

Introduction

Life exists only where there is meaning.

—C. G. Jung, *Collected Works: The Practice of Psychotherapy*

Elisa is a 35-year-old single parent. One day, she asked a doctor for medication because she felt like she was having a heart attack and could not breathe. After a consultation, the doctor referred Elisa to a counselor, who learned something about her story. Elisa had lived in El Salvador until the conditions with the gangs became so dangerous that she was frightened for her children's future. She figured out how to get her family out of the country and into the United States, but she had to leave behind her parents and extended family. She got her children into a safer school, but she could only find work cleaning houses even though she had a university degree. She constantly worried that she would be deported and that her children would be left with no parents. Elisa also worried that her children were no longer speaking Spanish and were picking up bad American habits. She was lonely and worried that she had made a mistake in coming to the United States. Everything seemed to be a struggle, and Elisa felt disconnected from herself and often had trouble leaving the house. She wondered what meaning her life had now.

We all struggle to figure out how to lead our lives and to make our lives meaningful. What can we do that gives us satisfaction and feels like it makes a difference? Do we matter to others? Are we engaged in things that feel meaningful, whether through work or hobbies or family? Will we be remembered when we are dead? Can we make sense of our lives, tie the past to the

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Meaning in Life: A Therapist's Guide, by C. E. Hill

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present and future, and make meaning of our lives? These are the questions that stimulated this book. In it, I describe how psychology and psychotherapy can address these questions.

Key Ideas in This Book

The key construct in this book is meaning in life, which I shorten throughout to MIL. MIL involves an intuitive felt sense of the experience of having meaning in one's life, the feeling that one matters and is significant; having purpose or goals in life; having a sense of coherence and comprehensibility; and having the ability to reflect consciously about meaning. Compared with meaning *of* life, a phrase which typically suggests a universal connotation for the human species as a whole (as in, "Why do humans exist?"), MIL is a more personal construct (as in, "What meaning have I created in my life?"). MIL differs from happiness (which relates more to pleasure and immediate satisfaction), identity (which involves a more global sense of self), subjective or psychological well-being (which again is a more global construct involving quality of life), and search for meaning (which involves a more concentrated seeking). (See Chapter 1 for more about definitions and Chapter 11 for descriptions of measures of MIL.) MIL can be a focus of personal reflection, and it can also be the focus of psychotherapy, both as an explicit concern in and of itself and as an underlying component of other concerns (e.g., depression, physical health problems, career concerns).

Audience for This Book

There are a number of audiences for this book. First and most important, I want to reach mental health professionals so that they can provide better services for clients who have MIL concerns. On the other side, clients who are interested in MIL could hopefully profit from reading this book so they can be better prepared for talking in therapy about their struggles with MIL. Students who are interested in learning about the theory, practice, and research related to MIL will also find this book useful.

Another audience I hope to reach is researchers. Psychology has had a bias against studying abstract constructs, such as MIL, because these concepts may not always be observable or easily measurable. Hence, more and better research is needed about MIL, particularly that involving measure development as we begin to clarify the construct of MIL and distinguish it from related constructs. We also need more empirical research on how to work with MIL in self-help and psychotherapy, in terms of the markers for working with MIL, how to work with MIL, and the consequences of such work.

Finally, the interested educated person outside of psychology will also hopefully find this topic and book relevant. Given that we all struggle with existential concerns such as MIL, we all can benefit from thinking deeply about the topic. I have tried to write the book with a minimum of jargon so that it is accessible to as many people as possible.

Outline of the Book

In the Prologue that follows, I describe my own journey searching for and reflecting about MIL. The main part of the book follows and is split into four parts. Part I covers what we know theoretically and empirically about MIL. Part II involves applications of what we know to psychotherapy and self-help. Part III is a description of our research program on MIL at the University of Maryland. Part IV includes a concluding chapter in which I draw together what we have learned and reflect on future directions for theory and research.

PART I. OVERVIEW OF MEANING IN LIFE

Prominent psychological scholars have posited that all humans strive toward meaning and that we have a need to understand the world, to know our place in it, and to have purposes and goals (e.g., Frank & Frank, 1991; Frankl, 1963; Klinger, 1977; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Yalom, 1980). Similarly, philosophers such as Descartes and Camus have suggested that we have a fundamental impulse to make sense of our experiences (see Proulx, Markman, & Lindberg, 2013). Frankl (1978) even proposed that seeking meaning is crucial not only to well-being but also to survival.

In contrast, some have argued that the quest for meaning is a luxury, a “first-world problem,” and that people only turn to thinking about meaning when things are going well (Baumeister, 1991). In this line of thinking, MIL is highly valued but reserved for a few lucky souls (Seligman, 2012), kind of the icing on the cake of psychological well-being (King, Heintzelman, & Ward, 2016).

Heintzelman and King (2014) argued persuasively, however, that MIL is not an esoteric phenomenon reserved for the self-actualized few. On the basis of empirical evidence, they concluded that, on average, people evaluate their lives as pretty meaningful. They suggested that meaningful lives are commonplace and that the things that make life meaningful (social inclusion, positive affect, religiosity, and environmental regularities) are readily available to most people. Heintzelman, Trent, and King (2015) also suggested, on the basis of the empirical evidence, that these high levels of meaning are not just due to people responding because of social desirability (i.e., wanting to look good to themselves and others) but because people feel that their lives are meaningful. Furthermore, the strong correlation between experiences of meaning and positive outcomes (well-being, health) suggests that having a sense of meaning is adaptive (King et al., 2016). King et al. (2016) further argued that the lack of meaning is pretty devastating, given that many tragedies (e.g., suicides, mass shootings) occur when people do not see their lives as meaningful.

Interestingly, the enjoyment of reflecting about MIL seems to vary widely across people. Some of us love to reflect on meaning, to ponder the existential issues about our role in the universe, and to examine whether we are making a difference in the world. We need to feel that we matter, that we are worthy, and that we are contributing in some way to the betterment of our fellow human beings and society. However, we all probably know people who seem blissfully uninterested in thinking about

meaning. They seem perfectly content with partying, shopping, watching television, playing games, pursuing hobbies, hanging out with friends, or making money. They do not spend much time thinking about the whys and wherefores of existence. They are not worried about leaving a legacy or doing something important. They are not wallowing in angst; they are just going about living and being.

So, is there a fundamental impulse toward finding meaning in life? Must everyone find meaning? Is all meaning good? Can a person be considered “healthy” if she or he is not willing or able to seek deeper meaning? What is MIL anyway? How does MIL develop? What are the sources of MIL? These are the topics of Part I of this book. More specifically, Chapter 1 focuses on defining MIL and distinguishing it from other constructs. Chapter 2 describes the development of MIL and goes into more detail about the nature of MIL. Chapter 3 describes the sources of MIL.

The large body of research that has been conducted on MIL has been summarized in several excellent edited volumes (Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Markman, Proulx, & Lindberg, 2013; Shaver, & Mikulincer, 2012; P. T. P. Wong, 2012; P. T. P. Wong & Fry, 1998). This research has come largely from social psychology, developmental psychology, and personality psychology and is summarized briefly in Part I of this book.

PART II. THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS FOR WORKING WITH MEANING IN LIFE

It is one thing to contemplate MIL, try to define it, and engage in philosophical discussions, but it is quite another thing to think about how to help ourselves or help clients in psychotherapy who are struggling either explicitly or implicitly with MIL. What are the best interventions? When and how should a therapist approach the topic? Are there indications and contraindications about when and how to work with MIL?

Metz (2013) made what he called a bold hypothesis that psychodynamic and humanistic therapy, clinical psychology, and counseling psychology are best understood as “enterprises in search of meaning in life” (p. 405). It is indeed intriguing to think that our underlying endeavor in psychotherapy is to help people in the journey toward understanding MIL.

The purpose of Part II is thus to focus on how to work with MIL in psychotherapy and self-help. In Chapter 4, the focus is on the major theories that have been presented for working with MIL, particularly logotherapy, existential therapy, and acceptance and commitment therapy. I then present in Chapter 5 my integrative theory for working with MIL, specifically describing background conditions that facilitate MIL work, a general three-stage (exploration, insight, action) framework for MIL work, and possible interventions for each of the three stages. In Chapter 6, I describe how MIL is implicated in many of life’s problems (e.g., physical health concerns, career concerns, transitions), and I provide more specific ideas for interventions for working with the MIL component of these problems. In Chapter 7, I present 10 cases to provide an inside picture of how experienced therapists work with clients about their explicit and implicit MIL concerns. In Chapter 8, I discuss multicultural and ethical considerations for working with MIL. In the final chapter in this section, I present a self-help guide for working with MIL, similar to that for psychotherapy.

PART III. RESEARCH ON MEANING IN LIFE

In concert with trying to define and understand what we mean by the construct of MIL, it is helpful to try to conduct empirical research on the topic. Struggling to operationalize the construct enough to study it forces us to refine our ideas further. Paying attention to disconfirming data also challenges us to think through what we mean by MIL.

The purpose of Part III is primarily to present the research that my research team at the University of Maryland has conducted on MIL. In Chapter 10, we describe studies with undergraduate students, doctoral students, and practicing psychotherapists about their definitions of MIL, how MIL developed, sources of MIL, and how therapists work with MIL in psychotherapy. These studies helped us refine our definition of the construct of MIL. I firmly believe that this observation step is critical to the first phase of the scientific approach. It is important to go into the endeavor with few expectations about the construct and attempt to learn from others. These studies used a variety of methodologies, ranging from qualitative to survey to quantitative. In addition, we review the existing measures and then present a new measure that we have developed to assess the presence of and reflectivity about MIL (see Chapter 11).

PART IV. CONCLUSION

I conclude the book by summarizing some take-home points and discussing future directions. Thus, in Chapter 12, I discuss the need for new theories about the construct of MIL, new theories about how to work with MIL in psychotherapy, and the need for future empirical research about the construct and about working with MIL in psychotherapy. I hope to stimulate new and exciting work in the field, particularly in terms of the applications to psychotherapy and helping people develop MIL.