

IN SEARCH OF MEANING: HOW ARE WE TO CONNECT WITH OUR LIFE MEANING?

By Peter White PhD

Natureconnect.com.au

INTRODUCTION

Humans in all places, cultures and times share many things in common. One is our inherent capacity for meaning, to consciously seek meaning in life, to make meaning of events. We are creatures of meaning-making, seekers of recognising the significance of things or events in and throughout our lives.

In times of rapid change, turmoil and global violence, in times of personal stress, anxiety and depression, we become increasingly prone to question our views and beliefs about the world, our place in it and who we really are. In times of personal and/or collective suffering it is natural to feel uncertain about beliefs and perspectives that once gave us a sense of meaning.

Even if we are reasonably comfortable with our day to day meanings from work, relationships and interests, the bigger existential questions of meaning can arise - what is my life purpose, who am I, why do we suffer, is there a god and is there anything beyond death. These can often be too overwhelming to deal with. Not having satisfactory answers to these can undermine our contentment and sense of security.

As seekers of meaning we prefer mental, emotional and spiritual certitude, an inner platform to give direction and structure to our experience of reality. When people feel that life is meaningless, sense little coherence or purpose in their life, it can even undermine their will to live. This article explores the importance of life meaning from the perspective of connection. It discusses the types of meaning and some of the ways to create and sustain life meaning.

The Meaning of Meaning

The most common use of the word 'meaning' refers to the sense or significance of a word or phrase, for example "what do you mean by that?" It also refers to the purpose or significance of something, an event, a relationship. We interpret meaning according to our personal and cultural perspectives. I, for example as an Anglo-Australian will more likely interpret a different meaning from an encounter with a landscape from that made by an Indigenous Australian.

We experience meaning as an idea or understanding as well as an emotional response to some person, event or situation. We tend to experience meaning in two broad ways: 1) a realisation or intuition of the presence of an overarching significance in our life (meaning in life); and 2) a search to

discover and/or enhance meaning in life (search for meaning). Of course the converse also applies: we may be struck by meaninglessness and/or disinterest or avoidance for seeking meaning.

Meaning in life is experienced as having a sense that our life, not so much a single event, experience or relationship has meaning but life overall has purpose and direction and that one has a strong feeling that one has a personal place in the grand scheme of things. As psychotherapist Victor Frankl once put it, a meaningful life is not achieved until one connects with a higher and more encompassing purpose.

Searching for meaning on the other hand is concerned with the creation of meaning, which often requires looking for significance and purpose in life. It is considered an unstable form of meaning (as it may or may not be 'found') and is significantly less associated with life satisfaction and happiness compared to the more stable life meaning. People who cannot find stable meaning in life search for it.

In this sense having a stable sense of life meaning can be viewed as the destination (but not static or immutable). The search for meaning is about the journey there, however and wherever 'there' may be perceived (or re-perceived) as one moves along one's life trajectory (the search for meaning often changes in intensity and form during different life stages).

The Essence of Meaning is Connection

With few exceptions we humans are socially oriented creatures needing healthy inter- and intra-personal connections to experience psychological wellbeing. We evolved in clans, tribes and within communities, and over the past thousands of years as part of civilisations. We are hard wired for seeking and maintaining positive social relationships and for the most part healthy relations with the worlds of nature and spirit. We therefore as a species and individually tend to have a strong desire, often unconsciously, for belonging to something beyond our own lives – community, tribe, spirit and/or place.

Belonging and/or connectedness to some higher grouping, order or purpose is a necessary individual requirement for experiencing an overarching meaning in life. To belong implies experiencing relatedness – with people, society, nature and/or transcendent powers and this requires experiencing connection. All sources that give life meaning can be viewed therefore through the prism of experienced connection, with humans, animals such as pets, nature, spirit and place. While life meaning includes day to day meanings of experiences, it is these myriad of meaningful connective experiences that helps us to sense coherence about our life.

Experiencing chronic disconnection, like meaninglessness can lead to reduced vitality, increased despair, and reduced self-worth. Any on-going experience of profound disconnection, from another person, place, nature,

for example tends to undermine or reduce life meaning and consequently psychological wellbeing. I, and many people have responded by searching for meaning with various levels of success. If the search does not yield a stable platform of meaning then we can become stuck in an ongoing cycle of searching for new experiences or highs, take unnecessary risks and eventually not finding lasting meaning, fall into the depths of disillusionment or worse.

Whether it be through deep, aligned connection with family, peers, community, place, nature or religion or spiritual practice, experiencing meaning in life provides the resilience to handle existential hardships like sickness, loss, failure and imminent death. Experiencing a stable and deep life meaning can be a deep reservoir of inner resolve to help us face adversity. It also creates the fuel, the motivation to create order and coherence (make sense) in life, to take a non-egoic or higher perspective towards our life experiences, especially in relation to traumatic or stressful situations.

Experiencing life meaning: tips and reflections

Despite living in a world of hyper-connectivity, many of us at different times of our lives experience a sense of disconnection in our lives. In order to allow the possibility for life meaning to unfold, we need to address these experiences of disconnection. By experiencing deep connection in our lives we may be able to tap into new perspectives and self-concepts that expand the horizon of meanings that lie within our intuitive and reflective grasp. There are a myriad of ways to do this, here are three approaches for doing this:

1) Tip 1: experiencing meaning through immersive nature connection

Research indicates that the experience of nature connectedness plays an important role in both meaning and happiness. Research has indicated that experiencing life meaning is highly associated with feeling deeply connected with nature including most relevantly for me, for adults in mid-life. I can vouch for the mid-life relevance of nature connection: experiencing my mid-life crisis of upheaval over many years was made tolerable by deeply connecting with nature, times out to take stock, perspective and allow the wonders and love from nature to heal my battered mind and heart.

There are various reasons for nature's healing effects including finding comfort in the order and permanence of nature, the perspective-making power of nature and the likelihood of experiences of wonder that can help re-new meaning and potential for self-transcendence.

So how do you create deep immersive experiences of connection in nature? I have described this in my previous articles in Wellbeing but essentially you need to get out into the bush or landscape and use

your senses in a mindful way to engage everything with attentiveness, compassion and love. Give yourself an hour or so to do this, do it as a regular practice each week and observe yourself and your responses, non-judgmentally as you mindfully perceive. The key is to mindfully watch the flow of experiences as they arise in each moment. To requires that we compassionately engage and re-perceive the world with love and grace in a way that allows the the beauty and complexity of life to imbue our life with greater meaning and perspective.

2) Tip 2: meditating on letting go and connecting to self & spirit

If you find your outer world unbearable at times, too threatening, too overwhelming then an important option is to go within, to connect with your deeper self. You need to recognise that your experience of personal suffering can be a reminder of disharmony and often outmoded beliefs and emotional blockages. You need to create a way to understand and let go of the blockages, to step away from the things, people and events that destabilise your sense of purpose, self and meaning. A spiritual practice can allow you the mental and physical space to focus attention inwards and allow the intuitive experience of meaning to arise.

Spiritual practice involving meditation, yoga or other contemplative practices offers structure and guidance to help you focus on a place of stillness and no-boundaries where connection to Self and spirit may be tangible. This is the space of being, where meaning of ego-based doing is replaced by the meaning of experiencing a sense of being. In this emptying process of being arises the knowing that you are loved and loving, you are an important part of some greater whole, beyond space and time. This knowing provides the unbreakable understanding that there is higher meaning in life in which suffering and death have no prominence. The first step is critical – to acknowledge and build it into your daily and weekly routine.

3) Tip 3: Becoming mindful of your responses to challenging situations

We all face difficult times along our life path. Whether its inner or outer conflict, tension or times of depression, anxiety and grief, these situations can rob of us of joy, contentment and meaning. Depression and other negative states such as anger and resentment tends to empty our lives of meaning. It tends to rob us of hope, self-control and self-worth. To take control requires stepping back from the precipice of habitual reacting or slipping on the slippery slopes of blame and self-righteous anger.

The key activity for taking control and responsibility for our actions is mindfulness. Mindful awareness, simply, is a neutrally observant

state of awareness in which we perceive our world and our self (thoughts, feelings, sensations, actions) from a caring, nonjudgmental moment to moment perspective. In gaining an honest, non-habitual perspective it can help you to realise that the causes of any suffering lies not so much in the challenging situation but in the habitual reactions to them.

Observing a situation or yourself neutrally from a new perspective can prevent you from being swept away by the strong currents of your thoughts, fears and feelings. This perspective taking, this capacity to acknowledge and let go of past and present hurt, habits and expectations is critical in taking control of your life and becoming connected. Mindfulness allows you to make better choices in each moment and to interpret, nurture and enhance meaning in the moment. This moment to moment meaning gradually joins together to paint a life canvas of greater meaning and contentment.

Wrap-up

The essence of a meaningful life requires the intuition and reflection of meaning upon day-to-day events, relations and emotions as well as experiencing a sense of connection to something greater than our own lives. It is to recognise that life meaning changes through our lives and that we need to recognise meaning can be best interpreted during connection and being mindful. If and when we experience an emptiness of life meaning, there are two basic choices we can make - to step back into the old ways of disconnection and habit or step forward from the edge of meaning and fly.

Meaning is part of our humanity and part of the creative act we engage in as we forge our paths through the understorey of our life. In recognising this we may not only take responsibility for creating life meaning but we may weave a more enduring meaning throughout our lives that may nourish us and the worlds that sustains us.

Friedrich Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how"