

# **Making Meaning in Life: A Thematic Review of Successful Experimental Psychological and Psychotherapeutic Interventions**

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**Abstract.** This review sought to identify thematic elements of causal interventions that significantly increase people's reports of meaning in life. The author draws on existing reviews and meta-analyses of clinical interventions, as well as additional review of other research methods from which causality may be indicated, specifically social psychological experiments and psychotherapeutic modalities. The aim of the present review is not to catalogue every single such intervention, but to describe with a high degree of inclusion the themes and focal points of published efforts to change meaning in life. Eight focal points and five themes were identified across the hundreds of studies identified. It is suggested that to the extent researchers and practitioners target interventions at these focal points and themes, they may anticipate being able to benefit those who participate in such interventions. Further, it is hoped that these focal points and themes may facilitate bridges between meaning in life research and practice and other disciplines.

**Keywords:** Meaning in life, Purpose in life, Positive Psychology Interventions, Psychotherapy

## **1 An Ocean of Meaning Research**

Meaning in life has emerged as one of the most important and exciting areas of research within positive psychology. It is no exaggeration to say that the field has exploded, with thousands of relevant scholarly articles published each year. This bounty of knowledge hints that whatever corner of meaning in life people are interested in likely already has at least some data pointing the way to future researchers. However, the downside of such abundance is that it is all but impossible for any single person to know the field any longer. Even the broadest characterizations of these thousands and thousands of studies and reports must necessarily be couched in cautious language. One example is the impression held by many that the vast majority of research on meaning in life has been correlational in nature, focusing on understanding how meaning in life relates to other variables of interest across the spectrum of well being and psychological distress. This is true, but with so much published research it is true in an unimportant or even misleading way. Even five years ago, this author would have confidently claimed that only a few studies had been published showing successful attempts to improve people's perceptions of meaning in their lives. However, the present state of the field yields article after article describing the results of lab experiments or online protocols, or of psychotherapies or self-directed clinical interventions. Perhaps the most exciting part

of this moment in meaning in life scholarship is that not only are thousands of new research projects being published each year, but within those reports exist hundreds that provide guidance on how we can work to increase meaning in life.

Other entries in this volume will undoubtedly help readers map the conceptual space of meaning in life, including the sometimes subtle variations of definitions and emphasis. Here, I will focus on the most basic sense of meaning in life, that is, people's judgments that their personal existences are meaningful. There is consensus in the field that to arrive at a judgment that one's life is meaningful includes some balance of perceptions that one's life makes sense, that one's life has a motivation to strive toward an overarching purpose, and one's life is inherently worth living and matters in some important way (e.g., Martela & Steger, 2016; Steger, 2009; 2012). These three dimensions of meaning are typically tucked under the umbrella of meaning in life, and measured with one-dimension self-report questionnaires, although three-dimensional measures are now available (e.g., George & Park, 2017; Martela & Steger, in press). Most of the articles identified in this review used one-dimension self-report questionnaires that ask about meaning and/or purpose, such as the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) or the Purpose subscale of the Psychological Wellbeing Scales (Ryff, 1989).

One immediate rejoinder to the idea that we do not know much about positively influencing meaning in life is the existence of existential or meaning-focused psychotherapies that trace back to the work of Viktor Frankl and his school of Logotherapy (Frankl, 1967). Several other generative individual and group-based therapeutic approaches have been developed, such as Existential Analysis (Längle, 2003) and Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy (Breitbart, 2016). Converting sophisticated psychotherapies into more bite-sized intervention ideas is a challenge, particularly given the emphasis on individual phenomenology within existential approaches. Therefore, one aim of the present review is to distill some common elements from these approaches and link them to the more simple and discrete interventions or manipulations used in experimental and social psychology.

Considerable heavy lifting has already been accomplished through the landmark work of Vos (Vos, 2018; Vos & Vitali, 2018) who published two meta-analyses of meaning-focused or meaning-inclusive psychotherapies. In some ways then, the present effort is an update and extension of this important achievement by Vos. I will begin with a brief review of common themes in meaning-focused psychotherapies, followed by a description of the method used in my review. I will then conclude with suggestions of the eight focal points and five themes that appear to be present in the interventions that are causally associated with significant positive changes in meaning in life.

## **1.1 Psychotherapeutic Modalities**

Psychotherapies are multifaceted and generally tend to plan for individual variation in timing, sequence, and emphasis on specific content areas, and while they suggest perspectives and provide numerous techniques for clinicians to adopt and choose from. It could be argued that diversity and variation are the rule, not the exception. The purpose of this section is not to catalogue all the perspectives and techniques included in meaning-focused psychotherapies, but simply to describe some of the leading

psychotherapies with a broad brush.

Frankl's (1967) Logotherapy can be seen as the fountainhead for many subsequent psychotherapies, and indeed, the psychological study of meaning as a whole. Among the key elements of Logotherapy are the assertion that humans have a "will to meaning" – that is, we are driven to seek and identify meaning in our lives. Frankl argued that when we discover meaning, we gain a purpose that only we can fulfill, and that bolstered with that sense of mission, we are stronger and more resilient in the face of setback and adversity. Logotherapy also emphasized our paired freedom and responsibility to choose paths through life for ourselves. We can adopt a variety of stances toward our life experiences and opportunities, and may elect to see any or all of them as meaningful. Each circumstance has potential to be meaningful and to be an opportunity to express our purpose. In one sense, then, the key themes highlighted by logotherapy are our personal phenomenological journey through life, the potential for meaningfulness to be seen or discovered around us, our freedom and responsibility to choose, and the strength to be gained from commitment to purpose.

Existential Analysis (Längle, 2003) develops some of these themes even further, supporting clients to develop authentic and responsible attitudes toward life. Among the central tasks proposed to face us are wrestling with the boundary-less sense of freedom in a way that enables us to experience and express ourselves freely, and living in a way that expresses that sense of self responsibly. Längle uses the concept of consent to help us understand this dynamic, suggesting that we must freely consent to the lives we lead and to the world around us, going beyond a grudging acceptance or resignation to life and instead entering into life with volition.

Two more recent meaning-centered psychotherapies round out the list of influential approaches in practice today. Wong (2013) developed a synergy between meaning-focused psychotherapies and cognitive-behavioral therapies, with a keen awareness of how structural and societal matters of justice, inequity, and access can challenge our ideas of what is possible in life. Wong places relationships at the center of the experience of meaning, and also echoes the dilemmas that responsibility and freedom can pose as we work to pursue what really matters in our lives. While injustice and prejudice may restrict our social and economic parameters, we still are tasked with finding paths forward. An additional theme of Wong's work is that we have responsibility to each other to recognize and work to remediate injustices and prejudices that affect others. Our meanings, as the find root in relationships, include each other. Breitbart (2015) developed a group psychotherapy called Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy for cancer patients to help them cope with their illness, treatment, and mortality. This therapy is a structured approach that blends existential themes with ideas from posttraumatic growth. The themes emphasized are how cancer may exert both positive and negative changes on people's lives and identities.

## **2 Reviewing Existing Causality-Informing Work**

The goal of this review was to identify superordinate focal points and themes that are shared by interventions and other activities that increase meaning in life. To the extent that research finds support for Logotherapy, Existential Analysis, and the meaning-centered psychotherapies, this builds a case for the importance of their central themes

to increasing meaning in life. Approaching psychotherapies in this manner can build a set of perspective, themes, and approaches that will form the basis for the present review. As noted earlier, Vos has undertaken more than one wave of psychotherapy reviews, and wherever possible, the themes and results identified in those reviews will be used as a platform for the present study. The most recent of Vos's reviews was published in 2018. Thus, the present study mainly searched for articles published from January 2017 through April, 2022. A literature review of journal articles published during that time was conducted, casting as broad a net as possible, with the intent of identifying empirical research papers in which some experimental or treatment method was used and in which causality can be inferred. Nearly all papers identified were psychotherapy treatment trials, social psychology experiments, online apps, or other quasi-intervention studies. As the present study is not a formal meta-analysis, there were few exclusion criteria, and no efforts were made to control for effects based on sample, lack of control group, treatment duration, outcome measurement, or fidelity or compliance checks. To be included in my review, a paper simply needed to *publish original research including empirical results and statistical analyses indicating significant positive change in a meaning in life indicator due to some treatment or intervention condition*.

I used Google Scholar, which is more inclusive than other academic article search engines, and searched for the phrase "meaning in life," which is more general than other terms in this research area such as purpose, personal meaning, meaningfulness, or existential meaning (although it should be noted that numerous articles focused on those more specific terms did appear in the search). The rationale was to increase chances of finding the greatest possible number of relevant publications. The first 1,000 entries from 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 were examined and if there was an indication of data presented, links to the entry was followed and the abstract, method, and results were scrutinized for evidence that it met the primary inclusion criteria. Thus, roughly 6,000 entries were examined under the assumption that trailing entries were less relevant.

From the articles meeting the inclusion criteria, lists and descriptions of specific components of psychotherapies, interventions, treatments, and manipulations were compiled. To be included in my final consideration of focal points and themes some degree of replication was required. Replication could include a classical replication of an experimental manipulation by an independent investigator, multiple separate reports on the efficacy of the same psychotherapy, or the appearance of the descriptions of specific components in more than one independent investigation. For example, Logotherapy and meaning-centered therapy both include components of "freedom," so "freedom" would be included as a component to be integrated into the superordinate points and themes.

The approach I used might be seen as overly inclusive (e.g., failing to exclude poorly controlled or executed studies, or including data from highly heterogeneous samples) or it might be seen as overly restrictive (e.g., failing to use multiple search terms, or failing to conduct searches prior to 2017). In the face of such legitimate criticisms, I would simply reiterate the goal of this paper, which was to identify broad themes of effective interventions and not to attempt to quantify or summarize the entirety of the field. The goal is not to assert that meaning in life interventions have X-sized effect that is variant across samples and methods to Y-degree. Instead it is to draw

attention to the most salient features of successful attempts to increase meaning in life to date in the hopes that it both calls attention to a growing wealth of practical knowledge of this sort and also accelerates applications of meaning interventions through simplifying a complicated and sprawling body of work.

### **3 Focal Points and Themes of Meaning in Life Interventions**

In a series of reports, Vos and colleagues (Vos, 2016; Vos, 2018; Vos et al., 2015; Vos & Vitali, 2018) compiled and analyzed dozens of what they called meaning-based practices. Meaning-based practices are not exclusive to specific therapies such as logotherapy, but are those practices that Vos and colleagues consider to be compatible or drawn from existential, logotherapeutic, or meaning-centered approaches. The ground-breaking efforts not only yielded metanalytical estimates of the efficacy of such approaches, but also a catalogue of themes, elements that increased the effectiveness of treatments, and what Vos called “meaning-centered skills.” These themes, elements and skills formed the initial pool of components I considered for my own review.

Readers are encouraged to consult these sources for more information on the effects of meaning-based interventions, but one of the headline conclusions was that by the time Vos published a book on the topic, nearly 400 separate trials had been identified, with 28,808 patients enrolled (Vos, 2018). The estimated effect size for meaning-based practices regardless of formal therapeutic orientation deployed was Effect Size Beta of .38, which is a medium effect. More tightly focused reviews identified a smaller number of explicitly meaning-centered psychotherapies, but also larger effect sizes. For example, Vos and Vitali (2018) identified 60 trials with 3,713 enrolled participants and a large effect size; Vos and colleagues (2015) identified 6 specifically meaning-focused trials, again with a large effect size at immediate follow-up. One implication is that the more focused on meaning the therapies were, the larger the effects, at least on meaning in life as an outcome variable. Across all meta-analyses, Vos and colleagues reported large effect sizes for meaning as an outcome compared to medium effect sizes for other outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression) with some exceptions where there were large effects on non-meaning outcomes as well (e.g., stress, relationship quality). Further, Vos (2018) estimated that 13.7% of all positive outcomes were due to the meaning-specific components of the psychotherapy. Thus, meaning can be a specific platform for psychotherapy, but it also can be a common factor across effective psychotherapies regardless of modality.

So, what are these meaning-specific practices? What psychotherapeutic components form this common meaning factor across modalities? There are numerous ways to answer these questions. For example, Vos & Vitali (2018) found that meaning-centered therapies had larger effects under certain circumstances, which can be considered efficacious components. More effective therapies:

- Explicitly discussed meaning in each session
- Discussed our existential limitations
- Did not include religious/spiritual formulations
- Were structured (compared to unstructured interventions)
- Explicitly urged clients to set achievable goals in daily life
- Used mindfulness exercises

- Addressed self-worth
- Focused on creating positive therapeutic relationships

These components were included in my compilation of themes. Added to this list were components of the set of meaning-specific practices and skills identified by Vos (2018):

- Meaning-centered didactics (teaching principles of meaningful living)
- Focus on long-term meaning vs. short-term gratification and pleasure
- Identify and explore meaning-centered topic in client's own life
- Guiding the discovery of the meaning potential in a client's life
- Offer realistic hope that clients may find some meaning despite circumstances
- Addressing the full range of possible sources of meaning
- Shift from general/abstract meaning to specific/concrete meaning in daily life
- Support effective goal management
- Encourage client to engage with the whole experience of time, past-present-future
- Explore past experiences as source of hope for future meaning
- Support clients to find authentic way to connect with social context
- Focus on sources of meaning that bolster self-worth

Thus, as noted previously, there already was a substantial foundation of understanding of the elements of successful efforts to improve meaning in life arising from the work of Vos and colleagues in analyzing psychotherapies. To these efforts, I added my own search, as described above, and identified additional published accounts not included in Vos's work. In a small number of cases, I found articles published earlier than 2017 from other reviews, but the majority of articles identified were from 2017 or later.

As an aside, for many years, when asked what interventions were shown to improve meaning in life, I would reply with a simple, one-word quip: "Therapy!" Although it was not the focus of the present study, a number of research reports, mainly from Iranian researchers or reported in Iranian journals, were identified that reported meaning in life as an outcome of non-meaning-specific psychotherapies. Among the many therapies included in these articles, all of which reported increases in meaning in life, were Reality Therapy, Spiritual-Religious Psychotherapy, Compassion-Focused Therapy, Group Reminiscence Therapy, Narrative Therapy, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Group Hope Therapy, and Quranic Teaching Group Therapy. There seems to be a prolific interest in the effects of psychotherapy on meaning in life in Iran and it is hoped that reports on these efforts can reach more accessible publications soon. In addition to these efforts, the diversity of therapeutic modalities tested with regard to meaning in life as an outcome variable is fairly impressive. For example, there is a report of art therapy among fire fighters in South Korea (Lee & Park, 2020), health promotion intervention among nursing students in Taiwan (Tsai et al., 2020), as well as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in Turkey (Seyrek & Ersanli, 2021) and a psychological wellbeing program in Saudi Arabia (Alhaj-Mahmoud & Ahmad, 2021) both aimed at university students. There was even an American trial showing that Psilocybin-Facilitated Therapy halted a loss of meaning among cancer patients (Ross et al., 2021). Somewhat more relevantly, and in concordance with Vos's (2018) finding

that meaning-specific components facilitated positive outcomes, one study of outcomes from Cognitive Behavior Therapy was able to attribute significant clinical improvement in anxiety and depression symptoms to patient meaning-making (Marco et al., 2020).

A second set of psychotherapies was identified that, while still not specific to meaning, had central goals or foci that were closely related to or consistent with leading meaning in life theories. These might be considered to be “meaning-infused psychotherapies” and include approaches originally based in art therapy, mindfulness, drama therapy, volunteering and prosocial interventions, and even walking and farming-focused interventions. Articles describing the outcomes of such psychotherapies were reviewed with an eye toward their inclusion of themes that appeared in more formally meaning-focused psychotherapies, or for overlap with the interventions tested in experimental psychology studies. That is, psychotherapeutic approaches that were not specific to meaning were considered only to the extent that they supported specific components that were present in other studies more directly targeting meaning in life.

### **3.1 Recent Articles on Meaning-Focused Psychotherapies**

The specific interest of this review was to find a majority of all the psychotherapy outcome articles that used a meaning-specific, meaning-centered, or meaning-focused psychotherapy and were not previously included in Vos’s analyses. Between 2017 and the end of April 2022, a total of 31 articles were identified that met this description. Descriptions of the psychotherapies used in these articles were examined for relevant components and mapped onto the components, practices, and skills already compiled by Vos and colleagues. When necessary new components were added to this list in cases where no existing component seemed to capture what was included in the list.

Several articles reported on trials of the group-based Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy developed by Breitbart and colleagues. Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy (MCP) has generated significant volume of publications, but a nice, brief introduction to this approach is available (Lichtenthal et al., 2020). This approach shares theoretical roots with the work of Frankl (1967) and of Yalom (1980) and as such overlaps considerably with the components identified by Vos and colleagues. However, themes such as planning for one’s legacy and exploring creativity as a specific source of meaning receive greater emphasis. Although there is similarity in descriptions of MCP across recent publications, some applications to specific populations introduced other components, such as guided imagery in an extension of MCP to pain patients (Winger et al., 2020), or altering the language and concepts to be more familiar and useful to Latino cancer patients (Costas-Muñiz et al., 2020).

More general meaning-centered approaches also added to basic themes from Frankl, Yalom, and others to incorporate elements that would increase access or appeal of the material to the populations being served, such as the inclusion of gratitude for a psychoeducational trial among Chinese university students (Cheng et al., 2015).

Another cluster of papers used various forms of life review therapy, autobiographical, narrative, or reminiscence therapies (e.g., Korte et al., 2012). These approaches tend to emphasize existential themes of integrating past, present and future time perspectives and making meaning from experiences. A smaller cluster emphasized

spiritual aspects of meaning and meaning-making (e.g., Kang et al., 2021). After reading through these psychotherapies, a more complete set of components was compiled, and those components that were present in 2 or more successful interventions were advanced to the final list for sorting into focal points and themes

### **3.2 Recent Articles Using Psychological Experiments**

Another cluster Where psychotherapy represents complex, multifaceted, often highly-individualized, multi-touch and interactive approaches to effecting durable change, psychology experiments are generally brief, direct, single-touch, standardized manipulations generally intended to produce momentary changes. It is perhaps because they come from such different worlds that psychotherapy and experimental psychology are so rarely integrated. But those interested in helping others increase meaning ought to pay attention to experiments. Despite, or perhaps because of, the seeming simplicity of psychology experiments and concerns over how replicable results may be, such results seem to be headline grabbers. In isolation, a result from a social psychology experiment might only be a distracting dead-end. However, such experiments, like psychotherapy, are focused on change and as such attempt to directly implicate causal factors. Thus, there is an opportunity to identify themes that span quite different efforts at identifying mechanisms of change.

As with the compilation of articles about psychotherapy outcomes, articles describing experiments were read with the intent of identifying the components that were used to improve meaning in life. A total of 40 articles reporting significant changes in meaning in life following an experimental manipulation were found in my search. To be considered as a potential focal point or theme, more than one article must have reported a component as a significant impact on increasing meaning in life, whether that article is an experiment or a psychotherapeutic outcome study. Articles reporting multiple studies using the same or similar manipulations were only counted once.

There seemed to be four leading theoretical sources of experiments: death and terror management theory, various approaches to time perspectives, general positive psychological interventions, and a range of approaches to expressing or detecting coherence or sensemaking. Studies that appeared linked to death and terror management theory tended to focus on the effects of being made aware of the fact of death. For example, one project found that people who generally preferred lots of structure and predictability experienced a loss in meaning when exposed to reminders of mortality (Vess et al., 2009). A more cheerful variation on the theme of helping people assert coherence is a method of guiding participants to take meaningful photos (Steger et al., 2014), which has been replicated a couple of times (e.g., van Zyl et al., 2020). Time perspective approaches tended to ask people to reflect on past life events or the future. A fruitful set of studies following in this approach focused on engaging people in nostalgia (Sedikides et al., 2018). In fact, these nostalgia studies are probably experiments with the strongest support currently. Positive psychological interventions tended to instruct people to execute interventions constructed around popular concepts such as gratitude, mindfulness, or prosociality (e.g., gratitude, Czyżowska & Gurba, 2021).

The approaches that emphasized coherence tended to encourage people to



engage in experiencing or creating art (Hagtvedt & Vohs, 2021), or place them in familiar or routine circumstances or present them with stimuli that were easy to make sense of. My favorite example of the latter is a study in which participants were randomly assigned to eat an Oreo cookie however they want or to engage in the “consumption ritual” of twisting the two chocolate cookie wafers apart, licking the frosting out, and then dunking the remains in milk – the “twist-lick-dunk” ritual of cookiedom (Wang et al., 2021). Without spoiling the joy of reading this article, the authors reported that not only was perceived meaning increased through the cookie ritual, but participants felt less lonely, too!

Clearly there are some common themes between the manipulations deployed in such experiments and the emphases in meaning-focused psychotherapies. Below is a list of the core components of the experimental manipulations reported:

- Reflect on meaning in events
- Crafting life narrative
- Share life event
- Identify strengths
- Clarify core values
- Forgiveness
- Meaning can be found anywhere
- Journey metaphor for life events
- Reflect on one’s purpose
- Being forgotten
- Social exclusion
- Sense of belongingness
- Prosocial act
- Subtractive counterfactual thinking about what might have been
- Gratitude activities
- Guided experience of creative arts
- Exposure to coherent stimuli
- Awe
- Self-affirmation
- True self prime
- Extrinsic goal orientation (only seemed to help narcissists!)
- Nostalgia
- Awareness of mortality
- Consuming food in “ritualistic” fashion
- Routines
- Thinking about the past or the future
- Thinking about places where one is not
- Beliefs in a Just World
- Exposure to authoritarian rhetoric
- Taking meaningful photographs

Many of the items on this list have not yet been replicated, nor do they correspond with the components of meaning-centered psychotherapies. However, where there was convergence, it might be considered particularly strong evidence of the sorts of operations that could yield increased meaning. To begin with, several of the

manipulations listed above have been replicated in multiple papers:

- Belonging = good; Exclusion = bad
- Nostalgia & Time travel
- Prosocial actions
- Counterfactual thinking, a good partner with Gratitude
- Personally important experiences with Art
- Connection with one's "True Self"
- Taking meaningful photographs
- Gratitude

Further, if one considers that concepts such as rituals and routines, just world beliefs, and the simplistic conspiratorial assertions of authoritarians provide people with a coherent way of making sense of the world (no matter how cancerous the sense made), then restoring or providing coherence via a range of stimuli also has been conceptually replicated.

#### **4 Integrating Psychotherapy and Experimental Psychology Interventions on Meaning in Life**

Further No claims are made that this is an exhaustive analysis of all papers that could be construed as relevant to the question "what can help increase meaning in life?" A small number of metaanalyses and formal reviews exist, and given the explosion of research on meaning, undoubtedly more will be published. Instead, this review seeks to provide what might be missing from other analyses and reviews that focus on characterizing the effect size of interventions: What makes them work?

It is therefore the hope of the present review to distill a small number of focal points and themes from these rarely-integrated bodies of work. One potential benefit of such an effort is that very different epistemologies and theories are favored by psychotherapy and experimental psychology researchers. By looking across these fields, both common themes and surprises might be uncovered. By focusing tightly on meaning-centered psychotherapies and experiments that have meaning in life as a dependent variable, I believe we can hone in on what types of interventions are more specific to meaning itself rather than a broader slate of psychological variables. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy for depression may increase meaning in life as it decreases depression symptoms, but it is not specific to meaning, and may in fact be affecting meaning by influencing more general psychological, behavioral, and social factors. To push this thought to an absurd degree, being able to get a meal after days of starvation might increase meaning in life, but access to food would never be considered to be a "meaning intervention."

Two thematic organizational efforts were made. The first was to identify focal points that span multiple specific meaning interventions, and the second was to identify even more broad themes that might span multiple focal points. There are probably an infinite number of ways to categorize the components of meaning interventions identified in this review, but it is hoped that the organization scheme offered here helps lay some foundation for creating a more holistic and conceptually grounded approach to meaning interventions in the future.

#### 4.1 Eight Focal Points of Meaning Interventions

In my opinion, successful meaning interventions as reported in recent research articles and via metaanalyses by Vos and colleagues tend to emphasize eight focal points:

- Reflection & Meaning-Making
- Awareness in the Flow of Existence
- Time Integration and Orientation
- Life Story
- Purpose-Infused Living
- Authentic Self
- Coping & Self-Care
- Healthy Relating

*Reflection and Meaning-Making* is represented in the psychotherapy literature by components that guide people to explicitly discuss meaning, engage in reflective practices like mindfulness and writing, and explore a full range of possible sources of meaning in life. Being able to reflect on and make sense of recent events, expressing one's self through art, and engaging in a variety of time perspectives, such as nostalgic reverie, also seem to echo this focal point.

*Awareness in the Flow of Existence* spans a number of components that help people build skills and perspectives around present experience. Activities such as mindfulness and experiences like awe capture the idea that there is meaning potential in each moment and that meaning can be found anywhere, even in the small things. Being more aware of how our consciousness works, and how we can build an appreciation for the phenomenon of being alive also fit within this focal point.

*Time Integration and Orientation* reflects both the central existential concern of being able to integrate our past, presents, and futures, and also the investments we can make in our past and future experiences. Many psychotherapies seek to help people find sources of hope and meaning in their pasts, and experiments that lead people to engage in nostalgia, foster hope for the future, or travel in time through recollected pasts and imagined futures reflect this focal point.

*Life Story* is perhaps a clumsy label for the richness of approaches that help people build narratives for their lives, review and reminisce over their lives, and consider their legacies. Making sense of life, the world, and the roles we play within them are theoretically central to meaning in life (Martela & Steger, 2016), and the human affection for storytelling both seem to elevate the pivotal function of reflecting on the stories of our own lives.

*Purpose-Infused Living* helps shift the focus away from thinking, pondering, or musing about life's meaning and toward active modes of living that create or express meaning. Psychotherapies and experimental manipulations that help people more effectively determine and pursue meaningful goals, as well as practices that help people balance short-term gratification with long-term accomplishments reflect this mandate to live in a meaningful and purpose-driven manner. This focal point also captures the set of skills that enable people to move between general, abstract meaning and specific, concrete actions.

*Authentic Self* points toward the central role of living as who we truly are while simultaneously seeking growth and self-development. This focal point draws attention to processes that encourage self-acceptance, support finding a basic sense of personal worth, aid in clarification of one's core values and character strengths, and propel people to act authentically in their lives. Avoiding phoniness, resisting coercion or mindless peer pressure, and putting in the work to discern appropriate aspirations for oneself also are part of the authentic self focal point.

*Coping and Self-Care* help integrate the unavoidability of suffering and adversity into a meaningful life. In some sense, providing people with tools to cope and care for themselves is a central purpose of psychotherapy. Within the articles reviewed here, this function manifested as efforts to help people grapple with their existential limitations, develop skills of cognitive reframing and restructuring, and develop self-compassion.

Finally, *Healthy Relating* gathers together the many threads of relationships variables that have been explored in psychotherapy and experiments, including the therapeutic relationship itself. Beyond this, existential and meaning-focused psychotherapies help people to engage authentically with each other through social connections, and numerous experiments have demonstrated the importance of healthy relationships through manipulations that target belonging versus exclusion, forgiveness, gratitude, volunteering, and other prosocial activities.

#### **4.2 Five Themes for Meaning Making**

Finally The eight focal points ideally provide guideposts to generating and identifying activities and interventions we can engage in to increase meaning in our lives. One hope is that different focal points, or even different combinations of the eight focal points, can be marshaled for specific purposes. For example, someone struggling to recover from a stressful or traumatic event might find particular benefit from engaging in the sorts of Coping and Self-Care practices emphasized by meaning-focused interventions. Taking this thought one step further, if the nature of that trauma was interpersonal, then it might be even more helpful to blend a consideration of Coping and Self-Care with Life Story approaches that seek to find previous examples, present skills, and future hopes for Healthy Relating. Rather than poring through thousands of publications on meaning in life, perhaps the rough summaries provided here can give people a more accessible starting place, as well as some clear hope that multiple published reports exist to back up each focal point.

But if we take this categorization exercise one step further, we might identify the themes that capture how people make meaning itself. Because the present review spans clinical populations, medical patients, undergraduate students and more from around the world, it is tempting to seek something universal in the set of results. That is, we could look at this collection of causally-relevant studies as indicating that *when people do these things, they find meaning*.

I identified five themes that allude to the things people might do to find meaning. They jump around the specific psychotherapeutic and experimental results gathered here as well as the focal points I proposed above. As such, they feel more universal and elemental for human meaning making, and suggest that if we develop our proficiency, comfort, and flexibility in any or all of them, regardless of how we might

specifically do so, we might simultaneously expand our toolbox for constructing meaning.

The five themes that seemed to me to weave through all of this research are Conscious, Time, Doing, Self, and Others.

- *Consciousness* – Develop tools to notice, reflect on, and make meaning from our lived – and imagined – experiences
- *Time* – Utilize and integrate the full array of time perspectives...past-present-future
- *Doing* – Intentionally live your purpose and story in daily life, toward valued aims
- *Self* – Explore, understand, embrace, and care for your authentic self on its developmental path toward improvement and growth
- *Others* – Connect and engage with others in mutually healthy, appreciative relationships, and seek and give support and aid

One benefit of trying to summarize all of this meaning research into such a brief set of themes is that each theme can be viewed as a bridge to other research areas and other psychotherapy modalities. For example, we can generate hypotheses for the potential of existing psychotherapies to increase meaning in life, as well as why they might do so. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy might increase meaning in life because it teaches people skills for managing their Consciousness. Narrative Therapy might increase meaning in life because it helps people integrate past, present, and future Time. Behavior Activation Therapy might increase meaning in life because it helps people identify and engage in activities that get them out in the world, Doing. Person-Centered Psychotherapy might increase meaning in life because it helps people build authenticity and other mature perspectives on the Self. Interpersonal Process Therapy might help increase meaning in life because it helps people gain understanding and skills for healthy relationships with Others.

These themes also link to the most successful interventions tested so far, and reflect with fidelity the concerns of existential and meaning-focused approaches to enriching people's lives. Yet, these themes are not simply restatements of existential psychotherapy. Because of this, they can provide bridges to other fields and disciplines and also illuminate broad areas of concentration from which new interventions might be developed and tested.

## **5 Conclusion**

There were multiple aims behind this chapter. As stated, it felt important to develop a framework that could create connections among disparate approaches to improving meaning in life. However, underlying this intention was an even more basic one. When we ask the question, "how do we get more meaning in our lives?" I hope that this chapter helps encourage readers to answer "There are so many ways!" On top of the dozens of studies reviewed by other writers, I identified more than 70 additional published articles, each of which presented at least one datapoint showing that engaging in one of a variety of meaning-focused interventions led to a statistically significant benefit. This should be seen as a remarkable achievement for the field, and an exciting state of affairs for practitioners everywhere. We find ourselves at the point in the

development of our study of the human pursuit of meaning that it is now apt to use the phrase “hundreds of studies” cast light on how to find meaning in life. I hope that the focal points and themes offered in this chapter can lend some organization to this veritable sprawl of studies, and perhaps even at the risk over vastly oversimplifying the complexity of the task, give people a few memorable and intuitive paths to follow: Consciousness, Time, Doing, Self, & Others.

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