



The role of “meaning in life” and meaning-making processes in coping with COVID-19; a review of meaning during pandemic and ways to foster meaning-making

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Abstract

COVID-19 outbreak has altered individuals meaning in life in several ways. People all around the world are going through life-changing losses which inevitably influence their meaning in life, how they make sense of the world and how they make meaning about the pandemic. Meaning in life is very important during such hard times because it is a construct that fosters resilience and psychological well-being. The way individuals make sense of the world and the ongoing situation influences their coping mechanisms. Moreover, meaning-making processes can help individuals avoid complicated grief, PTSD, worry, and even reach post-traumatic growth. Investigating the different aspects of people’s life influenced by COVID-19 and the role played by meaning, this review tries to bring about a better understanding of meaning as a construct that contributes to better adapting. It also gathers four methods for enhancing meaning in life and meaning-making processes in order to improve resilience and well-being in people. This methods include life crafting intervention, creativity, family meaning making and ways to foster meaning making of the COVID-19 in general population.

Keywords: COVID-19, loss, meaning, meaning-making, meaning in life, resilience



Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease outbreak that happened in China in January 2020 and developed into a global pandemic, altered people's life significantly and put individual's physical and mental health at risk [1]. Although governments around the world implemented different measures, most countries have been going through a lockdown and social distancing [2]. Adapting to the new condition could be hard [3]. During such hard times, we naturally seek out meaning in life [4] while the previous meanings and goals become lost and shattered [3]. Knowing that meaning-making has an important role in developing reliance and adjusting to the new COVID-19 outbreak [5], this review aims to investigate the different ways that this pandemic has affected our meaning in life, the role played by meaning-making in fostering well-being during such times and also four possible methods for finding and reconstructing meaning.

How COVID-19 losses affects our meaning in life, and meaning-seeking endeavors?

COVID-19 pandemic changed a great deal of our known world and also our understanding of it. COVID-19 pandemic affected not only people's physical health but also their mental health, leading to a wide range of psychological problems including anxiety, depression, burnout, nervousness, obsessive compulsory disorders, and general mental health problems [5].

Individuals have a set of core beliefs that collectively convey a sense of fairness. This means that people believe that the world is a fair place in which they can influence their circumstances by their actions with relative confidence regarding the future, the meaningfulness of their existence, their identity, personal worth, and relational networks. Stressful or traumatic events can result in mental health disorders by violating these core beliefs, leaving individuals disoriented in terms of their identity, future expectations, and the nature of the world [6]. The situation is very complicated. Several variables can compound pandemic loss effects: high-risk situations and socioeconomic disparities, ambiguity, unacknowledged and stigmatized losses, and the pileup of stressors [7].

As opposed to most disasters, a pandemic is pervasive. Through such times families experience a sense of loss regarding loss of loved ones, loss of physical contact; loss of jobs, financial security, and livelihoods; the loss of pre-crisis ways of life and hope for the future and the loss of what they knew as normal [7]. Although this is the case for many individuals during a pandemic, grief is not only experienced after losing a loved one but also plays a role after life-changing losses [8,9,10]. These losses can be categorized as follows:

Complicated/traumatic deaths:

Sudden deaths due to COVID-19 often happen after extreme physical suffering, which is very hard on loved ones who cannot help or even be by the bedside to provide comfort and



say goodbyes. Also, by gatherings being prohibited, families cannot honor the deceased, share grief, and provide mutual support [11]. The opportunity to deal with the death of a loved one through the spiritual dimensions of grieving rituals is gone, making the process of grief harder and more complicated [12].

Loss of physical contact: isolation

When going through a traumatic experience like a pandemic, helplessness and confusion are common and we feel a strong need to reach out to others for comfort, safety, and support. With social distancing, travel restrictions, and the fear of bringing the virus to our loved ones, the risk for physical and mental decline, substance use, emotional despair, and death increases, especially for those living alone or in care facilities [7]. There are various negative impacts associated with forced and prolonged mass quarantine including boredom, loneliness, social disconnectedness, a sense of lack of meaning, relationship breakdowns, avoidance behaviors, anger, and abnormal emotional reactions [13,14,15].

Loss of jobs, livelihoods, and financial security:

Job loss, prolonged unemployment, business closure, and uncertain economic recovery have a significant impact on the well-being of families, especially for those with lower income [7]. Loss of employment has been reported as the most stress full challenge and the financial strain is known to be a risk factor for additional stressors such as the increased risk of infection [16]. A recent survey by the American Psychological Association (2020) shows that one of the most affected groups by a pandemic is the parents of children under 18 [17]. Also, with worry being defined as continuous thinking about actual or possible future threats, uncertainties, and risks [18], research showed that worry about economic influences and worry about academic delays were moderately related to a higher level of anxiety among Chinese college students during COVID-19 pandemic [19].

Loss of hopes and dreams:

An untimely death of a family member, anticipating death and sickness, the prolonged recession that generates anxiety and uncertainty about one's future career and plans, and also fear of losing the dreams about finding a life partner and starting a family upends life cycle expectations and shatters hopes and dreams [7].

Loss of normalcy: shattered assumptions and meanings

There is a collective experience of shattered assumptions during the pandemic. Our beliefs about our life and the world we live in, change in the structure of our life as a result of losing a loved one, unclear future, and the lethal potential of the virus lead to loss of what we knew as normal [7]. For instance, COVID-19 introduced a vocabulary of its own regarding physical distancing, social isolation, and stay at home which resulted in altering the meaning of "home", as an already familiar concept, in different positive and negative ways [20].



How meaning-making helps well-being?

COVID-19 pandemic is posing serious threats to our system of meaning construction. The process of meaning-making includes different cultural, social, familial, and psychological layers that cause a lived, dynamic sense of intentionality and selfhood. We both “make and find” meaning. Guidano (1991) defined psychopathology as “a science of meaning,” and proposed that most forms of mental distress shape as a result of a meaning-making disruption. For instance, according to WHO, depression is one of the most harmful consequences of the pandemic, in which the depressed persons often report that they feel disconnected from the world and that the world seems like an empty place deprived of all meaning [17]. Kelly (1955) describes predictability as the core element of meaning-making, making the unpredictability of pandemic time a serious challenge for an individual's meaning-making. The meaning-making process is crucial for even children during the present pandemic to help them deal with the COVID-19 emergency [21]. During such times, the capacity to attribute sense and coherence to uncertainty can promote a sense of efficacy and power; thus enhance psychological well-being. For instance, finding the meaning of “we are all in the same boat,” as a metaphor helps individuals benefit from communal coping and reduce the uncertainty, thus increase their resilience during the pandemic [22]. Resilience is more directly predicted by cultivation of social support and adaptive meaning making rather than preexisting characteristics [23]. While high levels of resilience are associated with better coping, low levels of resilience are positively related with worry, anxiety and symptoms of PTSD [5]. There are different ways to foster meaning and enhance the meaning-making processes, four of which are presented in this article. These methods include meaning making in family to get over loss, meaning making through creation and creativity, life crafting intervention, and a strategy for making meaning of COVID-19 in the general population.

Meaning-making in family to get over loss:

Family plays a key role in the process of meaning reconstruction during hardships such as loss, given its status as the intersection between the individual and social dimensions [17]. “Family resilience” a construct developed by Walsh (1998, 2015), is drawn from the traditionally individualistic trait of resilience. In response to COVID-19, family resilience can be fostered with three critical aspects: the meaning-making of adversity, fostering a positive outlook, and transcendence and spirituality [24]. Despite the common sequences of reactions to grief, in the COVID-19 pandemic, people get through their grief process in different orders; some might be consumed with sadness while others are angry or in disbelief. Resilience in response to loss does not mean “just bounce back”, but means healing gradually over time, struggling well, and integrating painful loss experiences into our life [7]. Mourners who can integrate their bereavement into their meaning system successfully, report fewer symptoms of complicated grief over a longer period [17].



Making meaning through creativity:

There are many theories regarding meaning-making. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs introduces self-actualization which can be reached through means such as creativity. Frankl's (1946) approach to finding meaning is derived from his experience in concentration camps, proposes three ways for achieving meaning in life: creating or completing a particular work or task, through interpersonal connection, and how people face unavoidable pain and suffering. Knowing that we are all mortal. Lifton (1979, 2011) proposed that one way to seek out meaning is to seek out symbolic immortality, or a way of living on even after we die. Lifton proposed five ways to reach this goal: having children, linking to the past and future through our physical matter, spirituality, and religion, living each moment to its fullest, and emphasizing the impact of one's work, mentorship of others, and creative output [4].

Marela and Stegar (2016) propose that meaning has three aspects: coherence, significance, and purpose. Coherence is making sense of one's life through time, significance is finding joy and value in one's everyday life, and purpose is having goals for the future [24].

There are different ways to seek meaning in life, including creativity and the act of creation [25]. The role of creativity is stated and also found in components of both Frankl's and Lifton's conceptions [4]. Moreover, all three aspects of meaning proposed by Martela and Stegar can be enhanced through creativity [26,27,28].

During hardships such as a pandemic, seeking out meaning in life is natural. The four C mode is a useful taxonomy to analyze creativity that proposes a developmental trajectory played out over one's lifespan or a particular domain of activity." Table 1" describes this model [4]:

Table 1-The four C model for creativity

Mini-c	Explorative behaviors which are meaningful to the person and might not be novel historically.
Little-c	Every day actions that can be done in a creative way, such as redecorating one's home or mix-and-match outfits.
Pro-c	Achieving an expert level creativity
Big-c	Creating something innovative, a dish for instance, that people continue to enjoy for years after one's death.



The frequency of creative activities may have increased during this pandemic as a means of coping with the distress, creating positive emotion and enjoyment [24,29] that had shown to be effective on individuals wellbeing [30,31]. Activities such as creating novel content on social media platforms, making homemade masks, baking bread, or singing to neighbors from balconies in Italy can be considered ways of expressing mini-c and little-c. Knowing that content on social media is spread worldwide and seen by millions of people, it can also be a pro-c action. The professionals expressed Pro-c in different ways such as musicians providing people with free online home concerts or scientists working together against one common enemy. Although Big-c category of creative actions is indicated through time, some professionals are currently considered an example of Pro-c but will most likely become Big-c examples later, including the scientists working on the development of COVID-19 vaccines [4].

It seems that the very act of making something is valuable as a possible method to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity [4]. Research has shown associations between creativity and building resilience [32], as a factor in responding to disasters and a facilitator of achieving post-traumatic growth [31,33]. Thus meaning-making through any kind of creative activity is an adaptive and resilient response to the pandemic [4].

Finding meaning during the COVID-19 using life-crafting intervention:

Life-crafting intervention proposed by Schippers and Ziegler (2019) helps individuals structure their search for purpose in life and also integrate that purpose with their life as a whole, thus reaching more significance [34]. In the life crafting process people actively reflect on their present and future life, set goals for important areas of life, such as social and career, make plans and undertake actions. This intervention is based on the Japanese concept of “ikigai”, meaning a life worth living, as in the third facet of meaning in life, significance. Knowing that this intervention can be very useful in times that meaning is lost, the life-crafting intervention is adjusted to this specific situation through focusing on the things individuals have lost during pandemic. The initial elements and description of a life-crafting intervention is shown in “Table 2” [3].

Part	Elements	Tasks involved
1. Discovering values and passions	Current and desired competencies and habits	Writing about: (1) What they like to do, (2) what kind of relationships they would like to have, (3) what kind of career they would like to have, and (4) lifestyle choices (1) Qualities they admire in



Table

		others, (2) competencies they have or would like to acquire, and (3) their own habits they like or dislike	2-
2. Reflecting on one's ideal future	present and future social life, career and the less ideal future	(1) Relationships that energize and de-energize them, (2) kinds of friends and acquaintances they would like to have in the future, and (3) what their ideal family life and broader social life would look like	
3. Writing about specific goals and "if-then" plans	Achieving goals and "if-then" plans	(1) What is important in a job, (2) what is it they like to do, (3), what kind of colleagues do they want, and (4) whom do they want to meet through their work? possible self and future when there are no (self-imposed) constraints. Contrast this with future if no changes are made	
4. Committing to the goals	Public commitment to the goal	(1) Formulating, strategizing, and prioritizing goals, (2) identifying and describing ways to overcome obstacles, and (3) monitoring progress toward goals Photo with statement, which communicates their goals; communicating goals to friends, coworkers	

elements of life-crafting intervention

Adapted from [3].



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Making meaning about covid-19 pandemic in the general population:

To foster the sense of coherence in the general population, all official and media communications should be clear, consistent and brief avoid additional challenges about the nature of the COVID-19 and its consequences. Second, anxious, depressive and emotionally negative responses to the situation should be normalized to avoid “medicalization of ordinary life”, a phenomenon introduced by France (2013). We should also emphasize the strengths and resources that individuals have and reinforce components of positive functioning through clinical interventions. This goal can be pursued through mutual interactions in a group intervention. Finally, spirituality in terms of religion, rituals or sense of connectedness to nature can help better coping and fostering personal and family resilience [17].

Conclusion

Finding meaning and making sense of the world is an important process that contributes to individual’s psychological well-being through enhancing resilience. Life changing events, such as COVID-19, alter the way people make sense of the world in major ways. The role played by meaning and meaning making process is so important that people naturally seek out meaning during hardships, making it essential for authorities and media to implement efficient methods, such as creativity, life-crafting, making sense of the pandemic and family meaning- making to improve resilience and enhance psychological well-being.



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