relationship to happiness and well-being. Motivation has been defined as essential to adaptive functioning and quality of life (Marin & Chakravorty, 2005), and as the content of the positive thinking one wishes to maintain towards the attainment of an objective (Schweingruber, 2006).

In studying the impact of motivation on human behavior, a group of researchers has looked at the contributions of social cognitive theory and studied the ways in which individuals represent objectives and behaviors (Conroy, Kaye, & Coatsworth, 2006), perceive and evaluate their own ability to learn (Harris, Mowen, & Brown, 2005), and construct their expectation of future results (Sinkavich, 1994). This cognitive approach has placed the accent on motivation as representation. Another group of studies focused on the energetic aspects of motivation, and specifically on the factors that activate behavior towards objectives or activities that are perceived as attractive and to which the individual may attribute value. Theories of intrinsic motivation and research on self-interest are part of this line of inquiry, and they include studies by Harter (1996) and Silon (1985) on competence, on self-determination by Ryan and colleagues (2006), and work on cognitive processes and emotion (Hidi & Baird, 1986, 1988). A third aspect of motivation analyzed by researchers in recent years is the self-regulation of learning. It looks at the ways or strategies with which the individual monitors, motivates and modifies behaviors in order to reach learning objectives (Boekaerts & Minnaert, 2006; Paris & Winograd, 1990; Rozendaal, Minnaert, & Boekaerts, 2001; Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003).

Beyond these narrow approaches, three basic elements are often cited as being part of what constitutes motivation: the mental representation of objectives and/or events that are desirable or that are to be avoided (Blessing & Ross, 1996); the emotional reactions that

accompany all motivated behavior (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006); and the perceptions or expectations that the individual has relative to his or her own ability to reach certain objectives (Robbins, Spence, & Clark, 1991). Such perceptions are influenced by prior experiences of success or failure (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2004; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Lewin, 1936), family history (Strauss, 2005), attitudes of parents and teachers (Harter, 1996), and biological factors (Hasselhorn, 1992).

Self-reflection

In my work as a psychotherapist, I see people who live under the weight of severely limiting beliefs about who they are and about what they are able to accomplish. One of the greatest challenges of some of my patients is in knowing how to interpret negative events. The responses they exhibit when confronted with major or minor setbacks and the explanations they give as to their cause influences in a very significant way their ability to make decisions and seriously affects their motivation.

Often, patients suffering from depression set personal objectives that excessively tax their already impaired resources and that are clearly beyond their capabilities. The lack of success in attaining these objectives causes additional frustration and loss of motivation. I find it therefore very important to help them set not only objectives in which they can believe, but that are also reachable, realistic, concrete, well-defined, and time-limited. I also seek to make these objectives divisible into progressive stages, which permits them to experience intermediate gratification on the way to their ultimate goals. In this approach I seek to educate the patient on making use of signature strengths and virtue, whose utilization promotes satisfaction and well-being, and I often use Seligman's books to illustrate my point.

Sometimes I encounter patients who have had so many experiences of pain and failure that they have become convinced there is nothing they (or I) can do to improve their condition. These are the tougher cases, because this negative conviction deprives them of motivation and undermines their very ability to act. Seligman (2000) coined the definition of this destructive mental attitude: learned helplessness. When someone experiences repeated failure, further efforts may appear to be futile and a terminal state of discouragement may ensue, with no further protective or proactive action taken by the individual to improve the situation. I use Seligman's research (2003) on what promotes learned helplessness to address these situations focusing on how patients view their problems in these situations (as permanent, pervasive and personal), and by displaying unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence.

I believe that in the quest for meaning, as well as in motivation, knowledge of self and of one's own patterns of functioning helps the individual to channel all available strengths and virtues towards an objective. Gauging my patients' level of self-awareness and self-knowledge allows me to gain a clearer assessment of their functioning in context, of their decision-making skills, and of their parameters of reference, their values, and of the barriers that influence the attainment of their life's objectives.

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