Experiencing meaning in life as way to cope with adversity and stress: A review of four case studies

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Background: It is unavoidable that we will face limitations and challenges in life. How individuals cope with adversity and stress, depends on many factors. One of the potential beneficial factors that can help individuals is experiencing meaning in life. The updated stress-coping model (Park & Folkman, 1997) indicates that individuals often cope with stressful situations by accommodation and assimilation of the stressful life event in relation to a pre-existing sense of global meaning in life. Many studies have empirically validated and extended the important role of meaning-oriented coping. However, many of these studies are presented in academic terms, which can hinder an inside understanding of the lived experience of clients.

Method: Four case studies of individuals in adverse life situations will be systematically reviewed, with an explicit attention to the role of meaning in life. This will show how theory on meaning-related coping can be applied to individual cases. These case studies are chosen because these individuals have explicitly discussed how they coped with their adverse life situation, and explicated the role of meaning-related coping.

Results: The first case study is the book Man's search for meaning from the psychiatrist Victor Frankl. In this book, he describes his experiences as a prisoner in a concentration camp during the Second World War. He writes how prisoners who were able to experience meaning in life were mentally and physically better able to cope with their situation. Frankl describes several potential sources of meaning, such as history and legacy, experiencing, productivity and creativity. These experiences led Frankl to conclude with Nietzsche: 'he who has a way to live for, can deal with any how.' The second case study is the book Miracle in the Andes by Nando Perrado. He describes how his airplane crashed in the Andes, where he had to survive for 72 days and trekked through high mountains to find rescue. He writes that it was the love for his father, and the prospect of his daily life at home, that helped him through the adversity. He describes the different coping responses of the other victims, and writes how the mental and physical state quickly deteriorated of those who did not want to be involved in any meaningful daily life routine and did not try to focus on anything meaningful. The third case study describes the experiences of a journalist who was diagnosed with breast cancer in her thirties. She has shared her experiences in a book submitted for publication. She describes how she experienced it as helpful to focus on meaningful activities, such as the routine of caring for her children and her terminally ill mother, and writing as a journalist about her own experiences. In her book, she describes that she met several mothers of class mates of her children who were also diagnosed with cancer; some of these women seemed to deny their situation, which seemed to hinder their psychological improvement. The fourth case study is the story of a political refugee from Iran. He told the author how his work as an artist has been his safe haven during times of adversity. However, he told how his artwork started to change, as he started to use other painting styles. Parallel to this artistic change, he started to experience severe post-traumatic distress. Traditional psychological treatment didn't work for him, but when he started to acknowledge the role of art in coping with his stress and he could understand and accept his artistic changes, all symptoms disappeared.

Discussion: Although these are four dissimilar case studies, all individuals point at the important role of experiencing meaning in life to cope with adversity in life. Meaning in life is a changeable dynamic phenomenon, as all individuals experienced changes in priorities in life, but – despite these changes- all acknowledged the importance of focusing on existential topics. Experiencing meaning in life corresponds with other psychological phenomena, such as hope and optimism, but it cannot be reduced to these phenomena. Implications for research and psychotherapeutic practice will be discussed.

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