

## CHAPTER SIX

### Using Meaning-Centered Approach to Cultivate College Mental Health

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#### ABSTRACT

Meaning in life is a common topic in research and practice, particularly since the emergence of the second wave of positive psychology. This chapter aims to provide a framework of mental health in college students using a meaning-centered approach. Evidence indicates that meaning in life has a notable promotive and protective effect on mental health and wellbeing when facing adversity and is associated with various positive outcomes in college students. However, few studies have focused on the meaning-centered approach in building college student mental health, and further research is hence called for in this area. Specifically, developing school-based intervention strategies is a critical step in building and fostering meaning in college students. Meaning-based intervention strategies could be integrated with school-based programs to cultivate mental health, and these could be used effectively in college settings. This chapter emphasizes the importance of understanding and promoting meaning in life among college students and designing meaning-centered prevention and intervention services to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Developing school-based meaning strategies for fostering young adults' functioning and positive mental health in the context of challenging circumstances are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Meaning-Centred Approach, Mental Health, Post-Secondary Education.

## INTRODUCTION

In some ways, young adulthood is a period for participating in identity formation and in exploring the self. During this dynamic developmental stage, young adults generally strive to attain a sense of identity and purpose, develop close relationships, and establish career roles. Young adulthood is also a stage of life often characterized by a change in life directions, which influences identity development and life outcomes such as incomes (Arnett, 2000). Asking the question “who am I?” can help college students explore further philosophical questions about meaning in life during this period (Dezutter et al., 2014). One’s college years are a include many important psychosocial changes and are critical to the search for purpose and meaning in life. Meaning-making experiences may also play a role in promoting college students’ academic functioning, psychosocial health, and wellbeing.

College-based mental health providers are encouraged to design therapeutic preventions and interventions to help students feel more sense of meaning in life (Trevisan et al., 2017), which helps them establish a stable identity and make better life choices, thereby cultivating better mental health and wellbeing (Yıldırım & Arslan, 2021). At the same time, young adults are also generally more intensely interested in searching for meaning than those in later developmental stages (Reker et al., 1987; Reker & Wong, 2012). Given the evidence suggesting that meaning in life is associated with better mental health and higher wellbeing (Arslan et al., 2022; Yıldırım et al., 2021; Yıldırım, Arslan, & Ahmad Aziz, 2020), it also might be an important therapeutic step to cultivate strategies to foster life purpose and meaning among young adults. These strategies may be beneficial for not only young adults’ current development but also their later outcomes. This chapter therefore aims to review meaning in life in the context

of positive education and to provide a framework of college mental health and wellbeing that utilizes a meaning-centered approach.

### **Meaning in Life: Research on College Students**

In recent decades, meaning in life has become a popular topic in research and practice, particularly with the emergence of the second wave of positive psychology. Positive psychology focuses on improving wellbeing and preventing mental health problems that arise when life seems barren and meaningless and emphasizes the ability of individuals to establish purpose and meaning in their lives. Viktor Frankl emphasized meaning in life as a fundamental and universal human need and founded the practice of logotherapy based on this principle. According to Frankl (2000), individuals are capable of searching for meaning in their lives irrespective of personal and social characteristics such as gender, age, and educational background. More recently, researchers exploring psychological wellbeing have argued that meaning is a core component of it (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Similarly, Seligman (2011) has defined meaning as cornerstone of flourishing that reflects belonging to and serving something one believes is bigger than themselves.

Although academic outcomes are one of the essential aims of education, questions about meaning in life are central to debates about what optimal life should be. School settings are therefore a unique environment for supporting both the academic functioning and wellbeing of young adults (Arslan & Yildirim, 2022). Due to various inherent psychosocial changes, young adulthood is a dynamic developmental stage that is well-positioned to search for purpose and establish a sense of meaning in life. Having a sense of meaning in life contributes to both college students' current and later mental health and wellbeing outcomes (Yildirim et al., 2021). Frankl (2000) has argued that the search for meaning is a primary and universal force in one's life and

describes three avenues that can help to discover it: (1) experiencing something or encountering someone, (2) doing a deed or creating a work, and (3) facing unavoidable suffering in our lives. Because higher education can offer one or more of these avenues for most people, young adults often have a unique opportunity to search for meaning and purpose, and this can benefit their healthy development and psychological adjustment (Arslan et al., 2021).

College students also explore life meaning by searching and discovering their unique role in life (Arslan & Yıldırım, 2022). Experiencing meaningful living during young adulthood is associated with several of the benefits that ensue through later life stages. Young adults who report that their lives are meaningful also report higher life satisfaction, better mental health, and greater psychological wellbeing (Arslan et al., 2020; Arslan & Yıldırım, 2021; Dezutter et al., 2014; Steger et al., 2009; Yıldırım et al., 2021). Experiencing life as meaningful also improves the capacity of people to navigate their way to protective resources that establish and maintain their mental health and wellbeing in the context of significant adversity (Arslan & Yıldırım, 2021; Wong & Wong, 2012).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, college students with higher levels of life meaning have reported lower stress levels and fewer psychological health problems such as depressive symptoms and somatization (Arslan & Allen, 2021; Parra, 2020; Yıldırım & Arslan, 2021), which suggests that meaning-centered experiences could be beneficial to college students' mental health and wellbeing.

Meaning in life has other significant benefits for healthy young adult behaviour. Meaning might contribute to developing more adaptive coping strategies and bolstering protective resources when facing difficult life experiences. Previous studies have indicated that young adults who report feeling that their life is meaningful are less likely to engage in risky behaviours (e.g., substance use, suicidal behaviour), and are more likely to report healthy,

prosocial behaviour (Csabonyi & Phillips, 2020; Lin & Shek, 2019). Young adults with a strong sense of life meaning may have a lens that helps them to interpret their lives more adaptively, which promotes mentally healthy behaviour.

### **Meaning-Centered Approach to College Mental Health**

Positive psychology-based interventions are designed to improve personal flourishing and character strength. Informed by second-wave positive psychology (PP 2.0; Wong, 2019), the Meaning Centered Approach (MCA) is an integrative and holistic framework developed to build resilience to improve flourishing and mental health. The MCA is originated from the application of Frankl's (2000) logotherapy and provides a flexible framework of positive psychology-based interventions to cultivate college students' mental health. The MCA is mainly based on the PURE strategies (purpose, understanding, responsibility, and enjoyment) and the ABCDE strategies (acceptance, belief, commitment, discovery, and evaluation) for building a healthier and happier life (Wong & Wong, 2012).

#### **The PURE Strategies**

The PURE approach involves a comprehensive definition of meaning in life and a model for implementing the MCA in existential positive psychology-based interventions that encourages the search for and maintaining of meaning in life. According to the MCA formwork, the components of the PURE strategies work together to create an upward spiral feedback loop (Wong, 2012). These strategies for building meaningful and purposeful living comprise the following principles.

### ***Purpose***

Purpose is the motivational component of the PURE approach, comprising aspirations, goals, incentive objects, directions, values, and objectives (Wong, 2010), and helps young adults to know what matters in their lives and mental health. Purpose has been identified as a natural partner of student achievement and striving that motivates students to progress toward their goals (Steger et al., 2021). It can be an effective means for overcoming an identity crisis (Erikson, 1968), and importantly, depends on one's overall life orientation to help them make the right choices (Wong & Wong, 2012). Having a strong sense of purpose, thus, encourages young adults to develop strategies and introduce activities that cultivate flourishing and psychosocial adjustment.

### ***Understanding***

Understanding is the cognitive component of the PURE model, reflecting a sense of coherence, effective communication, understanding one's own identity and that of other people, and making sense of situations (Wong, 2012). It is thereby the key to assessing and accepting the existing situation in order solve problems (Wong et al., 2016), and plays an essential role in building a purposeful and meaningful life. Important aspects of this that apply to the context of education include, for example, effective communication and having a clear and coherent self-concept.

### ***Responsible Action***

Responsible action is the behavioural component of the model, and refers to doing what is morally right, finding the right solutions, and appropriate actions (Wong, 2012). Responsibility is also an essential resource to the thriving and surviving in significant

challenging times (Arslan & Wong, 2022). Young adults with a strong sense of responsibility take an active role in tasks and projects and make positive decisions towards their academic goals and wellbeing.

### ***Enjoyment***

Enjoyment is the affective face of the PURE model, referring to one's assessment of satisfaction with their situation and life as a whole and is a key element in self regulation (Wong & Wong, 2012). When college students experience satisfaction with their choices and actions, there are more likely to have better psychosocial and academic functioning, therefore enjoyment is a motivational resource promoting productivity and positive development. For example, students with low levels of enjoyment can re-evaluate the previous steps of the PURE (purpose, understanding, and responsible action) and focus on areas that need improvement.

### ***Applications to Young Adult Education***

Wong (2016) has describes how the PURE framework in meaning-centered interventions can be used to help young adults thrive:

1. Explore their stated purpose for change and their preferred future without their problems.
2. Help them gain new understanding and insight into their difficulties.
3. Lead them to embrace their freedom and responsibility to implement actions based on their strengths, self-efficacy beliefs, and available resources.
4. Guide them to experiment with whether their actions would bring about positive change; If not, then, they need to either modify their actions or decisions.

Mental health providers could thereby utilize PURE-based strategies to cultivate college students' mental health and wellbeing. Meaning-centered strategies could help young adults develop measurable and realistic decisions and action strategies, deal with life challenges and link their academic and life goals. Meaning-centered strategies could also be useful to promote students' sense of purpose and meaning in life, which in turn enhance their adaptive coping strategies and resilience that foster good mental health and wellbeing. Adoption of the PURE-based strategies also predict sources of satisfaction (i.e., extrinsic vs intrinsic motivation) that are essential for academic functioning, mental health and wellbeing (Wong et al., 2016). School mental health providers could therefore teach the PURE principles to enhance student functioning and productivity.

### **The ABCDE Strategies**

The ABCDE model is primarily a meaning-centered intervention strategy for dealing with adverse life events (Wong, 2012). This is different from the ABCDE strategy of rational-emotive therapy (Ellis 1962, 1987); however, it is similar to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes 2005) that focuses on actions and values rather than thinking. The ABCDE model includes the skills and strategies for overcoming challenges, whereas the PURE approach emphasizes the principles of meaningful living. The ABCDE model entails the following psychological strategies:

#### ***Acceptance***

Acceptance is a vital element of meaning-centered interventions that contributes to the source of meaning and is also a key component of the tragic optimism and ABCDE model. Accepting that something is wrong and that they need to change is the first step of recovery,



but this does not mean passively accepting the situation as fate (Wong, 2012). Acceptance means recognizing one's limitations, accepting their dark sides, and learning how to transform and transcend what cannot be changed (Wong, 2010). This first step enables people to face and adapt to the new situation and helps them develop a more positive attitude toward life.

### ***Belief***

The belief component of the ABCDE strategy linked with faith and positive expectations (Wong, 2012). Belief motivates one to maintain hope and confidence in the face of adversity and is therefore an important motivational resource for change. The MCA highlights the importance of positive thoughts and beliefs that give individuals hope and pursue goal striving (Wong & Wong, 2012). Believing that the future could be better, and that life is worth living despite challenging experiences is particularly important during young adulthood to cultivate mental health and wellbeing. If they do not believe that life can be better, they are less likely to be committed to taking the steps to change.

### ***Commitment***

Commitment is the action principle of the model, reflecting the potency of action. Change and recovery are possible when people take concrete steps in a new direction, move forward and carry out their responsibility with resolve, regardless of threatening circumstances (Wong, 2016). Therapeutically, this strategy helps young adults to specify and commit to the pursuit of valued directions that promote daily functioning and psychological health (Biglan et al., 2008). Hence, it is important to help young adults to identify their values and commit to actions consistent with those values.

### ***Discovery***

The discovery strategy helps young adults to learn new things about themselves and life, and discover hidden resources and strengths (Wong, 2016). Meaning is usually discovered more than created (Frankl, 2000), and this helps to explore positive aspects of life and understand what matters in life. Many strategies could be useful for young adults to discover life in a new way. For example, mindfulness-based activities may could facilitate discovery of the richness of the present moment.

### ***Evaluating***

Evaluation is the affective element of self-regulation and is related to the previous strategies of the ABCDE model. If previous strategic steps are successful, positive feelings result, which promotes positive changes (Wong, 2010). Through evaluation of previous steps' outcomes, the ABCDE strategy helps to assess risks and opportunities and enjoy the outcomes of their progress.

### ***Applications to Young Adult Education***

The ABCDE approach provides meaning-centered strategies for young adults to overcome negative life experiences and suffering by reviewing dysfunctional thoughts and replacing them with more rational ones that build resilience and improve mental health for students. Given that young adult life is dominated by school in many cases, findings relevant to the benefits of meaning are most likely applicable to college and university life. Meaning is also essential to flourishing and therefore provides a novel framework for positive education. The ABCDE strategies could help students to accept their situation, develop realistic and measurable action strategies, and discover their strengths in dealing with adversity.

## CONCLUSION

Today, people can face various threatening circumstances that cause psychological distress and decrease well-being. Young adulthood is a dynamic developmental stage characterized by the possibility for change in life direction, which influences identity development and later life functioning (Arnett, 2000). Providing prevention and intervention services is therefore an essential step toward developing strategies to cultivate their mental health and positive functioning.

This chapter aimed to provide a framework of mental health in college students based on a meaning-centered approach. Studies suggest that meaning in life has a notable protective effect on mental health and is associated with various outcomes values by college students, but few have emphasized a meaning-centered approach for this. Using meaning-centered strategies may be critical for building and fostering meaning in college students, and these could be integrated with existing school-based programs for supporting student wellbeing and mental health.

Meaning-centered intervention principles include opportunities for school-based mental health providers and educators to create a new framework of positive education to improve college students' mental health. The MCA emphasizes principles and strategies that target improving psychosocial and emotional well-being, positive relationships, resilience, and character strengths, and how to apply these principles. Many strategies (e.g., dream work, cognitive reframing, and magic questions) could help young adults see themselves and life in a new way. The PURE-based strategies aim to enhance sources for mental health and wellbeing, whereas the ABCDE principles focus on the essential strategies of MCA for dealing with adverse life events. For example, purpose allows young adults to create life goals and direction, which gives them the capacity needed to succeed in life. The discovery strategy of the ABCDE

model is useful for exploring the richness of the moment, identifying one's hidden strengths, the positive aspects of their lives, and rational thinking that enables good decision-making. Evidence has also pointed to the effectiveness of the meaning-centered interventions for improving flourishing, building resilience, and reducing mental health problems such as depressive symptoms (Cheng et al., 2015; Kang & Kim, 2015; Lim & Kang, 2018; Robotmili et al., 2015).

Additionally, the MCA equips mental health providers and educators with the strategies and skills needed to empower students in their pursuit of happiness and meaning and handle challenging circumstances. The MCA includes essential tools for young adults to make life worth living and tap into their capacity for meaning making to restore faith, purpose, and hope (Wong, 2010). This provides a promising and applicable positive education framework for college mental health, empowering mental health providers, educators, and policymakers to create meaningful school experiences. While studies show that MCA provides practical ways for young adults to build resilience, identify their strengths, and experience life meaning, future research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of MCA-based interventions with college and university students. There is also a need for research on meaning in school settings in the context of different cultures such as Turkey. Overall, this chapter emphasized the importance of designing meaning-centered prevention and intervention services to promote mental health and wellbeing through promoting sense of purpose and life meaning among college and university students.

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