

It's not going to be that fun: negative experiences can add meaning to life

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People seek to spend time in positive experiences, enjoying and savoring. Yet there is no escaping negative experiences, from the mundane (e.g. arguing) to the massive (e.g. death of a child). Might negative experiences confer a hidden benefit to well-being? We propose that they do, in the form of enhanced meaning in life. Research suggests that negative experiences can serve to boost meaning because they stimulate comprehension (understanding how the event fits into a broader narrative of the self, relationships, and the world), a known pillar of meaning in life. Findings on counterfactual thinking, reflecting on events' implications, and encompassing experiences into broad-based accounts of one's identity support the role of comprehension in contributing to life's meaning from unwanted, unwelcome experiences.

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Whether unfolding in the moment, anticipated, imagined, or revisited through memory, experiences are, in a sense, how people live in time. The pleasure principle, that people seek to avoid negative experiences and far prefer positive ones, is an old idea with much empirical backing [1,2]. Failure at work, relationship dissolution, and health challenges are not the kind of events that people welcome, whereas career success, long and happy relationships, and tip-top health make for an ideal life. Without doubting that negative experiences can bring pain and suffering, the current paper takes the perspective that, at times, difficult and aversive circumstances may have the side benefit of aiding meaning in life.

The rationale for this perspective is that problems, adversity, and loss may promote efforts to comprehend how

they make sense and integrate them within existing knowledge. These mental integration efforts can strengthen and support perceptions of meaningfulness. While it is unlikely that people's immediate reaction to threatening, challenging experiences will be to engage comprehension processes, the motivation to understand the event's significance for the self and the world may come with some time.

Meaning often is defined in terms of connections among stimuli, information, and concepts [3,4]. Meaning informs meaning in life, namely through a pillar termed comprehension. Comprehension involves assigning personally significant interpretations to disparate, yet connected, bits of information [5]. It also refers to the degree to which people perceive a sense of coherence and understanding about their lives [6,7]. Meaning in life is not only about comprehension (viz. [8]), to be sure. Nevertheless, comprehension may be a crucial process by which people can extract meaning from undesirable, aversive experiences.

Our paper departs from most prior empirical work by highlighting the role of negative experiences in aiding meaning in life. Although happiness and meaningfulness often are considered to be two forms of positivity (e.g. eudaimonia versus hedonic happiness [9–12]; and have substantial empirical overlap (correlations between the two hover around $r = .60-.70$, [11,13,14,15], we contend that conceptualizing meaning in life as being fundamentally positive can obscure some of the avenues by which meaning in life comes about — of which contending with negative life events is a prime example.

The perspective that meaning in life and happiness are not as conceptually similar as their empirical overlap may suggest is informed by our prior work [13]. We surveyed hundreds of Americans several times across several months and had them report the degree to which they perceived their lives as having meaning and, separately, happiness. After removing the variance the two outcomes shared, we examined the everyday experiences that differentially predicted meaning in life versus happiness. The results revealed that happiness is about feeling good, avoiding feeling bad, and having one's own wants and needs met. By comparison, meaning in life was predicted by behaviors and feelings reflecting concern for others and outcomes, as evidenced by arguing, worry, and stress. Relevant to the current paper's focus on comprehension, happiness was predicted by a focus on the present

moment and disinterest in reflective thought, whereas life's meaningfulness was predicted by mentally linking events across time and desiring conscious reflection.

The value of negative experiences for meaning in life was underscored by two recent large-scale investigations. One made use of experience sampling procedures, whereby people reported their happiness and meaning in life upon being randomly prompted throughout the day. Supporting the independence of happiness and meaning were findings that working, studying, and visiting a hospital were behaviors associated with greater meaning in life but not happiness [16]. Another study had people report their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of life's meaning at the end of each day. After statistically controlling for their impact on good or bad feelings, social conflicts (e.g. arguing) predicted greater meaning in life that day [17[•]]. Echoing the current paper's theme, this work pinpointed a cognitive component that linked negative experiences to meaning in life, namely attempts to comprehend events in terms of interpretations of the past and implications for the future, '... the experience itself may still be appraised as undesirable and falling short of expectations. What may contribute to meaning are the lessons learned and the resolutions put forth going forward' (p. 603). Hence was born our contention that an overlooked contributor to meaning in life is negative experiences, especially when they involve and invoke mental integration and comprehension.

Finding meaning in negative experiences

Several lines of research support the contention that negative experiences can fuel the processes that support meaning in life. One concerns how people respond to meaning threats. There may be no greater meaning threat than the loss of a child. A study of interviews with parents whose young children died recently looked for spontaneous mentions relating to four types of meaning indicators [18]. Almost all parents attempted to understand their child's death, including relying on biomedical explanations and attributions for what happened. Additionally, almost all parents connected the death to contemporary events in their daily life. In contrast, that their child's death provides some kind of benefit was a less common form of meaning. That bereaved parents seemed to be working through their trauma through comprehension (as well as connection) is consistent with the argument that negative experiences may stimulate processes that promote meaning.

Less traumatic forms of meaning threats also produce efforts to bolster meaning. A review of hundreds of findings concluded that when people experience a disruption to existing meaning frameworks (e.g. how they understand themselves, their relationships, or their place in the world), they seek to bolster connections among established meaning frameworks [3[•]]. For example,

feeling socially ostracized, being robbed of agency, and facing personal uncertainty are meaning threats that lead to meaning-bolstering responses such as in-group bonding, upholding cultural norms, and the desire for structure [3[•],19,20]. Encountering a threat to one's meaning frameworks is not desirable nor pleasant. Yet, across a host domains — from loss, major illness, career change — meaning disruptions can renew efforts to find meaning nevertheless.

Narrative identity is a construct that illustrates both negative experiences and the importance of entwining them into an understanding of one's life, relationships, and the world (e.g. [21–23]). Narrative identity involves viewing the self as an ever-evolving story that functions to provide understanding of how disparate life events fit together. When people are able to envelop negative experiences (e.g. divorce, trauma) into a broad understanding of their life's narrative, they gain a sense that their lives have meaning compared to people whose life stories contained negative experiences that were not recognized as part of the broader pattern [24–26].

A thought-provoking finding on the role of comprehension comes from work on people's use of counterfactual thinking. Counterfactual thinking refers to mental simulations of hypothetical events that bear close resemblance to an actual event, and tends to be elicited by negative, more than positive, outcomes [27–29]. For instance, a driver who was seriously injured in a car crash engages in counterfactual thought when she reflects on what may have happened had she not taken a new route home from work. Using counterfactual thinking to understand pivotal life events heightens their meaningfulness [30[•]]. The provocative finding came from an experiment that compared engaging in counterfactual thinking against instructions to consider the meaning of the event. Counterfactual thinking elevated the meaning people ascribed to the event more than did dwelling on its meaning directly. Perhaps counterintuitively, by contemplating how the event may not have happened, people arrive at a fuller understanding of the meaning of what actually happened and engage processes that enable people to see how the event fits into grander schemes.

In summary, a diverse set of literatures support the argument that negative experiences can promote meaning in life. Horrendous traumas, such as the loss of one's child, prompt people to seek meaning in the event. Feedback and events that call into question personal meaning frameworks elicit attempts to find meaning in unaffected domains. The importance of cognitive processes aimed at understanding and integrating confronting events was demonstrated by work on how some forms of art can boost meaning in life, the formation of a redemptive narrative identity, and contemplations of what might have been.

Future directions

We conclude with three potential avenues for future research. One regards the role of negative experiences in everyday life. Because daily experiences often are small and easy to dismiss, they may not stimulate the kinds of mental comprehension engagement that we have outlined as being helpful to adding meaning to life. As a result, a direction for research may be to study interventions that help people extract meaning from those small moments. Our review found evidence for counterfactual thinking, drawing out potential implications of the event, and enveloping the event into a broad narrative of one's personal identity as examples. With the exception of counterfactual reasoning, the rest have been measured and not manipulated. Given the success of instructing people to use counterfactual thinking in enriching the meaningfulness of events [30*] other comprehension practices may similarly be amenable to interventions. More broadly, work on how to boost meaning in life is lacking. There are few experiments in this literature and those that do exist often do not include a neutral control condition, making it an open question as to whether differences in meaning in life that follow from those manipulations are the result of boosts in one condition and/or reductions in another (e.g. [4,31]). Manipulations that reliably boost meaning in life would be a worthy contribution, both for pragmatic and conceptual purposes.

Experiencing awe may be a good candidate for experiences that foster meaning in life. Awe has both positive and negative components, such as with nature's destructive powers (e.g. tornados) and the unfathomable scope of deep space. Awe slows the passing of time [32] and stimulates a need for accommodation [33–35], a cognitive process aimed at creating new mental models in order to make sense of the experience [33,36]. That awe combines both negative feelings and comprehension suggests that it may aid meaning in life, and thus be a fruitful direction for research.

We return to the notion that positive feelings and meaning in life often co-occur and correlate with one another [37]. While we suggested that some of those findings may overstate the similarity between happiness and meaning in life, nevertheless we concur that events that bring meaning to life can result in happiness. A direction for research may be to track the time course of their interrelations. We predict that after removing their shared variance, experiences that boost happiness would not necessarily increase in subsequent meaning in life, whereas experiences that boost meaning in life may boost life's happiness at a later point. Tests of whether this pattern is supported could open up new theoretical insights on the nature of both happiness and meaning in life.

Conclusion

We proposed that negative experiences can have the side benefit of aiding life's meaning. To be sure, we do not expect nor advocate that people stir up negativity in their careers, relationships, or health in order to create opportunities for meaning. Rather, when negative events do occur — which they do and will for everyone — people could use those experiences to stoke comprehension processes, perhaps enhancing meaning in life as a result. The drive to understand what unfortunate, unpleasant events mean for the self, relationships, and the world may be the initial step undergirding how people come to see their lives as having meaning.

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- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

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