

RESILIENCY & MENTAL HEALTH WELLNESS QUICK TIPS #5

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Resiliency & Mental Health Wellness Quick Tips #5

Each week, we will present an article here that will discuss a key component of resiliency, positive psychology, and mental health wellness!

The articles will briefly present a new topic, provide a skill and/or exercise to try, and will often include other available resources.

We hope that you find this material helpful and work to apply these concepts in your life.



“Life doesn't just happen to us. We happen to life; and we make it meaningful.” - Victor Frankl

COMMENTARY

It is often helpful to appreciate the small things that can help ground us in times of difficulty - the warm sun, or the awe-inspiring sights and sounds of nature for example. It can also be beneficial to reflect on how immense this universe is and focus on something that is bigger and greater than any of us. Existing is a gift. All too often we can lose sight of this gift when we get bogged down with life circumstances. This week, I want to introduce a resiliency concept that can assist us when trying to comprehend something that challenges our beliefs about the world we live in.

Resilience Concept: Meaning & Meaning Making

- What is Meaning? Meaning is about making sense of your life and life experiences. In other words, *What does this experience MEAN to me?*
- What we must understand is that first and foremost, it is a choice. A powerful choice. Each of us, as humans, has the power to choose how we respond to life circumstances, which are often unfair, unpredictable, and sometimes even devastating.
- I know this does not define meaning and you may feel like I am taking you into an abyss of deep philosophical thoughts, but it is a critical concept. **YOU** have the ability to make meaning out of everything that happens to you. So, it starts with a question, what is your meaning?
- What is Meaning Making? Simply stated, it is the process by which we come to understand and make sense of live events.

THE LESSONS OF VICTOR FANKL

Victor Frankl was a holocaust and death camp survivor turned psychiatrist. During his time as a prisoner, he saw both sides of humanity. Humans at their worst and other humans at their best. He published a book in 1946 titled *Man's Search for Meaning*. In it, he discusses how the largest motivator for human behavior is to find meaning in life. Significantly, he believed **People Could Discover Meaning Under All Circumstances, even the most miserable experiences of loss and tragedy.**

Victor Frankl left a legacy of amazing work in the area of meaning available to us. Below are a few takeaways from Victor Frankl's work that we can apply right now and throughout our lives (Pattakos & Dundon, 2017).

1. No matter what happens to you in life, you have the power to choose how you interpret that event and how you will respond.
2. We are all important and doing important work, no matter what that work is.
3. Meaning can be discovered in everything we do.
4. Meaning exists everywhere and in every situation and is present for your discovery.
5. Regardless of our situation, we can find deeper and richer meaning in our lives.

COVID-19 & Meaning

When life events involve something as traumatic and devastating as COVID-19, it threatens our view of the world as being safe. We question why something so horrible is happening. It can be difficult to reconcile these feelings and emotions. Our experiences contradict our general assumptions about the world.

When we cannot reconcile our experiences with our global beliefs, this can lead to depression, anxiety, and a traumatic stress response. But, to build resilience, and improve our chances of maintaining our mental wellness despite these traumatic experiences, we can work to find meaning (i.e., meaning making) to be able to move forward in our lives.

"Forces Beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation." - Victor Frankl

Science Behind Meaning Making and Resilience

Researcher demonstrates that meaning making strategies are essential to recovery and resilience after various types of disasters (Park, 2016). Another study found that the search for meaning in life may be an important part of recovery from natural disasters such as floods (Dursun, Steger, Bentele, & Schulenberg, 2016). Meaning has been intricately tied to resilience both philosophically and scientifically, in that meaning and resilience reduce the incidence of post-traumatic stress, and that meaning is the factor that seems to be a critical component of what makes someone resilient in the first place (Aiena, Buchanan, Smith, Schulenberg, 2016).

MEANING MAKING STRATEGIES

1. **Family & Social Bonds** - Use the experience of COVID-19 to build meaning in your life by fostering family bonds. Make efforts to connect and spend time with family and friends (virtually now) and in-person later. Following last week's discussion on social resilience, we can find meaning in our lives by focusing on the importance of family bonds and connections. Remember, life is a gift and is not limitless. Focus on the time we have on this earth by being as closely bonded to others as we can.
2. **Build Spiritual Resilience** - While this can be fulfilled by religion for some, spiritual resilience is not necessarily religion. It can mean different things for different people. Whatever it is for you, as the opening paragraph suggests, focus on the world being bigger than any of us and what a gift we have been given in the first place. Spiritual resilience is the ability to sustain your sense of self and purpose through a set of beliefs, values, or principles. Get in tune with your core beliefs and values and focus on those as part of your meaning and purpose in life.
3. **Don't sweat the small stuff** - Catch yourself when you are focusing too heavily on the "small stuff" that really does not matter in life. Take time to pause and reflect when going down that rabbit hole, and ask yourself, "Is this really important? Is this worth the emotional investment I am giving it?"
4. **Turn something bad into something good** - Doing good for others, finding a purpose and meaning by engaging in charitable causes or events can help see the big picture and take something tragic and turn it into something meaningful. Also, smaller acts of kindness (also discussed in a previous Quick-Tips) work just as well to build daily meaning into our lives.

RESOURCES

Recent Examples of Activities Focused on Meaning and Something Bigger Than Ourselves

1. The residents of New York City sing, chant, and loudly applaud the front-line workers of the COVID-19 Crisis.
<https://youtu.be/7ky03VsUjUY>
2. The Blue Angels Fly-Over New York and Philadelphia Area in honor of front-line workers during COVID-19
<https://youtu.be/fB8a-ZQaySQ>

Brief Video - Victor Frankl

https://youtu.be/Y_Cey-UZX-E