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Meaning in Life and Posttraumatic Growth

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It has often been assumed that the search for meaning following adversity is adaptive, but scant evidence exists to support this. Rather, it seems that while the presence of meaning is adaptive, the search for meaning is actually related to greater distress. Across three samples (158 churchgoers, 128 members of the general population, 84 funeral directors), we assessed schematic changes following adversity using the Changes in Outlook Questionnaire and both the presence of meaning and the search for meaning using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire. It was found that the presence of meaning was associated with greater positive change and less negative change, but the search for meaning was associated with greater negative change across all three samples.

Although psychologists have long been interested in how people adapt to threatening events, it is only recently that the positive psychology approach has been applied to understanding how people adapt following trauma. Research has now demonstrated that following adversity people often report various positive changes, such as enhanced relationships, altered views of the self, or shifts in life philosophy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a, 2004b).

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The range of events that have been found to act as triggers to positive change is wide. For example, positive changes of one sort or another have been reported following bereavement, cancer, mastectomy, bone marrow transplant, heart attack, rheumatoid arthritis, spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, a shipping disaster, a tornado, a plane crash, rape, childhood sexual abuse, incest, assault, shootings, HIV infection and AIDS, and military combat (see Linley & Joseph, 2004).

In their conceptualization of how positive change arises following adversity, Joseph and Linley (2005, 2008) proposed that finding meaning is central to cognitive-emotional processing. In brief, traumatic events are thought to shatter assumptions about the self and the world, thus leading to cognitive processing as people work through and search for new meanings in life. As these new meanings are found, and the person's view of him- or herself and the world is reconstructed, the new assumptive world begins to emerge (Joseph & Linley, 2005, 2008). Thus it is that we would predict the presence of meaning is central to understanding positive change. This is not a new notion, but one that builds on the existential writings of Yalom (1980) and more recently Janoff-Bulman's (1992) theory of shattered assumptions, as well as previous empirical work showing that meaning in life is positively related to psychological well-being (e.g., Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Previous research has shown that meaning in life was related to positive changes in college students following the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001, and following the Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004 (Steger, Frazier, & Zacchanini, 2008).

Finding meaning has long been accepted in the literature as related to psychological health following adversity, notably since Frankl's (1963) observations on his experiences in the Nazi death camp Auschwitz that those who were most equipped for survival were those able to find meaning in life despite the horrors of the camps. Later, as a psychiatrist, Frankl talked of how he saw in his many patients over more than a quarter century of practice a capacity to find meaning in the tragedies and misfortunes of their lives. He used the term "tragic optimism" to convey the sense of the two sides of suffering, that while there might be nothing inherently good *in* misfortune, it might be possible to extract something good *out of* misfortune. To Frankl, it was the confrontation with what he called the "primordial facts" of existence—its transitory nature and the inevitably of suffering—that offers the opportunity for meaning in life. But while these theoretical perspectives point to the importance of finding meaning, one might question the adaptive significance of the ongoing search for meaning.

It might be speculated that an ongoing search for meaning is indicative of the shattered assumptive world and as yet unresolved cognitive processing. As such, it might be predicted that the search for meaning is unrelated to positive change but related to greater distress. Supporting this notion, Helgeson, Reynolds, and Tomich (2006) concluded from their meta-analytic

review of 87 studies that benefit finding following adversity is related to more intrusive and avoidant posttraumatic experiences, which they note can be understood as unresolved cognitive processing.

We know from previous research that negative schematic changes are related to high levels of cognitive processing (Joseph et al., 2005), and so we would speculate that those searching for meaning are working through the implications of a challenged assumptive world in which they are more likely to endorse negative posttrauma schematic changes such as not looking forward to the future, not being able to cope with things, fearing death, and so on. As meaning is found, people resolve these existential issues and shift toward an endorsement of positive schematic changes such as valuing relationships more, feeling more experienced about life, looking upon each day as a bonus, and so on. As such, it would seem that it is axiomatic that the search for meaning has an intrinsic negative valance as it represents the struggle with the existential issues that arise following adversity.

Thus, although it has often been assumed that the search for meaning is positively adaptive, we suggest otherwise. Empirical research on this is sparse but suggests that the distinction between the presence of and the search for meaning is important and that these constructs are differentially related in a way consistent with our prediction. Research that does exist shows that while the presence of meaning is associated with fewer depressive symptoms and less neuroticism, searching for meaning is associated with greater depressive symptoms and higher neuroticism (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2004; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008).

Our aim was to assess the relation between the search for and the presence of meaning and positive and negative changes following adversity. We assessed both the presence of meaning in life and the search for meaning in life (indicative of meaninglessness) using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2004). We hypothesized that the presence of meaning would be associated with higher positive change and lower negative change and that the search for meaning would be associated with higher negative change and lower positive change.

In order to provide replicability of findings and to ensure variability in responses to the questionnaires, we collected data from three diverse groups for this study. First, we collected data from churchgoers on the basis that this population would reasonably be expected to have greater presence of meaning, given their religious faith. Second, we collected data from the general population to explore the extent to which findings replicated across a population that might not be expected, a priori, to have high levels of meaning present in their lives. Third, we collected data from funeral directors, as a way of exploring whether daily confrontation with death would impact the search for or presence of meaning.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Sample 1: churchgoers

Surveys were distributed to people attending a range of mainstream Christian churches in the United Kingdom, together with reply-paid envelopes, allowing participants to complete and return the surveys at their leisure. The survey packs were presented in four different orders to control for order effects. Participants who returned the survey by a specified date were entered into a prize draw for a £25 (approximately $40) gift voucher. In total, 250 surveys were distributed and 158 returned, giving a response rate of 63.2%.

Participants (59 men, 108 women) were aged between 15 and 79 years ($M = 41.02$ years, $SD = 15.83$), primarily married/living as married (58%) or single (26%), and of White ethnic background (96%); had a high school education (19%), university degree (19%), or a professional or vocational qualification (42%); and were employed full time (48%) or part time (21%), were retired (14%), or were students (12%). Participants indicated their religious denomination as Protestant (60%), Christian (34%), Catholic (4%), or other (2%) and reported that they attended a place of religious worship, on average, once per week (86%), more than once per week (8%), or once per month (6%).

Sample 2: general population

Surveys were distributed to as wide a range of participants as possible using a snowball sampling technique, through which surveys were given to associates of the researchers, who were asked to distribute them to their own associates, and so on. Approximately half of the surveys returned were collected by undergraduate students, who were given course credit for the completed surveys they returned. Random checks were made to guard against the falsification of data through this method. The survey packs were presented in four different orders to control for order effects. Participants were invited to take part in a study examining how they lived their life and the things that were important to them, and they were given a reply-paid envelope to enable the return of the completed survey at their leisure. Participants who returned the survey by a specified date were entered into a prize draw for a £25 gift voucher. In total, 250 surveys were distributed and 128 returned, giving a response rate of 51.2%. However, 9 of these participants were allocated to Sample 1 (described above).

Participants (41 men, 77 women, 1 with no data on gender) were aged between 18 and 75 years ($M = 32.16$ years, $SD = 15.12$), primarily single (49%) or married/living as married (39%), and of White ethnic background (94%); had a high school education (50%), university degree (9%), or a

professional or vocational qualification (19%); and were employed full time (31%) or part time (11%), were retired (7%), or were students (45%). Participants reported their religious denomination as none (58%), Protestant (20%), Catholic (11%), Christian (5%), or other (5%) and reported that they attended a place of religious worship, on average, never or less than twice per year (68%), twice per year (14%), or four times per year (18%).

Sample 3: funeral directors

Surveys were distributed to 350 members of the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD), drawn at random using the online research randomizer (www.randomizer.org) from the NAFD membership directory. The survey packs were presented in four different orders to control for order effects; however, the professional experiences section was always presented first, since other responses were keyed back to this. Participants were invited to participate in a "Funeral Directors Survey" and return their completed survey using the reply-paid envelope provided. Participants who returned the survey by a specified date were entered into a prize draw for a £25 gift voucher. Eighty-four completed surveys were returned, giving a response rate of 24%. This relatively low response rate is likely reflective of the high completion time (upwards of 30 minutes) required from busy professionals (as indicated by unsolicited comments on some of the returned surveys), but is consistent with other research conducted with this population.

Participants (64 men, 19 women, 1 with no data on gender) were aged between 24 and 77 years ($M = 47.79$ years, $SD = 11.49$), primarily married/living as married (83%) or single (10%), and most had children of their own (77%). In addition, participants were primarily of White ethnic background (99%) and had a professional or vocational qualification (65%). They were primarily employed full time (95%) and had worked in their current position for between 2 years and 50 years ($M = 20.52$ years, $SD = 11.89$). A minority of the participants (18%) had also worked or were currently working in another professional capacity dealing with death and bereavement, and had been doing so for between 4 years and 40 years ($M = 10.87$ years, $SD = 9.89$).

Measures

Participants completed a battery of questionnaires that included the following instruments. The *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (MLQ; Steger et al., 2004) includes two five-item subscales that assess the search for meaning in life (e.g., "I am searching for meaning in my life") and the presence of meaning in life (e.g., "I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful"). Participants completed the original 14-item version (four items were

excluded from the present scoring system, following the recommendations of Steger et al., 2004), scored using a 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*) scale. One item is reverse scored. Higher scores indicate greater search for meaning and presence of meaning, respectively.

The *Changes in Outlook Questionnaire* (CiOQ; Joseph et al., 1993) is a 26-item self-report measure of changes in outlook, scored using a 6-point Likert-format scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). The CiOQ has two subscales: Positive Changes (11 items; e.g., "I feel more experienced about life now," "I value other people more now"), with a range of 11–66, and Negative Changes (15 items; e.g., "I no longer feel able to cope with things," "I have very little trust in myself now"), with a range of 15–90. The CiOQ has adequate reliability and validity and has been shown to correlate highly with other measures of positive change following adversity (Joseph et al., 2005). For all participants in all three samples, the CiOQ was keyed to the "most upsetting event that you have experienced within the last 2 years."

RESULTS

All descriptive statistics for this sample are presented in Table 1. Cronbach alphas for all measures were generally satisfactory. Scores on the CiOQ indicate moderate levels of growth and low levels of negative change.

We found that while the presence of meaning was associated with higher scores on positive changes and lower scores on negative changes across all three samples, searching for meaning in life was associated with more negative changes (see Table 2).

TABLE 1 Sample Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range	Alpha
Sample 1				
MLQ: Presence	30.15	4.42	10–35	.78
MLQ: Search	15.59	8.19	5–35	.90
CiOQ: Positive Changes	48.84	7.39	23–64	.80
CiOQ: Negative Changes	27.25	9.40	15–66	.85
Sample 2				
MLQ: Presence	22.44	6.14	7–35	.83
MLQ: Search	19.39	7.06	5–33	.89
CiOQ: Positive Changes	43.70	8.62	18–61	.83
CiOQ: Negative Changes	36.90	12.42	15–75	.89
Sample 3				
MLQ: Presence	27.22	5.50	11–35	.89
MLQ: Search	14.68	6.85	5–32	.87
CiOQ: Positive Changes	49.72	7.14	29–66	.88
CiOQ: Negative Changes	26.24	10.03	15–58	.75

TABLE 2 Correlations Between Meaning in Life and Growth Following Adversity.

	Positive changes	Negative changes
Sample 1		
MLQ: Presence	.21*	−.49**
MLQ: Search	−.08	.43**
Sample 2		
MLQ: Presence	.40**	−.57**
MLQ: Search	−.01	.33**
Sample 3		
MLQ: Presence	.40**	−.45**
MLQ: Search	−.01	.32*

Note. $^{*}p < .01$; $^{**}p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Across three samples, our findings demonstrate that the presence of meaning in life was consistently associated with greater positive change but that searching for meaning was not. Rather, searching for meaning was found to be associated with greater negative change. We would argue that the search for meaning is vital for the development of positive changes but is not in itself related to such changes; rather, it constitutes the necessary cognitive process through which people are able to find meaning.

A strength of this research was the use of three samples. We sought out what we thought were three diverse samples in order to obtain a wide range of variability in meaning and in how meaning is construed. For this reason, we are encouraged by the consistency of findings across all three samples that these results might be robust. This is particularly notable given that our population sample selections were guided by the implicit belief that we might be able to tap different experiences of the search for and presence of meaning by virtue of the nature of the sample. We found that churchgoers and funeral directors both had higher levels of presence of meaning and lower levels of search for meaning than the general population sample. The pattern of results was consistent across the three populations, suggesting that fundamental human processes are at work and that these processes are less influenced by contextual factors such as church attendance or professional work involving dealing with death and bereavement.

However, while we think this is an interesting contribution, the study is limited in several respects. First, the meaning questionnaire we used is generic in that it does not ask about the content of meaning, and so we are not able to shed any light on what meanings people find that are helpful to them. The issue of spirituality has been investigated as one vehicle for finding meaning (Yanez et al., 2009), and we would speculate that religious and spiritual meanings were likely dominant in our first sample. Understanding the

content of meaning presence promises to be a fruitful line of future inquiry, as does the search for meaning itself. At this stage of research, we would recommend idiographic study to explore these issues. Although we propose that the presence of meaning has an intrinsic positive valence and the search for meaning has an intrinsic negative valance, this remains speculative until we have a greater understanding of how people construe meaning.

Second, although the sample sizes compare favorably with much other research within the area of posttraumatic growth, the funeral directors sample was smaller than would have been ideal. However, despite the limitations in statistical power that this inevitably brought about, we were able to demonstrate consistencies with the other two samples.

Third, while we adopt the view that a wide range of stressful events can act as triggers for positive change, not simply those that would be considered traumatic within the psychiatric literature, we are aware that this was not a psychiatric sample and that these results might not generalize to a psychiatric sample. We asked respondents to complete the CiOQ in relation to the most upsetting event in the past 2 years, but as we have no data on the severity of the event, the research remains to be replicated with other samples whose levels of trauma are known. Other research suggests that there is a curvilinear relationship between posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth (Butler et al., 2005), and so it is possible that the relationship between meaning and growth is moderated by levels of posttraumatic stress.

Fourth, a main limitation is the use of cross-sectional methodologies. Although it seems likely, we cannot conclude that the presence of meaning is a determinant of positive change. Longitudinal research is now needed to track the search for meaning and the presence of meaning over time in people who have experienced adversity in order to confirm whether the search for meaning does indeed give rise to the presence of meaning, and whether this is accompanied by a shift from a negative to a positive schematic worldview. Thus, while the search for meaning seems intrinsically negative, it might be that longitudinal research will show that the search for meaning is predictive of subsequent positive change.

In conclusion, our results support the conceptual distinction between the presence of and the search for meaning and suggest that these two constructs are differentially related to adaptation following adversity such that the presence of meaning is associated with positive change, but the search for meaning is associated with negative change.

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