



Finding Meaning in the Unexpected: Underexplored Pathways to Discovering and Cultivating Meaning in Life

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Not all those Who Wander are Lost.

—J. R. R. Tolkien.

Abstract. One of the central components of meaning in life involves the experience that life “makes sense” and represents a coherent whole. Yet, less is known about the ways through which individuals discover or find meaning in everyday life. Despite advances in our understanding of the creative pathway through which individuals find meaning in life, mainly through the field of meaning in work, and the attitudinal pathway, mainly through the exploration of meaning-making in the face of adversity, the experiential pathway remains largely underexplored and its potential components require further unpacking. This chapter aims at broadening the existing perspective regarding the ways in which individuals seek and derive meaning in their lives by considering the potential role of mindfulness and unexpected experiences in everyday life. Based on conceptual and empirical suggestions, these two rather underexamined gateways of the experiential pathway may have a unique contribution to make in better understanding how individuals may approach the question of meaning in life in the face of the unique challenges of the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world of our time.

Keywords: Meaning in life · synchronicity experiences · mindfulness · coherence · search for meaning

The search for meaning is considered to lie at the core of human psychology, from young children asking “why” questions to make sense of the world to adults seeking more meaning through various life domains throughout their lives. Existential questions such as “why are we here?” and “what is my purpose?” have inspired various myths, religions, arts, and philosophies in different cultures around the world and across time and traditions. While human interest in meaning dates back centuries, researchers have only recently begun to explore the search for meaning in a systematic manner. Mounting empirical research in recent decades supports the theoretical and philosophical foundations indicating the centrality of meaning in life to human experience and underscores its

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importance as a contributing factor for human flourishing as well as a coping mechanism for adjustment to life's adversities and suffering (e.g., Czekierda et al., 2017; Damon, 2008; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004; Linley & Joseph, 2011; Melton & Schulenberg, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, 2012; Steger et al., 2009). Recent years have further witnessed a growing sophistication in assessing meaning in life (e.g., George & Park, 2016; Martela & Steger, 2016) and new conceptualizations regarding the place of meaning in life within general models of well-being (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Keyes et al., 2002). As part of this surge in research, increased attention has been given to the understanding, assessment, and practice of meaning in life in numerous arenas and contexts, such as psychotherapy, education, and organizations (e.g., Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014; Hill, 2018; Park & George, 2018; Russo-Netzer et al., 2016; Vos, 2018; Wong, 2014). However, less is known about the implicit processes by which meaning is found or discovered in everyday life.

Processes of meaning-making may be triggered, for instance, following adversities and crises (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park, 2013) or unusual events (Proulx & Heine, 2009). According to the meaning-making model, perceived discrepancies between the appraised meaning of a particular situation and its global meaning (i.e., general orienting systems of beliefs and goals) create distress, which generates meaning-making efforts to reduce it. Meaning can also be derived from various sources in life, such as personal striving, achievement, intimacy, religion/spirituality, personal relationships, and generativity (Emmons, 1999; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Wong, 1998). A fundamental source of meaning is social relationships, which address people's need for relatedness (Hicks & King, 2009) and belonging (Lambert et al., 2013). Cultural values may also be a source of meaning in life for many individuals, given the central role cultures play in enabling individuals to organize fragmented daily experiences, detect links and patterns, and integrate them into a coherent narrative of self and life (e.g., Chao & Kesebir, 2013; Heine et al., 2006). Meaning can also be cultivated through explicit interventions such as psychotherapy (Russo-Netzer et al., 2016; Vos, 2018).

Logotherapy, a meaning-centered psychotherapy, suggests that we can discover meaning in life in three different ways, known as the categorical values, comprised of the creative, the experiential, and the attitudinal values (Frankl, 1959/1984). *The creative pathway* consists of what individuals give to the world, such as accomplishing a task, creating a work, or contributing to society. This pathway has been widely explored as part of the surge in research on meaningfulness in work (e.g., Steger & Dik, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010) and concepts such as calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009). For instance, a positive relationship to one's work was suggested as a possible source for joy, energy, fulfillment, and an overall deep sense of meaning in life (Wrzeniewski, 2003, p. 297). *The attitudinal pathway* reflects the stand individuals take toward an unchangeable situation or unavoidable suffering (Frankl, 1959/1984). Tragic optimism (Frankl, 1959/1984) refers to remaining optimistic through hope, faith, and love in spite of the tragic triad of pain, guilt, and death. This is based on the principle that life is meaningful under all circumstances (Frankl, 1959/1984; Lukas, 1998). A vast literature across various bodies of knowledge supports the idea of potential growth in the face of adversity. It uses terminology such as resilience (e.g., Masten, 2001), benefit-finding (Davis et al., 1998), stress-related growth (e.g., Siegel et al., 2005), and adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph,

2004). In the context of posttraumatic growth (PTG), the crisis, although often bearing negative and enduring consequences for the individual, also brings about an opportunity for a unique type of growth and personal development in the wake of the trauma that would not be possible otherwise (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi et al., 1998). *The experiential pathway* focuses on what the individual takes from the world in terms of experiences and encounters (e.g., nature, art, relationships).

While research has advanced our understanding of the creative pathway, mainly through the field of meaning in work, and the attitudinal pathway, through the exploration of meaning-making in the face of adversity, the experiential pathway remains largely underexplored and its potential components require further unpacking. Some scholars have suggested that positive affect is associated with the increased sense of a meaningful life (e.g., Hicks & King, 2008; King et al., 2006; Ward & King, 2016), yet more examination is needed to identify the underlying mechanism that may be at play. The present chapter aims to broaden the existing perspective regarding the ways in which individuals seek and derive meaning in their lives by considering the potential role of mindfulness and unexpected experiences in everyday life. This may offer a unique contribution in the face of the special challenges of the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA; Horney et al., 2010) world of our time, and it may hold the promise for a better understanding of how individuals may approach the question of meaning in life.

1 Listening to the Call of Meaning: Mindfulness

In essence, meaning potentials exist at each and every moment of our lives, even the most challenging (Frankl, 1959/1984). Yet, for such meaning potentials to be noticed, discovered, and realized, there must be an increased awareness that most often arises when we are mindful and actively attend to them. In other words, meaning cannot be "given" or prescribed but rather must be discovered through an active, dynamic, and unfolding process of exploration, reflection, and engagement with the world. Along the same lines, it has been suggested that the search for meaning may function as a state of mind or a schema, enabling the individual to identify information relevant to meaning in life (cf. Steger et al., 2011). Searching that results in active attempts to identify situations that have the potential to provide meaning (i.e., prioritizing meaning) has been found to be connected with happiness, life satisfaction, and gratitude among adults. Prioritizing meaning, thus, may reflect an active and concrete implementation of such intention or schema, through the planning and decision-making that weave meaningful activities and situations into daily life routines (Russo-Netzer, 2018). This process entails self-awareness in discerning personal values, aligning daily choices of activities accordingly, and refining such choices through detecting potential shifts of meaning in a personally relevant manner that is rooted in everyday experience. The importance of such ongoing self-awareness to one's everyday experiences may hint at a possible avenue through which individuals may approach meaning, as suggested by various researchers—mindfulness (e.g., Garland et al., 2015; Kashdan et al., 2015).

Mindful awareness has been defined to involve "a *knowing* and *experiencing* of life as it arises and passes away each moment. It is a way of relating to all experience—positive, negative, and neutral—in an open, kind, and receptive manner" (Shapiro et al.,

2018, p. 1694). The core elements suggested to underlie such awareness—intention, attention, and attitude (Shapiro et al., 2006)—may also be relevant to finding meaning in everyday experiences. The connection between mindfulness and meaning may seem natural and indeed some scholars suggest that the contribution of mindfulness to positive psychological and physiological outcomes is mostly derived from an enhancement of a sense of meaning in life (Crego et al., 2020). Yet, empirical studies that directly explore the interplay between mindfulness and meaning are still in their infancy. Current theoretical models suggest two intrinsic properties that appear to mediate the connection between mindfulness and meaning in life: decentering and increased self-awareness.

Decentering involves the ability to view thoughts and emotions as temporary and transient, detached from oneself. The ability to decenter from thoughts and emotions may contribute to an increased sense of meaning and purpose in life. Since decentering enables positive reappraisal, it may facilitate a sense of meaning in life through the mediation of positive feelings. More specifically, in adopting a nonjudgmental approach toward stressful situations, a process of making positive attributions is initiated and the mind is given space to discover the surrounding environment. Such a state of awareness may foster better recognition of positive aspects of oneself and the world, which may lead to increased positive emotions and a new and broader perspective regarding the meaning discovered in one's experiences. Such cognitive flexibility enables a more positive reappraisal of situations and our surroundings to rediscover ourselves and the world and increase our awareness. Together, these processes may contribute to further elevated awareness.

Additionally, mindfulness practice may enhance *self-awareness*, a process that bolsters the sense of purpose in life. It has been argued, for instance, that mindfulness practice fosters the cultivation of authentic self-awareness that is vital for the development of the ability to align choices with our values and interests (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003). In this sense, better awareness of values and preferences may assist in getting clarity about our goals and purpose in life. Being aware of our experience of the present moment facilitates better estimations of our values, behaviors, and beliefs, hence assisting the process of self-integration and leading to higher coherence between our values and actions, thus enhancing the presence of meaning in life. Mindfulness, by expanding awareness and facilitating the ability to deeply experience and savor life experiences, facilitates the processes involved with interpreting life in a meaningful way. Expanding self-awareness through mindfulness enables people to better understand themselves and their lives with clarity. Focusing on the moment may assist us in becoming more familiar with our passions, preferences, and values, as well as with making the experience of life more meaningful. Overall, mindfulness may facilitate reflection on meaning in one's past, present, and future experiences. When reflecting on the past, individuals can be encouraged to "connect the dots" in their personal life story by identifying sources for life meaning in choices, turning points, values, characters, and insights gained from positive and negative past experiences. Reflecting on the present is focused on deepening sensory experiences and the sense of being in the present moment through increasing the level of awareness of the transient nature of experiences, being mindful of the potential for meaning in the present moment, and savoring experiences. Reflecting on the future encourages people to focus on purpose and goals in life, as well as the construction of

legacy, through visualization of their future self, in a way building their own lighthouse on the foundations of their values-based, unique action. As observed by Marcel Proust (1949) that “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes,” it may be suggested that discovering meaning is a unique process that involves open and attentive observation of the world with curious eyes and a new, fresh way of seeing.

In a somewhat related manner, intentionality plays a key role in the phenomenological perspective (Husserl, 1931) in human consciousness as it refers to the notion that consciousness is always the consciousness of something or an orientation toward an entity. This process of intentionality involves both the subject (the experiencer) and the object in a mutually active co-constitution (Creswell, 2007). The relationship between being-in-the-world and the world is thus expressed in the concepts of noema (the content of the experience) and noesis (the intentional act of consciousness) (van Manen, 1990). Understanding subjective experience as the object of consciousness entails the description of experience and interpretations (Patton, 2002), since “phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on lived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). The process of reflection enables the person to become aware of her or his experiences and thereby make sense of them (Schutz, 1970). It reflects a dialogical, active, and dialectical relationship between human being and world (Anderson, 1991; Spinelli, 1989). This co-constitutionality is illustrated by Matsu-Pissot through the metaphor of dance: “We dance with the world which is dancing with us... the dance is seen as a unity, not as separate entities. The step of the world defines and gives meaning to the leap of the person. The posture of the person defines and gives meaning to the pirouette of the world” (Matsu-Pissot, 1995, p. 41).

2 Listening to the Call of Meaning: Synchronicity Experiences

Another possible and rather underexplored avenue to meaning in life is unexpected experiences in everyday life. Jung’s (1931/1969) conceptualization of synchronicity as unpredictable instances of meaningful coincidence may reflect such a phenomenon. Broadly defined, synchronicity refers to unusual and meaningful coincidence, connecting the inner and outer worlds of the individual. For example, this may involve thinking of or being occupied with something and later experiencing a situation unusually related to that inner state. Synchronicity was first defined by Jung (1931/1969) as a psychologically meaningful connection between an inner event (e.g., thought, image, dream) and one or more external events occurring simultaneously. In other words, such experiences reflect “the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance” (Jung 1950/1997, p. xxv). As explained by Hocoy (2012), “the term consists of the Greek words for joined with and in time, suggesting a bond that takes place in temporal correspondence” (p. 468). According to the Jungian perspective, every external experience can have meaning if it is connected to the inner world. This may correspond with one of the central components of having a sense of meaning in life, that of coherence, a feeling of life that “makes sense” and represents a coherent whole (George & Park, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Martela & Steger, 2016). While

detecting coherence in the external world can be intentional, it is largely the product of unconscious processes (Heintzelman & King, 2013). In other words, meaning may be detected (Baumeister & Landau, 2018; King & Hicks, 2009). Detecting connections, associations, and regularities in the environment is an adaptive capacity shared by all creatures (e.g., Geary, 2004). For example, a series of laboratory studies found that the feeling of meaning often emerges when reliable patterns exist in environmental stimuli (Heine et al., 2006; Hicks et al., 2010). However, the meaning maintenance model (MMM) suggests that experiences of unpredictable happenings may pose a challenge to the individual's need for certainty, predictability, and control in life (Heine et al., 2006; Proulx & Heine, 2008) and thus may raise questions regarding structure and coherence.

Since Jung introduced the concept of synchronicity, the notion has gained unique endurance and cultural impact, mainly among clinicians (Hocoy, 2012; Main, 2011). Synchronicity experiences have been viewed as a possible vehicle for personal transformation (Jung, 1931/1969; Main, 2011), as well as for individuals' growth (e.g., Russo-Netzer & Ickson, 2020). Several scholars have used case studies to demonstrate that awareness of synchronicity might be beneficial in clinical and therapeutic settings (e.g., Roxburgh et al., 2015). In other words, experiences of unpredictable happenings may temporarily shake and challenge individuals' sense of certainty and control in life, but when they are capable of making sense of such happenings, it may open up opportunities for greater sense of meaning in life. Thus, synchronicity experiences may represent an underexplored example of meaning-making processes in the face of uncertainties involved with random events or unexpected coincidences. A line of thought coming from career counseling theories indicates that coincidental events can be seen as turning points in one's career (Guindon & Hanna, 2002). More specifically, the planned happenstance theory suggests that individuals who stay receptive to external unexpected events may benefit. According to that theory, by staying open to unexpected chance events, individuals may turn accidental cues into meaningful career opportunities (Krumboltz, 2009; Mitchell et al., 1999). Moreover, by tolerating ambiguity and staying open-minded, individuals gain a valuable opportunity to explore their intrinsic interests and desires, which enhances their commitment to their authentic identity at work (Blustein, 2011). These findings raise the question of how people make sense of random and unexpected information and events in their everyday lives in natural settings. How do we treat unfamiliar patterns in our environment? This is especially important given phenomena such as "hedonic adaptation" (e.g., Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999), which is the tendency to habituate to positive (and negative) life circumstances and experiences (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004, 2006), and "inattentional blindness" (e.g., Mack, 2003; Rock et al., 1992; Seegmiller et al., 2011), which occurs when we fail to notice an unexpected yet visible stimulus and instead act on what can be considered autopilot.

In order to extend existing knowledge in the literature of synchronicity experiences and their perceived contribution to individuals' meaning in life, an exploratory qualitative study utilizing a bottom-up approach examined how people make sense of occasional and unexpected information and events in their lives (Russo-Netzer & Ickson, 2020). Based on phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews, a model was offered to characterize the experience of synchronicity and meaningful coincidences. The model

(REM) refers to three major building blocks: receptiveness (R), or increased attention and openness to both a person's internal and external world, which is viewed as a precondition for an exceptional encounter (E), a sudden unexpected event that corresponds with a person's inner state of mind, triggering memorable and distinctive emotions, and meaning-detecting (M), a conscious process of connecting the event to a person's life narrative. The first aim of the study was to build on this model and to validate a tool to assess individual differences in the experience of synchronicity, while measuring both aspects of the experience (i.e., awareness and meaning-detecting). This shed light on a rather underexplored potential link in the chain between these two constructs, suggesting that the interplay between them is not straightforward, thus calling future studies to further explore the contribution of synchronicity as well as other potential mediators. Given that people differ in their tendency to detect synchronicity experiences and make sense of them and given that no valid assessment tool had yet to be offered and validated, the next step was to develop a new measure needed to better understand the prevalence of the phenomenon in various populations and to explore its potential links with well-being variables. Results from two studies employing adult community samples demonstrate coherent, replicable structure and good internal reliability for a two-factor Synchronicity Awareness and Meaning-Detecting (SAMD) Scale. The findings suggest that synchronicity awareness and meaning-detecting are positively associated with openness to experience and tolerance for ambiguity. The findings also suggest that individuals who search for meaning and are open to synchronicity events and manage to make sense of them may experience more meaning and optimism, which eventually may contribute to greater life satisfaction (Russo-Netzer & Ickson, 2020).

3 Conclusion with an Eye to the Future

Since William James's (1890/1950) assertion that "my experience is what I agree to attend to" (p. 402), it has long been acknowledged that our attentional choices may shape our experience (e.g., Driver, 2001). The present chapter highlighted two underexplored potential methods in the experiential pathway by which individuals may discern and utilize meaningful opportunities through an active engagement with life. It thus can be suggested that when the search for meaning is expressed by actively being aware of one's taken-for-granted reality through mindfulness, on the one hand, and of unexpected or unpredictable stimuli in the environment, on the other hand, the search for meaning may be expected to be associated with benevolent outcomes. In other words, when we are attentive and open to the world around us, we are more open to and capable of noticing situations and experiences in which lies the potential for meaning. Maintaining an open and receptive approach may facilitate a readiness for novel external information, thus ultimately turning "ordinary" coincidences into meaningful ones. This may hint at a possible mechanism for the beneficial outcomes reported by study participants, suggesting a learning loop in which experience may create room for more receptiveness and willingness to explore, which in turn may enable a new process of awareness and meaning-detecting (e.g., Krumboltz et al., 2013). Furthermore, mindful attention to the present moment (Bishop et al., 2004), a nonjudgmental state of awareness in which individuals attend to and focus on their present experiences (Brown & Ryan, 2003), may also

contribute to such ability to cope with uncertainty (Jacobs & Blustein, 2008). Together, these may enhance an orientation of “learned meaningfulness,” rather than ignoring or rejecting unexpected triggers. An awareness of emerging new knowledge through exploration and meaning-detecting of one’s environment may enhance psychological safety and courage to further open one’s horizons to explore new pathways and new insights, as well as new goals to pursue. Such a mindset may support individuals in coping with the challenges of our changing world, where uncertainty and complexity appear to be a significant part of our day-to-day reality. In a world of post-truth, relativism, high intensity, cynicism, and increasing productivity demands, employing not only an open-minded but open-hearted approach would appear to be significant in reconnecting and coming into direct interaction with life’s complexities and opportunities and making sense of them in a deep way.

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