

If we think of the human search for meaning in terms of its details of operation, we might agree that the process is similar to this:

1. I observe something from which I can derive no meaning. For our example let's say I am tending my child at a park. A tiny meteorite strikes the park, killing three children. My child had been playing at that location only minutes earlier.
2. I feel a desire for meaning. Some of the puzzles include, why would innocents die this way? Why those three and not some other three? Why did my child live even though she was only seconds away from being killed?
3. I first try to employ my intellect for some meaning in a process not that advanced beyond smelling blood and becoming alert for fresh kill. At this level, I think the question "Why?" is not about truly existential meaning, but about mechanical meaning. Why did those three die? Because they were in the path of the meteorite. But why was that the path? That's how gravity interacts with meteors. These answers do not provide the kind of meaning I have grown to crave. They are as useless to me as blaming their grandmothers because they became pregnant 35 years ago. So I am not yet comfortable.
4. I next move to more modern methods like religion or philosophy. If I have "faith" in my religious teachings, this may work. Why did the meteorite strike innocent children? It was an Act of God. Why those particular children? Due to the sins of their parents. Or the sinful activities allowed by their city. Why not my child? Because my faith protected her. But if I am not religious none of those comforts me. What about philosophy as a method for finding relief from the need for meaning? In my personal experience, philosophical writers have directed their search for meaning in incredibly useless directions, but let's stay with my own self-generated philosophy. Why did any children die? I don't know. Why those three? I don't know. Why did my child live? I don't know, but I'm glad she did. Well, that wasn't very comforting.
5. I search for ideas from others. I read pop-psych paperbacks. I read Viktor Frankl. I look at Heisenberg for possible connections to daily life.
6. I make a choice. Through one or another approach, I find a meaning that I accept and take comfort from; or after exhausting my resources, I fail to find a comforting meaning, and I become neurotic. If the latter, my existential confidence in life choices erodes more and more the longer I fail to discover the right kind of meaning. Perhaps I live my life grasping first one and then another fad. I take up meditation. Or I take medication. Or I try alcohol and/or drugs. I can only escape this spiral in one of two ways. I must discover a meaning that "explains" it for me, that brings me back into equilibrium with my need for meaning; or I must build or buy a worldview

where this event is so unimportant that my discomfort is acceptable to me. That might be some deep religious devotion, or Scientology, or insanity.

Feel free to leave comments. Two hundred heads are better than one.