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Author(s): Szende Elekes

Title: THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCING MEANINGFULNESS RELATED TO RELIGIOUS FAITH IN PHYSICAL WELL-BEING
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Issue: 1/2011

Citation style: Szende Elekes. "THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCING MEANINGFULNESS RELATED TO RELIGIOUS FAITH IN PHYSICAL WELL-BEING". Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai - Theologia Catholica Latina 1:81-94.
https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=114482

THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCING MEANINGFULNESS RELATED TO RELIGIOUS FAITH IN PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

SZENDE ELEKES*

Abstract. The role of psychosocial factors in the maintenance of physical health and evolvement of chronic diseases is a well known phenomenon in the field of health psychology. Some psychosocial factors might play a role in the emergence of diseases, for example stress, negative life events, the experience of loss. Other factors help people preserve their health, like social support or religious faith. Among the least mentioned, we would like to enroll meaningfulness, a concept introduced by the psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor Frankl, that – according to the author – refers to man's deepest motivation. According to his theory named logotherapy, man is instinctly striving to find and fulfill meaning and purpose in life, and the frustration of this "will to meaning" leads to different mental and physical disorders. Frankl speaks about "psychosomatic health" in spite of psychosomatic disease and states that meaningfulness contains something that he called "survival value". Starting with these concepts, in the present study we attempt to make a review of the literature concerned with the relationship of experienced meaningfulness/ meaninglessness and physical health, with both its objective and subjective aspects. We would like to take into consideration religious faith as well, more specifically its inner aspect, one's personal relationship with the Divine, and the way it relates to the experience of meaningfulness and physical well-being.

Keywords: well-being, meaningfulness, logotherapy, religious faith.

1. Introduction

In this study we aim to be concerned with the construct of meaningfulness, the experience that life has a meaning, a purpose to be fulfilled, as it appears in the logotherapy of Viktor Frankl[1], who made a substantial contribution toward the development of the theoretical foundation for meaning in life. We relate meaningfulness/meaninglessness (and its counterpart) to the domain of health psychology, and, to begin with, we enroll meaningfulness in the list of other psychosocial factors that can influence health states. In the subsequent chapter we have a look at how meaningfulness appears in Viktor Frankl's approach. Then we attempt to make an approximate overview of the literature concerned with the

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1 M.D., Ph.D. Viktor Emil Frankl (March 26, 1905, Vienna – Sept. 2, 1997, Vienna).

role of meaning in life in well-being, with both its psychological and physical aspects. In the end, we present a few meaning-oriented interventions implemented by now, which resulted in significant improvements of health.

2. The concerns of health psychology

In the last three decades we have witnessed the emergence of numerous new interdisciplinary sciences on the boundary of classical medicine and psychology, which propose to study the meeting points of these two domains. Such disciplines are for example medical psychology, psychosomatics, behavioral medicine, epidemiology, health promotion. The results of these isolated efforts are accumulated and integrated by *health psychology*, the discipline that tries to understand how health and illness of people are influenced by psychological factors and the way they people react to disease[2]. Among the antecedents which led to the appearance of health psychology we may mention the failure of the biomedical model in proper interpretation of health and illness, the shift of emphasis from contagious diseases to chronic diseases, increased concern with quality of life, and most of all the recognition that psychological issues play a central role in almost every health condition and that addressing these issues will increase well-being and the quality of life.[3]

2.1. The bio-psycho-social model of well-being

All these resulted in a paradigm change in the health system: the monopoly of the biomedical model of health was gradually taken over by the less reductionist *bio-psycho-social model,* which offers a more comprehensive frame for interpreting well-being. The World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health is congruent with this approach, as it defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."[4] This definition suggests that health doesn't mean an adequate physiological state, rather it results from the optimal functioning of both biological, psychological and social aspects of one's life. In this approach it is inappropriate to speak about 'psychosomatic disease' because psychological, social, cultural and economical factors play a role in the evolvement and development of every disease.[5]

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2 VARGHA J.-L., SZABÓ K.-G., *Egészségpszichológia*, Kolozsvár, 2009, 4.

3 P. KENNEDY, S. LLEWELYN, "Introduction and Overview", in *The essentials of clinical helath psychology*, New York, 2006, 1.

4 *WHO definition of Health* <http://who.int/about/definition/en/print.html> [13.12.2010].

5 VARGHA, SZABÓ, 5.

One of the basic principles of health psychology committed to the bio-psycho-social approach is that psychosocial factors contribute measurably to maintenance of health, or conversely, to getting ill prematurely. In the next paragraph we make a short review of a few psychosocial factors which, according to many studies, exercise influence on promoting health or generating disease.

2.2. A few psychosocial factors that play role in health

The impact of *stress* upon health is well-known: the persisting state of distress is the source of many diseases: high blood-pressure, coronary sclerosis, heart attack, contagious diseases, etc.[6] Chronic states of distress (ex. divorce, unemployment, war) are exerting their effect through directly attenuating the organism's immune defense system. Strongly related to this we mention here the effect of *burnout* which, according to longitudinal studies, entails premature mortality.[7] Similarly, research has proven the immune suppressive impact of *negative life events* as well, like losing a beloved person. Many studies indicated the experience of *mourning* as generating factor in cancer and tuberculosis.[8] In the case of mourners, the activity of natural killer cells of the immune system, which have a role in destroying cancer cells, is significantly dropped.

Several studies have been concerned with psychosocial factors involved in the evolvement of cancer diseases as well as those playing role in survival. According to the results, the experience of loss – the event of losing an important relationship – can be found in the lifespan of cancerous patients almost in every case, which in turn leads to a feeling of "inner vacuum" and the conviction that "life has no more good to offer".[9] At the same time it was revealed that patients with a strong will and motivation to live, those able to express negative feelings, and those who are less conformists, can expect better outcomes of the disease.[10]

Finally, we would mention one psychosocial factor that, unlike the aforementioned, appears to be a resource in the maintenance of both physical and mental well-being. The health promoting impact of social support has been

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6 EGRI L., "Spiritualitás, vallásosság és testi egészség", in TŐZSÉR *E.* (ed.), *Pszichológusok és teológusok. Az istenhit mint erőforrás*, Budapest, 2006, 160.

7 S. TOPPINEN-TANNER, K. AHOLA, A. KOSKINEN, A. VAANENEN, "Burnout predicts hospitalization for mental and cardiovascular disorder: 10-year prospective results from industrial sector", in *Stress and Health,* 25 (2009), 294–295.

8 VARGHA, SZABÓ, 88.

9 SZABÓ K.-G., "A pszichoszociális tényezők szerepe a rákos megbetegedésekben", in *Erdélyi Pszichológiai Szemle*, II/1, 2001, 73.

10 SZABÓ, 82.

revealed by numerous studies. By social support we mean that feeling of comfort, care and appreciation that is received by the person from other significant people or groups. Among the functions of social support manifested in the form of either emotional support or concrete help we may mention satisfying the need for relatedness, assuring the feeling of belonging somewhere, strengthening self-esteem.[11] We emphasize that when speaking about social support, we are not concerned with the objective presence of a social network in the life of a person (ex. family, friends), rather the subjective experience of the support, because only this way it can exert its defensive effect against the negative consequences of acute stress.

3. Meaningfulness in the approach of Frankl's logotherapy

3.1. Basic concepts

Above we made a short overview of a few relevant psychosocial factors purportedly influencing well-being. In this paper we suggest another psychological factor that very likely plays a role in the maintenance of health and emergence of diseases, and that would be meaningfulness. Hereinafter we propose to come round this concept and its linkage to general well-being.

The need for meaning in life, as man's deepest desire is first getting contours in the work of Viktor E. Frankl, a neurologist and psychiatrist, the founder of the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy, called *logotherapy and existential analysis*. Not irrelevant to mention, he was also a Holocaust survivor, and his best-selling book, *Man's search for meaning* (originally published in 1946 as *Trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager*) chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp prisoner and puts into practice his theory of finding a meaning in all sorts of existence, even the most cruel ones. His method of psychotherapy, the logotherapy is an application of the principles of existential philosophy to clinical practice.

According to Frankl's theory, humans are originally built in such a way as to find meaning in life and to fulfill it, a desire described by him as the "will to meaning". The meaning in Frankl's conception is pre-existent, and it is not meaning in life in general, "rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment", which "differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour".[12] This meaning can be fulfilled in three different ways: at first through what we contribute to life, what we create (*creative values*), secondly

[11] VARGHA, SZABÓ, 50.

[12] V. FRANKL, *Man's search for Meaning, An introduction to logotherapy,* Boston, 1992, 114.

through the love and joy we experience, when we are passive "contemplators" in life (*experiential values*). But these two forms of values are not the only sources of meaning. We might be facing a fate which cannot be changed, but there is still meaning in our lives through the attitude we take towards the unavoidable suffering.[13] According to Frankl, these attitudinal values compose the most "human" way to fulfill meaning in life.

Besides these three sources of meaning, other core concepts of the theory are *supra-meaning* and *self-transcendence*. *Supra-meaning* in his conception is the idea that there is, in fact, ultimate meaning in life, meaning that is not dependent on us or on others: it is a reference to God, something which cannot be proven, it only appeals for one's faith.[14] *Self-transcendence* means that "the more one forgets oneself – by giving oneself to a cause to serve or to another person to love – the more humane one is and the more one actualizes oneself".[15] Self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.

According to the author, the feelings of joy and happiness should not be a purpose of human strife, rather an epiphenomenon, a result of fulfilling a meaning. As he says in his work, Die Wille zum Sinn: "happiness cannot be pursued. It must ensue." The more people are concerned with pursuing happiness, the more probably they will miss experiencing it.[16] To this end, Frankl suggests the technique of *dereflection*, which helps people to shift their focus of attention from themselves to the task they are involved in.[17]

Frankl states that today man's greatest problem is not rooted in frustration as Freud suggested it, or inferiority complexes as Adler thought, rather it takes the form of meaninglessness, which leads to an "existential vacuum".[18] This existential vacuum is used as a metaphor: if meaning is what we desire, then meaninglessness is a hole, an emptiness, in people's lives. Whenever there is a vacuum, things rush in to fill it. He suggests that a new types of neurosis, termed '*noogenic neurosis',* can be observed which arises

[13] V. FRANKL, *The doctor and the soul. From psychotherapy to logotherapy*, London, 2004, 12, 58–59, 109–166; FRANKL, *Man's search for Meaning*, 116.

[14] V. FRANKL, *The unconscious God*, New York, 1985, 13, 141–142.

[15] H. LI, "College stress and Psychological well-being: Self-transcendence meaning of life as a moderator", in *College Student Journal*, 42/2, 2008 Part B, 533.

[16] FRANKL, *The doctor and the soul*, 51–52.

[17] FRANKL, *The doctor and the soul*, 232–237.

[18] FRANKL, *The doctor and the soul,* 11.

largely as a response to the complete emptiness of purpose in life.[19] The existential vacuum, the frustration of the will to meaning, the existential hindrance may lead to different forms of psychopathology like depression, substance addiction, aggression, burnout, premature mortality, etc. There is empirical evidence to support this assumption. For example, in the course of a sociological survey, young people who attempted to commit suicide were interviewed about the motives of their action, and in 85% they indicated meaninglessness as a main cause.[20]

3.2. The "survival value" of finding a meaning

Frankl states that the need for meaningfulness contains something he calls *survival value*. To illustrate this, he brings the metaphor of the alpinist who, by getting into the thick fog and losing sight of his aim, is endangered by final exhaustion. Once the fog slips away and the alpine-hut becomes discernible in the distance, he regains power and vitality to continue his way.[21] Frankl gives examples to this phenomenon from his own life experience as well: only those prisoners of Nazi concentration camps were able to survive in the end, who were open to the future, to a task that was waiting for them, to a meaning they wanted to fill in.[22] In his autobiographical work, he recalls one of his fellow-prisoners: the man dreamt that on X day of the next month the camp would be liberated, and this hope kept him in countenance in the next weeks. Since that day arrived and nothing of what he had expected happened, suddenly he became ill and died.[23]

From our point of view this "survival value" of meaningfulness might have relevancy in health psychology, making meaningfulness a psychosocial factor which has significant impact upon mental and physical health states.

Frankl himself was concerned with the problem of psychosomatics. However, he suggests that instead of psychosomatic disease, we should be speaking of psychosomatic health. He adds that from this point of view the psychosomatic medicine should shift its focus from indispensable disease treatment to the alternative health promotion.[24]

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[19] J. CRUMBAUGH, L. MAHOLICK, "An experimental study in existentialism: the psychometric approach to Frankl's concept of noogenic neurosis", in *Journal of Clinical Psychology,* 20, 1964, 200.

[20] V. FRANKL*, Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, Budapest, 2005, 154.

[21] FRANKL, *The doctor and the soul*, 119.

[22] FRANKL*, Man's search for Meaning*, 84.

[23] FRANKL, *Man's search for Meaning*, 82–84.

[24] FRANKL, *Az ember az értelemre irányuló kérdéssel szemben*, 211.

4. Meaningfulness as a construct

Before we enter into the review of literature concerned with the relation of meaning in life and well-being, we would like to investigate whether in some researchers' point of view meaningfulness is a one-dimensional construct or rather has different aspects. As we mentioned before, Frankl distinguished between the *concrete meaning* of the present moment and the so-called *supra-meaning*, which in his consideration is transcendent and much more abstract than the former. [25]

Research concerning meaning in life, has focused almost exclusively on the fact whether people find or not their life meaningful. Although it is often studied as a one-dimensional construct, several studies suggest that it may have multiple dimensions.[26]

Yalom, for example, makes the distinction between *cosmic meaning* which is transcendent and superior to the person, and *terrestrial meaning* (or self-focused meaning) which is personal and entirely secular.[27] Mascaro and Rosen also distinguished between several forms of meanings. Besides *personal meaning* (perception of purpose and coherence in one's life) and *implicit meaning* (attitudes that people typically report as contributing to a meaningful life), the authors introduce the concept of *spiritual meaning*, which is defined as "*the extent to which an individual believes that life, or some force of which life is a function, has a purpose, will or way in which individuals participate*".[28]

Steger and Frazier also speak about two dimensions of meaningfulness: the *presence of meaning* refers to the presence or absence of meaningfulness, and the less studied *search for meaning* dimension (as it appears in Frankl's writings), which refers to people's desire to constantly improve the meaningfulness of their lives. This latter was found fairly independent from the experience of presence of meaning.[29] According to studies, presence of

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[25] FRANKL, *Man's search for Meaning*, 171; FRANKL, *The unconscious God*, 141.

[26] T. MARTOS, B. KONKOLY TEGHE, M. STEGER, "It's not only what you hold, it's how you hold it: Dimensions of religiosity and meaning in life", in *Personality and Individual Diffenrences,* 49 (2010), 863–868.

[27] LI, 533.

[28] N. MASCARO, D.H. ROSEN, "Assessment of existential meaning and its longitudinal relations to depressive symptoms", in *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 27/6 (2008), 579.

[29] M. STEGER, P. FRAZIER, S. OISHI, M. KALER, "The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the Presence and Search for Meaning in life", in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53/1 (2006), 80–93.

meaning is generally higher in independent cultures, while interdependent cultures, like Japan are characterized more by search for meaning.[30]

According to some authors, these distinction between several forms of meaning may affect their association with other mental health constructs, but so far the empirical investigation of these implications is missing.[31]

5. The relation between religiosity and meaning in life

We propose to make a bypass to touch on the relation of meaningfulness and religious faith. In Frankl's theory the Transcendence plays an important role. He himself was a believer and in the beginning he even used the terms Transcendent and God interchangeably – he received a lot of criticism for this. However, he states that logotherapy is not only for believers but for every human being.

The majority of studies concerning this relationship agree that individuals often consider religious and spiritual beliefs and experiences as important sources for meaning in life through positive beliefs, social support, rituals, symbols etc.[32] Support for this notion can be found in positive associations between meaning in life and various measures and indices of religiosity.[33] As Peterson and Roy comment, "*one function of religion is to provide a source of meaning and purpose for people*".[34] It seems that religion provides a frame and structure which makes easier to understand and interpret life at difficult times.

However, religion is not the only source of meaning, and one does not have to be religious in order to discover meaning in life. It is important to emphasize that meaning in life and religion are not identical concepts. There are religious people who don't find their life as meaningful and nonreligious people

[30] M. STEGER, Y. KAWABATA, S. SHIMAI, K. OTAKE, "The meaningful life in Japan and the United States: Levels and correlates of meaning in life", in *Journal of Research in Personality,* 42 (2008), 660–678.

[31] MARTOS, KONKOLY TEGHE, STEGER, 863.

[32] S.K. FLETCHER, "Religion and life meaning: Differentiating between religious beliefs and religious community in constructing life meaning", in *Journal of Aging Studies,* 18 (2004), 171.

[33] MARTOS, KONKOLY TEGHE, STEGER, 863; S. ZIKA, K. CHAMBERLAIN, "Religiosity, Life Meaning and Wellbeing: Some relationships in a sample of women", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27 (3), 1988, 411–420.

[34] ZIKA, CHAMBERLAIN, "Religiosity, Life Meaning and Wellbeing", 412.

who experience high meaning in life.[35] As regard to this chain of meaning in life – religiosity/spirituality – wellbeing, recent studies suggest that meaningfulness would mediate the link between religiousness and psychological well-being.[36] This hypothesis was tested using measures of religiousness and well-being, and found that meaning in life indeed mediated the relationship between religiousness and self-esteem, life satisfaction and optimism.[37] Zika and Chamberlain came to the same conclusion claiming that the relationship between life satisfaction and religious practice is mediated by meaningfulness.[38] In Steger and Frazier's opinion, these findings suggest that "meaning in life may be an effective conduit through which counselors and clients can discuss ultimate matters, even if they do not share similar perspectives on religion".[39]

6. The role of meaningfulness in well-being: review of empirical research

6.1. Psychological well-being

Empirical research has mainly focused on the relation of meaningfulness and the psychological aspects of well-being, mostly referring to physical health as a causal factor able to influence meaningfulness. A number of researches have already reported meaning in life to be a strong and consistent predictor of psychological well-being.[40]

In their well-known study Zika and Chamberlain examined how meaning in life relates to three major dimensions of well-being: life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect. They also explored its association of meaning in life to negative aspects of well-being, like depression and anxiety. They found that life meaning related at least moderately to every component of well-being. The authors emphasized that meaning in life relates more strongly to the positive aspects of well-being than to the negative aspects, by this suggesting a more *salutogenic* approach to investigating mental health.[41]

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[35] Á. SKRABSKI, M. KOPP, S. RÓZSA, J. RÉTHELYI, R.H. RAHE, "Life meaning: An important correlate of health in the Hungarian population"*,* in *Internatioanl Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12/2, 2005, 83.

[36] M. STEGER, P. FRAZIER, "Meaning in Life: One Link in the Chain from Religiousness to Well-being", in *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52/4, 2005, 574–582.

[37] STEGER, FRAZIER, 574–582.

[38] ZIKA, CHAMBERLAIN, "Religiosity, Life Meaning and Wellbeing", 415.

[39] STEGER, FRAZIER, 574.

[40] LI, 533.

[41] S. ZIKA, K. CHAMBERLAIN, "On the relation between meaning in life and psychological well-being", in *British Journal of Psychology,* 83 (1992), 133–145.

One study has demonstrated a negative correlation between meaningfulness and substance abuse.[42] Another study also demonstrated an inverse relation between life-meaning and suicide ideation, revealing that meaning in life functions like a buffer, moderating the impact of coping style on suicidal ideations.[43]

Mascaro and Rosen found that spiritual meaning had inverse relationships with depression, anxiety, and antisocial traits, and a positive relationship with hope.[44] In another study, the same authors examined the role of meaning in relation to stress. The conclusion was that spiritual meaning weakened the relationship between stress and depression, while its absence strengthens it. With other words stress leads more likely to depression in case of individuals with low levels of spiritual meaning. According to the authors although "both spiritual and personal meaning are inversely related to depression and positively related to hope, only spiritual meaning moderates the relationship between daily stress and depression"[45] Likewise, another study examined the moderating effects of self-transcendence meaning in the relationship of college stress and well-being in case of college students. The authors defined self-transcendence as "a higher living state that is beyond self, within which people search for self-detachment and boundless self".[46] The findings of the study demonstrated that self-transcendence meaning is able to reduce the impact of stress in causing depression and impairing self-esteem, which means that students under high levels of college stress are likely to benefit from self-transcendence meaning of life.

In their study Ho et al. examined the role of meaning and optimism in promoting well-being among Chinese adolescents. Their results showed that meaning in life correlates positively with life satisfaction and negatively with psychosocial symptoms, like avoiding social situations and having strong fears of being humiliated. On the contrary, meaning in life does not seem to relate

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42 I. VILLE, M. KHLAT, "Meaning and coherence of self and health: An approach based on narratives of life events", in *Social Science & Medicine,* 64 (2007), 1001–1014.

43 M.J. EDWARDS, R.R. HOLDEN, "Coping, Meaning in life and Suicidal manifestations: examining gender differences", in *Journal of Clinical Psychology,* 57/12 (2001), 1517–1534.

44 N. MASCARO, D.H. ROSEN, L. MOREY, "The development, construct validity and clinical utility of the spiritual meaning scale", in *Personality and Individual Differences,* 37/4 (2004), 845–860.

45 N. MASCARO, D.H. ROSEN, "The role of existential meaning as a buffer against stress", in *Journal of Humanistic Psychology,* 46/2 (2006), 168–190.

46 LI, 535–537.

significantly to satisfaction with health, which means that people who experience high meaning in life are not necessarily involved in activities that promote health. The role of optimism in this sequence of meaning in life – optimism – psychosocial symptoms can be understood as follows: individuals who have meaningful goals experience a more positive emotional state, which in turn improves well-being.[47]

Numerous studies demonstrated that meaning mediates the reaction of the individual to different negative life events. This means the same circumstances can evoke different levels of stress depending on the meaning attached to the stressors.[48] The onset of a life-threatening illness can be such a stressor: but its impact is shaped by the meaning that the person ascribes to it, which determines his responses to the illness. This meaning ascribing process could take the form of discovering a purpose in the loss or the occurrence of the illness.[49] Another study showed that patients with limited life expectancy, who are able to find a meaning in life, are still able to consider their life as worth living. Instead the lack of meaning brings in the wish to hasten death or a request for euthanasia. [50]

Jim et al. conducted a study in which they investigated the mediating effect of meaning in life in the relationship between social and physical functioning and distress in breast cancer survivors. In the cross-sectional study, meaning in life was partly responsible for the effects of functioning impairments on heightened distress. The authors concluded that "the negative social and physical sequelae of cancer are associated with heightened distress, and this association appears to be accounted for, in part, by patients' loss of meaning in their lives".[51] Also in the field of psycho-oncology, Simonelli et al. examined physical consequences and depressive symptoms in breast and gynecologic cancer survivors. Their results indicate that "survivors with more

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47 M.Y. HO, F.M. CHEUNG, S.F. CHEUNG, "The role of meaning in life and optimism in promoting well-being", in *Personality and Individual Differences,* 48 (2010), 658–663.

48 B.L. FIFE, "The role of constructed meaning in the adaptation to the onset of life-threatening illness", in *Social Science & Medicine,* 61 (2005), 2132.

49 FIFE, 2133.

50 M.J. FEGG, M. KRAMER, S. L'HOSTE, G.D. BORASIO, "The schedule for meaning in life evaluation (SMiLE): Validation of a new instrument for Meaning-in-Life research", in *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management,* 35/4 (2008), 356–364.

51 H.S. JIM, B.L. ANDERSEN, "Meaning in life mediates the relationship between social and physical functioning and distress in cancer survivors", in *British Journal of Health Psychology,* 12/3 (2007), 363–381.

physical sequelae also reported lower levels of meaning of life, which was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms".[52]

6.2. Physical well-being

As we could see above, the majority of studies concerned with meaningfulness, discuss it in relation with psychological aspects of well-being: life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, anxiety, self-esteem, psychological adjustment to illness etc. The literature examining the meaningfulness – physical well-being relation is sparse, but there are studies in this field. An often cited study examined meaning in life (measured by Life Meaning subscale of Rahe's brief Stress and Coping Inventory) in relation to mortality rates and health status in a large sample of Hungarian participants, selected to represent the country's population. Researchers found life meaning "to be inversely related to oncological, female cardiovascular, and total premature mortality rates in the 150 subregions of Hungary and on an individual level to participants' reported health status"[53]. They also found that meaning in life is positively associated with indices of psychological well-being like self-efficacy, problem-oriented coping and social support.

7. Meaning-oriented interventions in coping with disease

For the huge importance that experienced meaningfulness plays in both psychological and physical well-being and coping with disease, psychotherapeutic interventions in palliative care has recently included meaning in life as a central component.[54] In Viktor Frankl's logotherapy meaning is not something that can be created or constructed by the individual, rather something pre-existent, objective reality, given to the individual by life.[55] In contrast, other researchers regard meaning in life "as a personal construct that is actively constructed or created".[56] Thus meaning-oriented interventions by now have mainly focused on constructing the meaning of a certain situation (e.g. illness). Just to mention the area of psycho-oncology, the treatment and management of cancer continues to evoke difficult existential questions that are challenging. Lee and al. state "the ability to successfully reconstitute a global

[52] L.E. SIMONELLI, J. FOWLER, G.L. MAXWELL, B.L. ANDERSON, "Physical sequalae and depressive symptoms in gunecologic cancer survivors: Meaning in life as a mediator", in *Annual Behavioural Medicine,* 35 (2008), 275–284.

[53] SKRABSKI, KOPP, RÓZSA, RÉTHELYI, RAHE, 78–85.

[54] FEGG, KRAMER, L'HOSTE, BORASIO, 357.

[55] MASCARO, ROSEN, 847.

[56] FEGG, KRAMER, L'HOSTE, BORASIO, 357.

meaning of life following a cancer diagnosis has been associated with general measures of psychological adjustment, self-efficacy, self-esteem and optimism".[57] They conducted a randomized controlled trial to study the effect of a Meaning Making Intervention for patients with cancer, initially developed for patients with post-trauma disorder. During the four individualized sessions, participants were guided to review their experience with cancer with the aim of chronologically embedding the illness in their lifespan. Patients who received Meaning Making Intervention, showed a significant improvement on both self-esteem and self-efficacy compared to those who received usual care.[58]

Apart from psycho-oncology, another study proposed to investigate the effectiveness of a Logo-autobiography Program in enhancing meaning in life and mental health in case of wives of alcoholics. Logo-autobiography is a type of group psychotherapy, combining guided autobiography and logotherapy, in which clients search for meaning in their lives by sharing their own private life stories. The major finding of this study was that the LAP was effective at improving meaning in life measured by Purpose in Life Test[59], and mental health subsymptoms like somatization, interpersonal sensitivity, depression and hostility.[60]

Ville and Khlat examined narrative recounting focusing on significant life events, as a meaning making intervention which "allows us to create order from disorder, to make sense of the chaos resulting from the flow of situations in which we find ourselves. We try to give unity to our life history, constantly revising the plot in order to incorporate new events." [61] The authors concluded that the process of narrative recounting might bring beneficial contributions to coping research.

8. Conclusion and future directions

In the foregoing we examined the construct of meaningfulness, man's deepest need, as it appears in Frankl's logotherapy. Among others, we conceptualized meaningfulness as a psychosocial factor which is able to influence both psychological and physical well-being. Then, without the claim

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[57] V. LEE, S.R. COHEN, L. EDGAR, A.M. LAIZNEN, A.J. GAGNON, "Meaning-making intervention during breast or colorectal cancer treatment improves self-esteem, optimism, and self-efficacy", in *Social Science & Medicine,* 62 (2006), 3134.

[58] LEE, COHEN, EDGAR, LAIZNEN, GAGNON, 3133–3145.

[59] Developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964).

[60] S. CHO, "Effects of Logo-autobiography Program on meaning in life and mental health in the wives of alcoholics", in *Asian Nursing Research,* 2/2 (2008), 129–138.

[61] VILLE, KHLAT, 1004.

of completeness, we attempted to review the literature concerned with the role of meaningfulness in different aspects of bio-psycho-social well being. It is noticeable that the majority of studies focused on the relation of meaningfulness and the psychological aspects of well-being. In contrast, the impact of experienced meaning on physical well-being is a much less studied phenomenon. The few existing studies investigating meaning in relation with physical health measured the subjectively rated health of the participants and mortality rates.[62] In our consideration, more research is needed to investigate the relation of experienced meaning in life, and both subjective and objective indicators of physical health, for example, the prevalence of psychosomatic symptoms like sleeping disorders, changes of appetite, different aches, fatigue, etc. Findings in this area could have practical implications in the health care system.

Considering the existent literature about the importance of meaningfulness in general well-being, future research could aim to implement and standardize meaning-oriented interventions in mental hygiene, either as a prevention for at-risk populations (e.g. persons who attempted suicide, who suddenly lost their job, are widowed, etc.) or as a psychotherapeutic intervention destined to augment medical care of patients with chronic or incurable diseases (e.g. cancer). An intervention like this could have practical implications for Catholic pastoral care too, supposing it could make use of the spiritual meaning,[63] or, as Frankl calls it, Supra-meaning or Ultimate Meaning[64], when trying to help believers searching the support of a religious community to go through critical periods of time.

Both medical care and pastoral care should always have in view to help the sufferers as much as it is in their power. For this purpose, we consider that meaning-oriented interventions, which aim either at discovering or constructing meaningfulness in people's lives, could bring enormous contributions for improving general well-being.

[62] SKRABSKI, KOPP, RÓZSA, RÉTHELYI, RAHE, 80.

[63] MASCARO, ROSEN, MOREY, 845–860.

[64] FRANKL, *The unconscious God,* 13, 141.