A Review of Interventions That Promote Meaning in Life

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Abstract

Increasing meaning in life in people undergoing various forms of trauma or adversity has shown promise as a means to improve well-being, coping mechanisms, and resilience. The purpose of this review was to characterize the effects of interventions designed to increase meaning in life and compare their impact. A systematic literature search of PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar was conducted encompassing the following parameters: meaning in life, purpose in life, sense of purpose, and randomized controlled trials. A total of 25 randomized controlled trials were identified for this review. The more common interventions were psychotherapy, psychoeducational, and narrative. Results indicate that these interventions are effective in increasing personal meaning making, as evidenced by an overall effect size $SMD = 0.60$ (CI 0.378 to 0.825). The most effective interventions were psychotherapy and narrative, with effect sizes of 0.670 and 0.59, respectively. Overall, these findings showcase the potential of meaning in life interventions.

Results

- The articles included in this review were published between 2001-2019.
- The sample sizes for the studies ranged from 15-305, the average was 109.6, the standard deviation was 81.3, and the percentage of female participants was 69.3%.
- Using Review Manager 5.3, meta-analysis revealed the overall effect size for all studies was $SMD = 0.60$ (CI 0.378 to 0.825), indicating that these programs successfully increased a person’s sense of meaning.
- However, there was considerable heterogeneity in the scores, with a highly significant Q statistic of 128.58 ($P < .0001$).
- The four psychotherapy studies had an average effect size (SMD) of 0.670 (CI 0.309 to 1.029).
- The seven narrative studies had an average effect size (SMD) of 0.59 (CI 0.21 to 0.97).

Discussion

In this systematic review of interventions that promote meaning making, moderate evidence for improvements in meaning making were found, with a significant overall effect size of 0.60. Subgroup analysis revealed the psychotherapy and narrative interventions showed the most promise in the form of significant effect sizes and relatively small (albeit still significant) heterogeneity scores. All 3 studies of one form of narrative, non-spiritual reminiscence, were rated as high in bias, but the effect size was similar when these were eliminated.

No other specific form of intervention had an effect size different from zero, largely due to the high levels of heterogeneity across studies. While the mindfulness subgroup had the largest effect size, interestingly, the spiritual reminiscence interventions had the lowest effect sizes of the subgroups and the lowest levels of heterogeneity, suggesting caution in adopting that approach despite the limitations of currently available data. Given that narrative interventions are typically briefer and do not require licensed professionals, they may be preferable to psychotherapy. Future research is needed to conduct studies with less potential bias in order to increase the precision of estimates and determine which interventions most reliably increase meaning making.