



Finding Meaning in Life

Create a compelling self-narrative based on the five pillars that influence the way we experience meaning.

Working countless hours trying to get his latest start-up up and running, Ted was at rock bottom, questioning the fundamentals of his existence. What was he doing with his life? Did it have any purpose? Was there anything he could look forward to? He felt increasingly isolated. Although his company was growing rapidly, he hadn't felt connected to his colleagues for quite some time.

Until now, Ted had been too busy with his work to wonder about the meaning of life. But now he felt lost. Since his children had left home, the hustle and bustle seemed pointless. Somehow, life made less and less sense to him; it even seemed tedious. It had been a long time since he had felt happy. His marriage had become superficial and lifeless. For too many years now, he and his wife behaved like two old acquaintances who were boarding together. Ted was in bad physical shape as well, having piled on weight over the past year.

As Ted took stock of his life, he realised that the very foundations of his existence were being shaken. He had been depressed before, but this went beyond. He wondered whether he was in the middle of an existential crisis – whatever that meant. He found himself thinking more and more about death, with the increasing realisation that he wasn't able to face his own mortality.

Ironically enough, never having been religious, Ted had started to envy religious people. At least their faith brought them some comfort. He felt he had nothing to help him with his despair. Everything had seemed so much simpler in the past. The same questions kept running through his head: If I die right now, what difference have I made to the world? Have I been chasing the wrong things all my life?

Death anxiety and the search for meaning

What is the meaning of life? This question is almost as old as time. The search for life's meaning is the unifying characteristic of our species and is perhaps the most important part of being human. It is thus unsurprising that throughout the history of humankind, the question of the meaning of life has attracted theologians, philosophers, psychologists, evolutionists and cosmologists alike.

Of course, Ted is far from being alone with his existential angst. Many of us are quite successful in pushing our feelings of unease into the background. Whenever possible, we prefer not to think of death, or at least to pay little conscious attention to its inevitable reality. The tragic quality of our lives is that we are the only species that has to live with the understanding and consciousness of our death.

Deep down, we desperately want our life to make

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sense. Of course, life can only be meaningful if we give it meaning, leaving it very much up to us to make a contribution worth remembering.

Defining meaning and purpose

Meaning can be redefined as *intent*, or *significance*. It refers to the extent to which we experience life as being directed and motivated by valued goals – in other words, that whatever we are doing matters. We can even see meaning as an experiential byproduct of a life lived in the way we think it should be lived. At the same time, we may also discover that meaning has deeper layers that need to be unearthed if we want to find out what's meaningful to us.

In popular use, meaning and purpose tend to be used interchangeably – and often rightly so, when we refer to the worth or value of something. For example, the meaning or purpose of life could refer to the worth or significance of life: my purpose would be to create something meaningful. This interchangeability is not a given, however. For instance, the comment, “there is no meaning in my life” is not the same as “there is no purpose in my life.” That's because meaning is the symbolic value of something, while purpose is a goal.

Thus, *to mean something is to have value and significance*. To have a purpose, however, means *to bring value to something, to make something significant*. In other words, purpose can guide life decisions, influence behaviour, shape goals, offer a sense of direction, *as well as create meaning*. It has a future connotation. In contrast, meaning is the end of purpose. It refers to the past, the present, and the future. Of course, without a sense of purpose, it is hard to find meaning. Also, at times, whatever our purpose is, it may have no meaning at all. We may be engaged in pointless, hollow activities.

The five pillars of meaning

There are five pillars that influence the way we experience meaning: belonging, purpose, competence, control and transcendence.

Belonging: As we are hardwired for connection, having the sense that our presence and/or absence means something to other people.

Purpose: A future-oriented construct in the form of a goal, target or objective to be reached.

Competence: A feeling that we are moving forward, progressing, honing our skills and can feel proud of what we're able to do.

Control: A sense that our life, our decisions and our

actions are very much determined by ourselves.

Transcendence: A feeling of unity and communion with something much bigger than ourselves.

To help my clients and students assess how effectively they deal with these five dimensions, I devised the Meaning in Life Questionnaire.

Meaning in Life Questionnaire

p ____ I am leading a very purposeful life.

c ____ My life is full of interesting learning experiences.

b ____ My interactions with other people give me a lot of pleasure.

co ____ It is up to me to make something of my life.

p ____ I look forward to the new, exciting challenges that each day come my way.

c ____ I very much enjoy what I am doing.

co ____ I feel free to make whatever life choices.

b ____ I have a very fulfilling social network.

t ____ When I die, I believe that I will have led a very worthwhile life.

c ____ I can completely lose myself in whatever I do.

b ____ I am very close to my family and friends.

co ____ I feel very much in control of my life.

p ____ I have always been very effective in pursuing my life goals.

t ____ I get a lot of pleasure out of helping others.

t ____ I am actively involved in issues that are larger than me.

7 – strongly agree
6 – agree
5 – slightly agree
4 – neither agree or disagree
3 – slightly disagree
2 – disagree
1 – strongly disagree

Scoring

Add up your responses. The range of scores is from 15 (lowest possible) to 105 (highest possible). A high score suggests that you have many psychological resources and strengths. (Key: b=belonging; p=purpose; c=competence; co=control; t=transcendence)

Telling our story

To create a meaningful life, these five pillars need to be woven into a compelling personal narrative. This is an exercise I often introduce in the **executive seminar** I've been running at INSEAD for decades. It facilitates telling the story that explains our role in our life's journey.

The stories we tell, and the way we tell them, reveal who we are and become an essential part of ourselves. After all, stories give us a sense of direction and a purpose. Our challenge is to create a life that contains a story worth telling.

We should also remember that the story we tell doesn't come from nowhere. As storytellers, we create our own personal myths that contain heroes and villains, people who have helped us or held us back. We pick the major events that determine the plot. We select the challenges that we have overcome and highlight the suffering we have endured.

When we tell our story we are likely to focus on the most extraordinary (good and bad) events in our life. These are the experiences we need to make sense of, because they tell us what's really

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significant. Putting the disparate pieces of our lives into a coherent narrative allows us to understand our life as a whole.

The power of storytelling explains why journal writing and intimate communication with others can have such powerful organising effects on our mind and a positive impact on our physical well-being. Keeping a journal allows us to work through overwhelming emotions and observe our thought patterns, rather than simply reacting to them.

Recording the small details of our daily life can help us to feel more grounded, more connected. The act of writing helps us to prioritise our fears and concerns. Also, it allows us to track patterns and growth over time.

When all is said and done, we all live within networks of stories. Stories create community. Through our stories, we are able to enter our inner world. As such, they help us to discover memories that have been waiting to be told. In that respect, stories are invaluable in bringing up the questions that define the meaning that we give to our lives. And in order to live, we will need these stories.

*This article contains edited excerpts from **Quo Vadis? The Existential Challenges of Leaders** by Manfred Kets de Vries.*

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