

Chapter 8 | Lesson on Meaning: What is the Meaning of Life?

What is the meaning of life,
when you are confined to a room or a bed
and struggling with every breath?

What is the point of living,
when so many people are dying
and you may not see another sunrise?

Is life nothing more than just breathing?
More than mere feeding and elimination?
More than being kept alive by machines?

These questions kept me awake
even when my body needed sleep.
The answers came to me in a lucid dream.

Several old friends smiled at me,
reminding me of the good time together,
They came from different period of time.

I recalled the exciting moments,
of my first degree, first love, first job,
and what I had done for others.

I remembered the happy day,
when I first heard God's call,
and many answered prayers.

Most of the meaningful moments,
were hidden deep in my memory,
and filled my heart with tears and joy.

The meaning of life can be found,
in those precious moments and,
the knowledge that I am not alone.

Meaning Management Theory and Death Acceptance



It is okay to be anxious about death, but it is better to manage it productively. Every day, we learn about people dying from this mysterious killer—COVID-19. Nobody knows for sure how to prevent it, let alone how to cure it. Each time you step outside your home, you may get infected. The best we can do is through social distancing and not touching anything that has been touched by other people.

It is perfectly understandable why people are scared, and death anxiety has increased dramatically since January 2020. But paradoxically, the prospect of death may also awaken your sleeping soul and make you alive to the true value of life. You may begin to seriously consider such questions like:

"What should I do with the time I still have, so that I will not be regretful when I die?"

"What ideal do I want to achieve with my death, if I were granted the magical powers to accomplish one death wish?"

Consider the above questions as an exercise to discover your meaning and value in life. Here are some passages about how to accept your mortality by using your strengths to live each day fully:

"If we have lived a meaningful life and achieved ego-integrity (Erikson, 1982), we are able to face death without fear. However, when we have too many regrets and a profound sense of failure and despair, then death is feared, because of the fear that we have never really lived when death beckons us (Tomer & Eliason, 2006a, Wong, 2000).

By accepting our mortality, we declare our intention to invest our energy and time in living the good life rather than defending ourselves against the inevitable death. Ideally, death acceptance should set us free from anxiety and energize us to live with vitality and purpose. By the same token, when we have lived a wonderful life and completed our life's mission, we would be prepared to face death. Ultimately, death acceptance is one of the cornerstones for the good life.

However, we can never be completely free from death anxiety. As we grow older, we brace ourselves for the bad news with every annual physical checkup. With aging parents, we are always prepared for their death and burial. Somehow, the specter of death is always hovering over us, reminding us of our mortality. No matter how we rationalize or think about death, our instinctive reaction is rarely one of unalloyed joy.

The relationships between death acceptance and death fear are complex and dynamic. They may co-exist under some circumstances like a raining cloud in an otherwise blue and sunny sky. That is why death acceptance and death anxiety are not simply opposites (Ray & Najman; 1974; Tomer & Eliason, 2006b; Wong et al, 1994).

In sum, we are all confronted with two fundamental psychological tasks: to protect ourselves against the terrors of loss and death (e.g., managing death anxiety) and to pursue the good life of living meaningfully and abundantly (e.g., managing death acceptance). These twin

tasks of living well and dying well are interconnected in important ways because of the intimate relationships between the meanings of life and the meanings of death.

This chapter makes the case that the most promising way to achieve these two major psychological tasks is through managing the meanings of life and death. The positive and proactive tendency to create a happy and meaningful life serves a growth-oriented function. The positive individuals would be willing to confront the crisis and create opportunities for personal development. Their tendency is to take on the difficult tasks and risk even death in order to achieve some significant life goals, such as competencies, self-efficacy, creativity or a higher purpose.

When individuals are primarily propelled by an irresistible urge towards self-actualization and fulfillment, then less energy is invested in defensive mechanisms, even though death anxiety may still be present. Therefore, meaning-management theory predicts that if one wants to live a vital and meaningful life, it is better to focus on the positive tendency of personal growth rather than on defensive mechanisms against death fear. MMT also predicts that the best way to reduce death anxiety is to facilitate death acceptance and positive tendencies."

The above passage is cited from Wong, P. T. P. (2007). Meaning management theory and death acceptance. In A. Tomer, E. Grafton, & P. T. P. Wong (Eds.), *Existential and spiritual issues in death attitudes* (pp. 65-87). New York, NY: Erlbaum.

What are the Stages of Grieving?

The experience of loss or death is an inevitable aspect of life. Any loss is painful—whether it is the loss of a family pet or the death of a loved one. Since nothing in life is permanent, every relationship and every life will end in death, even if everything is perfect.

The stronger the attachment or bond, the greater the pain when it ends. What is the most helpful way to grieve the loss?

My 4-stage model focuses on the transformation process through meaning. Hope that you can gain some understanding of productive grieving:

“(1) **Mourning the loss:** This involves primarily the affective process, which begins with numbness and shock, moving through the roller-coaster ride of intense emotions, and finally settling into a subdued and serene sense of sadness. This process is not linear; however, the cycles may become less frequent and less intense. Recalling and reliving the positive moments may mitigate against the feelings of loss. Often, grieving involves many emotions, such as guilt, anger, shame, regrets, hostility, and sadness. Clarifying emotions is part of the process. Sorting out and reconciling conflicting feelings contribute to recovery.

(2) **Accepting the loss:** This is the most basic and most complex task. To accept the finality of the loss, the process occurs not just at the cognitive level, but also at the social, behavioral, existential, spiritual, and emotional levels.

Cognitive acceptance involves more than an intellectual understanding that death is final; it also requires some level of cognitive resolution to reduce instances of intrusive thoughts and ruminations.

Spiritual acceptance may involve establishing a spiritual connection with the deceased and experiencing an inner vision of a spiritual union.

Emotional acceptance may be most difficult to achieve when the initial emotional attachment is very strong, even when there is a replacement for the attachment. One can truly let go, only when one has achieved acceptance at the emotional level.

(3) **Adjusting to the loss:** This involves the process of making a series of mental and behavioral changes to adapt to the new dynamics within the family and in the larger social network. It also involves working through personal and interpersonal issues, such as forgiveness of self and others, resolving interpersonal conflicts, and re-establishing some relationships.

(4) **Transforming the loss:** This process is fundamental to recovery. It moves from struggling with the loss to incorporating it into the new reality and future plans, such as redefining one's self-identity and life goals. This process will involve reinvesting one's psychological energy, making new friends, developing new plans, and engaging in productive activities.

Basically, it involves the discovery of new meanings and the reconstruction of existing meaning structures. It requires the re-authoring of one's life story. In short, it provides not only a new perspective for the loss but also for narratives of one's past and future. I consider this transformation necessary for grief resolution, restoration, and personal growth."

The above passage is cited from Wong, P. T. P. (2008). Transformation of grief through meaning: Meaning-centered counseling for bereavement. In A. Tomer, G. T. Eliason, & P. T. P. Wong (Eds.), *Existential and spiritual issues in death attitudes* (pp. 375-396). New York, NY: Erlbaum.

The Other Side of Sadness

The Other Side of Sadness



What the New Science
of Bereavement Tells Us
About Life After Loss

GEORGE A. BONANNO

In the last few days, I have been grieving the death of my friend and first Ph.D. student George Dimistroff (Ashburnham Funeral Home, 2020). It must have been a difficult way to die alone in the intensive care unit without having a chance to say a final goodbye to his dear wife Sheila and his children.

Life would be very difficult in the days ahead for his family without George. A vital part of their lives was suddenly ripped apart from them by a strange and evil disease.

But all that we truly want in life is on the other side of suffering, I have always maintained that concept all throughout my research career.

I am glad that Dr. Bonano's (2010) research supports my thesis. His research also concludes that grieving can actually lead to a new sense of meaning in life, but he did not articulate the transformative process of grief.

The following passages are cited from my paper *Transformation of grief through Meaning: Meaning-Centered Counseling for Bereavement* (2008):

"Meaning management is essential to this transformative process. In order to move forward, we have to somehow reconstruct our meaning-systems in order to adapt to different set of realities following bereavement. This evolution of meaning in response to loss continues so that we can maintain some sense of coherence in the midst of change and loss. We can experience positive changes, when the dead are weaved into the fabric of life, and the past is integrated with the future as the basis for self-identity.

Meaning-Centered Counseling (MCC) emphasizes the transcendental function of grief, which awakens one's spiritual and existential yearnings, and spurs one to rise above the painful experiences of mourning. Recovery always involves the reconstructing of painful and sorrowful experiences through the transformation of assigned meanings.

One can never go back to the past. Therefore, recovery does not mean a return to the normal life before the bereavement. True recovery actually means that the bereaved person has found new meaning and purpose, which enables the person to reach a higher level of maturity.

In C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961), he documents the transformation from overwhelming grief and anger at God to a new understanding of God and life. Such transformation can happen to anyone who is open to the spiritual reality beyond the physical realm.

There is no medicine, no magic, and no logic to expel the affliction of bereavement. The only hope is to transform it into a poem, a song, or a story that makes us feel like human beings again. That tender feeling of love and liberty makes life worth living in the wasteland of death.

Even when everything is taken away from us, and when we are dying alone, we can hear the angels singing, and feel the peace from heaven. I take great comfort in the promise of Jesus: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4, The Bible, NIV).

Healing is a gift, because it can neither be purchased nor manufactured, no matter how resourceful we are. It remains shrouded in mystery, maybe because its origin is spiritual and transcendental. However, we do know that we are likely to receive this gift, when we stretch our hands heavenward in our brokenness. The blessings of grieving constitute part of positive existential psychology or mature positive psychology (Wong, 2001a), which includes such phenomena as meaning-based post-traumatic growth (Wong, 2003b) and tragic optimism (Wong, 2001b). The rigor of positive psychology research coupled with the profound concepts of existential psychotherapy can break new grounds in achieving a more hopeful understanding of grieving and healing.

I want to conclude by quoting from Ringma (2000) who eloquently expanded on the idea of the gift of healing:

“Nouwen suggests that ‘finding new life through suffering and death: that is the good news.’ Christ’s death mirrors precisely that message. Suffering may seem senseless, but it need not have the last word. New hope can spring up from the ruins of previous expectations and plans. New life can come from the greatest disappointments. But this can only come if we embrace the pain of our dashed hope and grieve our losses to the point of relinquishment. It is at that place, with nothing in our hands, that good gifts will come our way.” (p. 128)

In the final analysis, grieving is the pain of letting go of love. Grieving is also the pain of searching for what has been lost. In the process, we discover something far more precious than we ever knew. Indeed, blessed are the broken hearted, for they will find healing and transformation. This chapter proposes that the good grief can set us free and make us grow."

Personal Meaning Profile

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This questionnaire measures people’s perception of personal meaning in their lives. Generally, a meaningful life involves a sense of purpose and personal worthiness. However, people often differ in what endows their lives with meaning.

The following statements describe potential sources of personal meaning. Please read each statement carefully and indicate to what extent it characterizes a source of meaning in your own life. You may respond by circling the appropriate number according to the following scale:

Or as in Wong & Fry, *The Human Quest for Meaning Edition 1*:

This questionnaire measures people's perception of personal meaning in their lives. Generally, a meaningful life involves a sense of purpose and personal significance. However, people often differ in what they value most, and they have different ideas as to what would make life worth living.

The following statements describe potential sources of meaningful life. Please read each statement carefully and indicate to what extent each item characterizes your own life. You may respond by circling the appropriate number according to the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all			Moderately			A great deal

For example, if going to parties does not contribute to your sense of personal meaning, you may circle 1 or 2. If taking part in volunteer work contributes quite a bit to the meaning in your life, you may circle 5 or 6.

It is important that you answer honestly on the basis of your own experience and beliefs.

- | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I have a good family life | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. I believe I can make a difference in the world | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. I am at peace with God | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. I have learned that setbacks and disappointments are an inevitable part of life | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. I believe that life has an ultimate purpose and meaning | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. I engage in creative work | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. I am successful in achieving my aspirations | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. I pursue worthwhile objectives | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. I strive to achieve my life goals | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10. I care about other people | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 11. I have someone to share intimate feelings with | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 12. I believe in the value of my pursuits | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 13. I seek to actualize my potentials | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 14. I have found that there is rough justice in this world | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 15. I strive to make this world a better place | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 16. I am at peace with myself | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 17. I have confidants to give me emotional support | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 18. I relate well to others | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 19. I have a sense of mission or calling | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 20. I seek to do God's will | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 21. I like challenge | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 22. I believe that human life is governed by moral laws | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 23. It is important to dedicate my life to a cause | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

24. I take initiative	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
25. I am able to make full use of my abilities	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
26. I strive to do my best in whatever I am doing	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
27. I have a number of good friends	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
28. I am trusted by others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
29. I am committed to my work	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
30. I have a purpose and direction in life	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
31. I seek higher values—values that transcend self-interests	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
32. I am highly regarded by others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
33. I seek to glorify God	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
34. I am enthusiastic about what I do	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
35. Life has treated me fairly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
36. I accept my limitations	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
37. I am at peace with my past	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
38. I have a mutually satisfying loving relationship	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
39. I have a sense of coherence and continuity in my life	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
40. I do not give up when I encounter setbacks or obstacles	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
41. I am altruistic and helpful	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
42. I am liked by others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
43. I have found someone I love deeply	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
44. I strive toward personal growth	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
45. I bring happiness to others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
46. I accept what cannot be changed	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
47. I am persistent and resourceful in attaining my goals	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
48. I value my work	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
49. I make a significant contribution to society	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
50. I contribute to the well-being of others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
51. I believe in afterlife	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
52. I believe that one can have a personal relationship with God	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
53. I attempt to leave behind a good and lasting legacy	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
54. I believe that there is order and purpose in the universe	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
55. I am treated fairly by others	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
56. I have received my fair share of opportunities and rewards	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
57. I have learned to live with suffering and make the best of it	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

For the scoring key, please refer to the "Measures and Scales Scoring Keys" section.

The New Search for Meaning Scale (SMS) 2019

Please reflect for a few minutes and respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can by circling the appropriate answer according to the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Moderately Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

1. I am trying to understand why I have problems with close relationships.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. I am seeking confirmation for my mission or purpose in life.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. I am searching for reasons for living in order to survive my ordeal.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. I am struggling to understand why bad things happen to good people.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. I want to find out why I am not satisfied with my life.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. Search for the meaning of life is a total waste of time.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. I am seeking to grasp the meaning of suffering and death.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8. I want to find out what really matters in every stage of my life.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
9. I am always searching for ways to make a valuable contribution to the world.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
10. There is no point in striving, because life is so hard and so short.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
11. I am seeking to find my out what life demands of me.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
12. I am trying to figure out my rightful place in the world.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

For the scoring key, please refer to the "Measures and Scales Scoring Keys" section.