

Title: Meaning-Based Interventions and the Mitigation of Perceived Suffering: A Comprehensive Review of Theoretical and Empirical Mechanisms

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Contemporary clinical, health, and existential psychology increasingly underscores the critical role of cognitive, emotional, and existential mechanisms in human adaptation to severe stress, chronic illness, and profound adversity. Perceived suffering and depressive rumination constitute pivotal transdiagnostic processes that not only precipitate and maintain mood and anxiety disorders but also severely compromise psychological well-being and quality of life. This comprehensive review synthesizes established theoretical frameworks ranging from Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy and Irvin Yalom's existential perspectives to Michael Steger's dual-component model of meaning and Paul Wong's existential positive psychology while critically evaluating the empirical evidence supporting meaning-based interventions in mitigating rumination and distress.

Methods: Through a critical synthesis of clinical, health, and existential psychological literature, this study investigates the transdiagnostic pathways through which meaning systems regulate distress and foster psychological resilience.

Results: Empirical findings indicate that meaning-oriented interventions function as powerful catalysts for cognitive restructuring. By facilitating a shift from abstract, passive brooding to concrete, value-driven processing, these interventions correct attentional biases and down-regulate the hyperactivity of the Default Mode Network (DMN) implicated in depressive rumination. Furthermore, meaning-making resolves cognitive dissonance between situational stressors and global belief systems, buffering perceived suffering via the enhancement of psychological capital and existential coherence.

Conclusions: Meaning-based interventions transcend superficial supportive counseling, operating as core transdiagnostic mechanisms of change within process-based therapies. By redirecting cognitive resources toward committed, self-transcendent action, individuals are effectively equipped to navigate biological and psychosocial adversities, thereby securing enduring psychological flexibility and structural well-being.

Keywords: Meaning in Life; Rumination; Perceived Suffering

Introduction

Contemporary clinical, health, and existential psychology has increasingly underscored the pivotal role of cognitive, emotional, and existential mechanisms in human adaptation to severe stress, chronic illness, and profound adversity. When confronting life crises and unavoidable

suffering, perceived suffering and depressive rumination emerge as central transdiagnostic processes phenomena that not only precipitate and sustain a wide array of mood and anxiety disorders but also severely compromise overall psychological health and quality of life (Aldao et al., 2010; Ware & Sherbourne, 1992; World Health Organization, 2016).

Rumination, conceptualized as a maladaptive transdiagnostic cognitive pattern, is defined as repetitive, passive, and involuntary engagement with distress symptoms alongside their underlying causes and consequences, devoid of active problem-solving actions (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Cognitive and neuropsychological models indicate that rumination disrupts the inhibitory and attentional control mechanisms of working memory (Eysenck et al., 2007). Neurobiologically, this process is closely tied to hyperactivity and functional dysregulation within the Default Mode Network (DMN) a neural network responsible for self-referential and internal thought processing, the continuous activation of which obstructs adaptive environmental information processing and proper stress appraisal (Hamilton et al., 2011; Treynor et al., 2003).

The persistence of this detrimental cognitive habit amplifies individual vulnerability to suffering, intensifying distress through negative attentional biases (Watkins, 2018). This establishes a self-perpetuating cycle wherein perceived suffering fuels ruminative mentation, which in turn deepens and exacerbates suffering, ultimately disintegrating overall functional capacity and quality of life (Carver & Scheier, 1998; World Health Organization, 1996).

In the face of unwanted and inevitable life suffering (such as life-limiting illnesses, acute crises, and enduring environmental stressors), conventional emotion-regulation strategies and standard problem-focused coping mechanisms frequently lose their clinical efficacy. Consequently, existential variables specifically "meaning in life" emerge as fundamental psychological resources (Frankl, 2017; Yalom, 2020). Grounded in Frankl's logotherapy and contemporary existential frameworks, human existence is driven by an innate motivational construct termed the "will to meaning," rendering suffering exceptionally devastating and intolerable when perceived as devoid of significance (Frankl, 2017; Vos, 2018). As an integrative cognitive-existential structure, meaning enables individuals to reappraise distressing events within a broader framework of ultimate values and life goals (Park & Folkman, 1997; Schnell, 2020; Wong, 2016).

Meaning-oriented psychological interventions seek to restructure the individual's meaning system, transforming cognitive appraisals of stressful and painful life events by activating existential values (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Steger, 2016). Theoretically, cultivating meaning in life inhibits passive, abstract brooding over distress symptoms and directs individuals toward acceptance, committed action, and psychological restoration (Hayes & Hofmann, 2020; Hofmann & Hayes, 2020).

Diverse empirical evidence across clinical and community cohorts has demonstrated that meaning-based interventions and the enhancement of purpose significantly attenuate rumination, perceived suffering, depression, and anxiety while improving quality of life

indicators (Hamid et al., 2011; Shariat et al., 2021). Despite this robust empirical background, what remains to be systematically addressed in the literature is a rigorous integration of evidence and a transparent conceptual model delineating the exact pathways and transdiagnostic mechanisms through which meaning-based interventions mitigate perceived suffering and elevate quality of life.

Therefore, the present review aims to provide a comprehensive and analytical examination of the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of meaning-based interventions in mitigating perceived suffering, dampening rumination, and enhancing quality of life, thereby illuminating underlying psychological mechanisms to inform clinical practice.

Theoretical Foundations, Fundamental Concepts, and Literature Review

In this section, the theoretical frameworks and fundamental concepts pertaining to the core research constructs—including meaning in life and meaning-making, rumination and its neuro-cognitive mechanisms, perceived suffering, stress, and quality of life—are analyzed and elucidated based on the existing literature.

1. The Construct of Meaning in Life, Suffering, and Existential-Cognitive Approaches

The concept of meaning in life constitutes a core axis of existential, cognitive, and positive psychology. Various perspectives explain its structural architecture and its protective role when confronting adversity:

- A) Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy: Frankl (2017) posits that the fundamental human motivation is the "will to meaning." The fulfillment of this drive involves discovering and realizing goals and values that impart direction and worth to existence. Frankl emphasizes that life retains potential meaning under all circumstances, even amidst unavoidable suffering, illness, and death, and humans possess the innate free will to choose their stance toward environmental and biological conditions. According to Frankl, meaning is discovered through three avenues:
 - *Creative Values*: Realizing a goal, executing a task, or creating a work through which an individual contributes to the world.
 - *Experiential Values*: Experiencing the world through beauty, art, nature, or deep interpersonal encounters such as love.
 - *Attitudinal Values*: Adopting a courageous and noble attitude toward unavoidable and immutable suffering.
 - Frankl (2017) views unwanted suffering as the crucible for the highest human values (attitudinal values). When suffering is unavoidable, altering one's attitude toward it enables "self-transcendence." An "existential vacuum" occurs when the

will to meaning is thwarted, paving the way for "noogenic neuroses," depression, and anxiety.

- B) Irvin Yalom's Existential Psychotherapy: Yalom (2020) positions meaning in life alongside death, freedom/responsibility, and existential isolation as one of the four ultimate concerns of existence. Encountering meaninglessness arises when individuals realize the universe lacks an inherent, pre-established structure, demanding that they construct their own purpose and meaning. Inability to organize a value system triggers deep psychological conflict and existential anxiety. Nonetheless, Yalom regards the attainment of meaning as a *by-product* of active engagement in life, love, creation, and value commitment.
- C) Michael Steger's Dual-Component Model of Meaning in Life: Steger (2016, 2017) defines meaning in life as a cognitive-motivational framework enabling individuals to comprehend experiences, integrate goals, and experience life significance. Steger divides the structure of meaning into two distinct yet interrelated components:
 - *Presence of Meaning*: The degree to which individuals feel their lives are purposeful and cognitively significant.
 - *Search for Meaning*: The dynamic drive to seek, understand, or deepen purpose and life goals.
 - High scores in "presence of meaning" strongly correlate with heightened psychological well-being, mental health, and quality of life.
- D) Paul Wong's Existential Positive Psychology and Contemporary Views: Wong (2016) established Existential Positive Psychology and Meaning-Centered Counseling, arguing that psychology must integrate both positive and negative facets of human existence (both suffering and well-being). Wong formulated the PURE model:
 - *Purpose*: Clear goals, life orientation, and guiding values.
 - *Understanding*: Cognitive comprehension of the self, reality, and identity.
 - *Responsible action*: Appropriate, ethical decisions and actions aligned with goals.
 - *Enjoyment/Evaluation*: Fulfillment and positive evaluation of life's trajectory.
 - Within this framework, Vos (2018) and Schnell (2020) emphasize empirical utility, demonstrating that meaning in life acts as a multidimensional protective structure that modulates physiological and psychological stress responses.

2. Review of Empirical Findings and Research Analysis

This section analyzes empirical evidence from domestic and international studies regarding the efficacy of meaning-based education and interventions on core variables (perceived suffering, rumination, depression, anxiety, and quality of life) across clinical and vulnerable groups.

- A) Efficacy of Logotherapy on Perceived Suffering, Depression, and Anxiety in Clinical Populations: Confronting hard-to-treat and chronic illnesses (such as cancer) represents a profound manifestation of unwanted and unavoidable human suffering, rapidly transforming physical challenges into existential and psychological crises (Hamid et al., 2011). Empirical findings demonstrate that group logotherapy significantly attenuates disease-related depression and anxiety while enhancing global quality of life by facilitating the reconstruction of attitudinal values and self-transcendence.
- B) Meaning-Based Interventions in Elderly and Vulnerable Populations: Aging is frequently accompanied by multiple losses, declining physical capabilities, and acute confrontation with mortality, which can induce meaninglessness, depression, and diminished quality of life (Yalom, 2020).
 - *Enhancing positive psychological traits and mental health in the elderly:* Shariat et al. (2021) investigated the efficacy of logotherapy on depression and positive psychological traits among the elderly. Their findings revealed that meaning-making training significantly reduces depressive symptoms while elevating positive traits (such as purpose, hope, and life satisfaction).
 - *The mediating role of psychological capital:* The findings of Shariat et al. (2021) align with Kaspour and Zarean (2023), who demonstrated that meaning in life influences psychological well-being through the mediating role of psychological capital (self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism). Meaning-based interventions activate these internal psychological assets, bolstering resilience when confronting the suffering of aging or developmental crises.

3. Analytical Summary of Empirical Findings

The reviewed empirical evidence outlines a clear causal-functional pathway:

- Input (Intervention): Meaning-making training and meaning-based interventions (logotherapy, meaning-centered, and process-based therapies).
- Cognitive-Existential Mediating Processes: Restructuring meaning systems (Park & Folkman, 1997), enhancing psychological capital (Kaspour & Zarean, 2023), and shifting cognitive processing styles from abstract to concrete and value-driven (Hayes & Hofmann, 2020; Watkins, 2018).
- Mediating Outcomes: Attenuating and damping rumination and brooding (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Treynor et al., 2003), correcting negative attentional biases (Eysenck et al., 2007), and modulating perceived suffering.

- Ultimate Outcomes (Outputs): Significant reductions in depression and anxiety, increases in life purpose, and comprehensive improvements across all dimensions of quality of life (Hamid et al., 2011; Shariat et al., 2021; Ware & Sherbourne, 1992; World Health Organization, 2016).

Discussion and Explanatory Analysis

The synthesis of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence in this review underscores the critical function of meaning-based interventions as robust transdiagnostic mechanisms in clinical and existential psychology. When individuals encounter severe stress, chronic illness, or unavoidable life adversity, perceived suffering frequently intensifies through maladaptive cognitive loops, most notably depressive rumination (Aldao et al., 2010; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). The current analysis elucidates how restoring and cultivating meaning in life alters these detrimental trajectories through multiple interconnected pathways.

1. Transdiagnostic Mechanisms: Damping Rumination and Cognitive Reappraisal

From a cognitive-neuropsychological perspective, rumination is sustained by attentional control deficits and hyperactivity within the Default Mode Network (DMN), locking the individual in self-referential, abstract brooding (Eysenck et al., 2007; Hamilton et al., 2011). Meaning-oriented interventions—grounded in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, Michael Steger's dual-component model, and Paul Wong's existential positive psychology—catalyze a fundamental shift from passive, abstract distress processing to concrete, value-driven action (Frankl, 2017; Steger, 2016; Wong, 2016). By embedding situational stressors into a broader framework of ultimate values and life goals (Park & Folkman, 1997), these interventions correct negative attentional biases and down-regulate the cognitive fixation characteristic of rumination (Watkins, 2018).

2. Buffering Perceived Suffering via Psychological Capital and Existential Coherence

The integration of existential resources with psychological capital (such as hope, self-efficacy, and resilience) explains the empirical efficacy observed in clinical and vulnerable populations (Kaspour & Zarean, 2023; Shariat et al., 2021). As demonstrated in studies involving chronic patients and the elderly, confronting unavoidable suffering often triggers an existential vacuum and severe psychological distress (Hamid et al., 2011; Yalom, 2020). Meaning-based interventions reconstruct attitudinal values, enabling individuals to discover self-transcendence even within immutable adversity (Frankl, 2017; Vos, 2018). This cognitive-existential restructuring resolves the dissonance between life stressors and global belief systems, thereby attenuating perceived suffering and significantly enhancing overall quality of life (Schnell, 2020; Ware & Sherbourne, 1992).

3. Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The therapeutic utility of meaning-based frameworks transcends supportive counseling, positioning them as core components of process-based and third-wave cognitive-behavioral therapies (Hayes & Hofmann, 2020; Hofmann & Hayes, 2020). Clinicians working with trauma,

chronic illness, and existential distress should systematically incorporate meaning-making techniques to foster psychological flexibility and structural well-being. Future empirical research should employ longitudinal and neuroimaging methodologies to further map the neural correlates underlying the shift from rumination to meaning-driven cognitive reappraisal.

Table 1. Summary of Key Empirical Studies on Meaning-Based Constructs and Psychological Outcomes

Author(s) & Year	Target Population / Context	Construct or Intervention Assessed	Key Findings & Putative Mechanisms
Hamid et al. (2011)	Clinical (Oncology / Cancer Patients)	Group-based Logotherapy	Demonstrated significant attenuation of disease-related depression and anxiety; enhanced global QoL by facilitating the reconstruction of attitudinal values and self-transcendence.
Shariat et al. (2021)	Vulnerable Demographics (Elderly)	Meaning-based psychological interventions	Effectively ameliorated depressive symptomatology; elevated positive psychological traits by re-establishing a sense of purpose against age-related existential crises.
Kaspor & Zarean (2023)	General / Academic (University Students)	Meaning in Life (MIL) & Psychological Capital	Established that Psychological Capital (hope, resilience, optimism) strongly mediates the relationship between MIL and overarching psychological well-being.
Steger (2016); Allan et al. (2016)	Organizational / Occupational	"Meaningful Work" (WAMI inventory)	Identified meaningful work as a robust moderating

	Cohorts		buffer; significantly weakened the pathogenic link between occupational stress, burnout, and diminished QoL.
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